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MAX SCHELER'S PRINCIPLE OF MORAL SOLIDARITY AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

We all know the magnificent final chorus of the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven. The text of Schiller and the music of Beethoven celebrate a fundamental solidarity of all men, which is a source of profound joy for them. [...] Max Scheler has explored it philosophically in his elaboration of "the principle of moral and religious solidarity." It has lost none of its timeliness since Scheler formulated it at the time of World War I, indeed, it has much to say to us today as we deliberate about the future of Europe and the rest of the world.

How should an American have anything interesting or insightful to say about the theme of this conference, the future of Europe?¹ I have decided to deal with my predicament by not speaking in my own name but instead by letting a great German philosopher speak for me. I refer to the important phenomenologist, Max Scheler (1874-1928), who in his time, and especially at the end of World War I, gave much thought to the future of Europe. And in order to cover myself as much as possible I would also like to refer here at the beginning to another great European spirit: I mean the Russian writer, Dostoevsky. In the *Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky puts into the mouth of the Staretz Zosima thoughts which are in perfect agreement with those of Scheler with which are about to become acquainted.

I

In 1917 Scheler wrote two studies on the future of Europe. He found himself in a situation very different from ours today. After all, we are not at the end of a world war. And yet it seems to me that much of this important Christian thinker had to say then, retains its relevance for us as we deliberate in 1994 about the future of Europe and of the rest of the world.

Let us look at the lecture of Scheler entitled, "The Cultural Reconstruction of Europe," in which we read, probably to our great surprise:

¹ The first public version of this paper was presented at the conference on the future of Europe, *Die Schatten der Zukunft*, held at the International Academy of Philosophy, September 30-October 1, 1994, in Balzers, Principality of Liechtenstein.

A cultural reconstruction is only possible if an increasingly large proportion of the European peoples learns to look upon this cataclysm as resulting from *a common guilt* of European peoples mutually influencing each other...

First, therefore, must come the recognition that in the final analysis there is only *one* answer to the question, Who or what nation is responsible for this war? The answer is You, the asker of the question – by what you have done or left undone.²

This way of extending the guilt and responsibility for a war strikes us at first as an exaggeration beyond all measure. But let us set aside for a moment the obvious objections which leap to mind, and let us see how Scheler develops the thought. In the following we find him distinguishing between the guilt which concerns him in this essay and the guilt which will concern the politicians at the peace conference after the war.

I do not say that once and for all the politician or historian must refrain from asking where the *political*, historical guilt for the definite occurrence lies, guilt for the outbreak of August, 1914.³

In other words, as we might say by way of rendering Scheler's thought more concrete, Serbia had a responsibility for the outbreak of the war that, for example, Belgium did not have; on this level of guilt, Serbia was guilty and Belgium was innocent. But on the deeper level of guilt of which Scheler speaks, we cannot localize the guilt so easily; the guilt is more diffused, and almost everyone has some share in it. Scheler proceeds to explain this deeper guilt as a guilt, not for starting the war, but for creating the moral *milieu* in which the war was possible at all.

What forms the object of common guilt is not that the war did take place, still less the how and when of its beginning, but that it *could* take place, that *such* an event was possible in this European quarter of the

² M. S c h e l e r, *The Cultural Reconstruction of Europe*, in: *On the Eternal in Man*, (tr.) Noble (Hamden, Conn., 1972), pp. 416-417. I do not think that the translator was well advised to translate *Gemeinschuld* as "collective guilt"; here and elsewhere I have amended his translation to read "common guilt." The German text reads: "Ein kultureller Wiederaufbau ist nur möglich, wenn ein immer größer Teil innerhalb der europäischen Völker lernt, dieses ganze Ereignis als Folge einer *auf Gegenseitigkeit beruhenden Gemeinschuld der Völker Europas anzusehen...* Zuerst also die Anerkennung, es gäbe in letzter Linie nur *eine* Antwort auf die Frage: Wer oder welches Volk ist schuld am Kriege? Die Antwort: Du selbst, der fragt – sei es durch Tun, sei es durch Unterlassen." M. S c h e l e r, *Vom kulturellen Wiederaufbau Europas*, in: *Vom Ewigen im Menschen* (Bern, 1968), p. 416. (Henceforth, VEM).

³ *Ibid.* "Ich sage damit nicht: Es müsse die *politisch-geschichtliche* Schuldfrage für das bestimmte Stattfinden dieses Krieges, seinen Beginn im August 1914 ein für allemal vom Politiker oder Historiker unterlassen werden." VEM, p. 416.

human globe, that it was an event of such a nature as we know it to be. The object of common guilt is its possibility, then, and its quality, not its actual occurrence and real beginning. As you must be aware, within the individual the object of any deeper guilt-feeling is likewise not «that I did it» but that I *could* so behave, was *such* a person could do it. Only this common act, insight into the *reciprocity* of the shared responsibilities of every belligerent nation and all its subdivisions, down to the family and individual, can produce the psychological atmosphere from which European culture can arise renewed.⁴

Perhaps the reader is still bewildered at the universality of Scheler's common guilt. Perhaps he will remind us of the way in which a great moral personality of our time, Victor Frankl, rejects emphatically the very idea of collective guilt. In the spirit of Frankl, and in many others, one might say against Scheler that guilt always only exists as individual guilt and that there is no such thing as Scheler's common guilt.

In response I would say that one can preserve all the truth in such an objection, even while affirming a moral solidarity of human beings in the sense of Scheler. Indeed, one can find in the writings of Scheler himself all the truth of the objection; Scheler, in fact, understood it deeply and knew how to explain it. He does not dream of letting the individual person and the individual responsibility of individual persons get lost in some encompassing community. In his other lecture from 1917, "Christian Love and the Twentieth Century," which also deals with the future of Europe, he says that the recognition of "the infinite worth of the *individual* soul" is "the *magna charta* of Europe." In the same place he embraces a certain (not primarily economic) individualism

which categorically denies that the individual person is a mere "*modus*" of some generality – the State, say, or society, or «world-reason» or impersonal self-generating historical process...⁵

⁴ *Ibid.* "Nicht daß der Krieg stattfand, noch weniger, wie er und wann er begann, ist Gegenstand der Gemeinschuld; wohl aber, daß er stattfinden *konnte*, daß *solch* ein Ereignis *möglich* war im europäischen Menschenkreise dieser Erdkugel, und daß er so, so beschaffen aussah, wie er aussah. Seine Möglichkeit und sein Sosein, nicht sein wirklicher Beginn also ist Gegenstand der Gemeinschuld. Es ist ja auch im Einzelleben nicht «daß ich das tat,» sondern daß ich so handeln, so tun *konnte* – ein *solcher* Mensch war, daß ich es konnte – der eigentliche Gegenstand jedes tieferen Schuldgefühls. Erst dieser seelische Gesamtakt der Einsicht in die *Gegenseitigkeit* der Verantwortung, der Mitverantwortung und Mitschuld eines jeden Volkes am Kriege, eines jeden Untergliedes im Volke bis zu Familie und Individuum herab kann die Gemütslage erzeugen, die *seelische Atmosphäre*, aus der ein Wiederaufbau der europäischen Kultur möglich ist." VEM, pp. 416-417.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 384. "...der es entschieden leugnet, daß die geistige individuelle Einzelperson nur ein sog. «Modus» [oder bloßer Teil] irgendeiner Form des Allgemeinen, des Staates, der Gesellschaft, einer sog. Weltvernunft oder eines aus sich herausströmenden sachhaften Geschichts-

This means that Scheler's individualism recognizes in each individual person such a being-of-its-own that no possible whole could ever encompass him as a mere part of itself. The individual person is a whole of his own. This is why Scheler in this passage proceeds to speak of the individual person as a subject of rights. He says that:

the separate individual...has an original sphere of action and natural right which is all his own, is independent of the State and its legislation; therein he enjoys the exercise of those «natural rights» which are innate in the essence of personality...⁶

On the basis of his deep understanding for the individual person Scheler can make telling criticisms of certain forms of social life. Thus, for example, he objects as follows to the ancient Greek ideal of community:

they were ignorant of the independent, Stateless, God-created, spiritual and immortal soul, superior in its innermost being to any possible State, possessing an inner world of religion and morality...⁷

With this personalistic individualism Scheler has much to say to us about our future; we have not yet come so far that it is superfluous to be reminded of the fundamental rights of the human person, or of the incommensurability of the individual person with the political community. But in this paper I want instead to draw your attention to his ideal of solidarity that underlies his claim about the common responsibility of Europe for the war. I have mentioned his individualism to show that Schelerian solidarity is not meant in a collective way, that it does not imply anything depersonalizing; it rests on personalism that takes very seriously the responsibility of each individual person.

But one will ask *how* this personalism can cohere with the talk of common guilt and of the other forms of human solidarity discussed by Scheler. One is naturally not content with the mere juxtaposition of apparently opposed lines of thought, but wants to know whether they form some unity in Scheler.

prozesses sei..." VEM, p. 382.

⁶ *Ibid.* "...das einzelne Individuum...hat noch seine ursprüngliche *Eigensphere* des Wirkens und des natürlichen Rechtes, eine Sphere, die vom Staate und dem von ihm gesetzten Rechte unabhängig ist: sein ihm eingeborenes, mit dem Wesen einer Person selbst gesetztes sog. Naturrecht..." VEM, p. 383.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 383. We need not concern ourselves with the question whether it is really possible to speak so generally of the "ancient Greek ideal of community," or whether one should restrict such characterizations to, say, the Aristotelian philosophy of the *polis*. What is important for us is that Scheler refuses to let the individual person be absorbed into the political community.

II

In order to answer this question we have to go back to the very foundation of Scheler's philosophy of the person, and in particular to this idea:

it is inherent in the *eternal, ideal nature* of a rational person that all its existence and activity as a spirit is from the very beginning just as much a conscious, co-responsible, communal reality. The being of man is just as originally a matter of being, living and acting "one with another", as it is a matter of existing for oneself.⁸

With this, Scheler rejects any and every social philosophy that sees the highpoint of social life in *Gesellschaft*, or society, which for Scheler means that form of living together in which all bonds with others, and all responsibilities for others, arise only through persons explicitly assuming responsibility for others. What he rejects, therefore, is the idea that the individual person arbitrarily posits the social relations in which he lives, and that before he acts to posit them he simply stands next to other persons, lacking any bond with them. What he affirms, by contrast, is the idea that persons are bound to each other, and thus co-responsive for each other, as a result of their very being as persons and in advance of any conscious acting (of course, he does not deny that there is *also* such a thing as an obligation that is freely assumed). Individual persons are from the very beginning comprehended in a fundamental human community; they do not create it but find themselves already in it; their social existence unfolds within this community, and finds in it a basic norm.

With this we are in the position to understand better Scheler's thought on the so-called common guilt and common responsibility. It is because we are established one with another in the community of mankind, and so have to do with each other even before assuming any particular responsibility, that we dwell in an interpersonal space in which "there is no moral gesture so trivial that does not radiate, like the splashing stone, an infinity of ripples – circles soon lost to the naked eye."⁹ From the point of view of *Gesellschaft* the moral condition of the individual remains with the individual until he turns to someone who consciously receives his act. But from the point of view of what

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 373 (I have amended the translation in several places). "Es gehört zum ewigen ideelen Wesen einer vernünftigen Person, daß ihr ganzes geistiges Sein und Tun ebenso ursprünglich eine selbstbewußte, eine selbstverantwortliche individuelle Wirklichkeit ist, *als auch bewußte mitverantwortliche Gliedwirklichkeit in einer Gemeinschaft* (my italics). Sein des Menschen ist ebenso ursprünglich Fürsichsein als auch Miteinandersein, Miteinanderleben, Miteinanderwirken." VEM, p. 371.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 377. "Es gibt keine noch so kleine moralische Regung, die nicht wie der Stein, der ins Wasser fällt, unendliche Kreise um sich zöge – und auch diese Kreise werden nur für das rohe, unbewaffnete Auge schließlich unsichtbar." VEM, p. 376.

Scheler calls "the principle of moral and religious reciprocity or *moral solidarity*,"¹⁰ the moral substance of the individual person has the irrepressible space and so to affect, for better or worse, the spiritual atmosphere in which the others breathe. In moral state of more of his fellow human beings than he can possibly count.

In one place Scheler makes an attempt to understand more exactly that transmission of moral influence by which we become co-responsible for others.¹¹ He thinks through what is involved in me failing to show love to another to whom I should have shown love. He says that the other would have been "called" to love me in return if I had loved him, since all love, by its inner logic as love, calls for some requital. My failure to love the other leaves him with one less reason for loving, for it deprives him of the call to requite my love. But in having one less reason for loving, the other grows that much less in the power to love, for the power to love grows by performing acts of love, as Aristotle recognized in his theory of moral virtue. When the other turns to all those who are his others, he turns to them with less power to love than he would have had if I had loved; in this way my failure takes its toll on all of his relations to others, thus making itself felt far beyond anything that I can track, just as the stone falling in the water sends its ripples across the lake and out of the sight of the one who dropped the stone. On the other hand, if I had loved as I should have loved, then I would have been co-responsible for the growth in the power of another to love, and thus co-responsible for the greater love he would have shown throughout his life in all of his relations with others.

Needless to say, Scheler does not mean that the moral and religious solidarity of which he speaks *consists* in such diffusion of moral influence and in the co-responsibility resulting from it. This solidarity already in some sense exists even before moral influence is diffused, and forms the basis of the co-responsibility. Of course, the solidarity is actualized and lived in a particular way when persons become co-responsible for good in each other.

Let us return to the common guilt which Scheler saw existing in Europe on the eve of World War I. Scheler means that everyone who in the years before the war did any moral wrong, contributed to the formation of the interpersonal situation in which a world war was possible. The wrong that each committed

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 377 (slightly amended by me). In VEM, p. 375, he speaks of what he calls "das [Prinzip] der moralisch-religiösen Gegenseitigkeit oder der *sittlichen Solidarität*."

¹¹ See his *Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* (Bern, 1966), pp. 523-526. He recapitulates this analysis in *Christian Love in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 377-378; German VEM, pp. 375-376.

did not stay with the wrongdoer but was able to spread throughout the European community, enhancing the possibility of a world war.¹²

It is now perfectly clear that Scheler's *Gemeinschaft* has nothing depersonalizing about it; it is in no way meant as a substitute for individual guilt and individual responsibility. Common guilt has its origin in individual persons who are co-responsible for their community, and it is nothing apart from such individual persons. If someone were to blame others for the war, Scheler would remind that person that he, too, is to blame for it. We can say that Scheler, far from denying individual responsibility, extends the range of it, so that it includes not only responsibility for oneself but also responsibility for others. It is true that according to the logic of Schelerian co-responsibility, I am not the only one who is responsible for myself but that others are co-responsible for me, and that as a result, my responsibility for myself is somewhat modified. But for Scheler these others never prevent me from also being responsible for myself, nor from being in some way co-responsible for all of them.

It is now also clear that the personalistic individualism of Scheler has nothing to do with the individualism proper to *Gesellschaft*, and that, quickened with the principle of moral and religious solidarity, his individualism is organically completed by his teaching on co-responsibility. We can take these words of his as a recapitulation of his teaching on solidarity:

each individual is not responsible solely for his own character and conduct, responsible through his conscience before his Lord and creator, but each individual...is, in his capacity as a "member" of communities, also responsible to God – as fundamentally as for self – for all that bears spiritually and morally upon the condition and the activity of its communities.¹³

¹² It is remarkable how the thought of Scheler, which for him can be understood in a properly philosophical way, can be found in a recent papal teaching. In his 1984 Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, John Paul II says (para. 16): "To speak of *social sin* means in the first place to recognize that, by virtue of a human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual's sin in some way affects others. This is the other aspect of that solidarity which on the religious level is developed in the profound and magnificent mystery of the *Communion of Saints*, thanks to which it has been possible to say that «every soul that rises above itself, raises up the world.» To this *law of ascent* there unfortunately corresponds the *law of descent*. Consequently, one can speak of a *communion of sin*, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the Church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words, there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human body."

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 376. "... daß nicht ausschließlich jede individuelle Person nur für sich allein und nur vor ihrem eigenen Gewissen und mit ihrem eigenen Gewissen ihrem Schöpfer und Herrn für ihr eigenes Sein und Tun verantwortlich ist, sondern daß sowohl das Individuum wie jede engere

III

Let us now try to address the theme of our conference: the future of Europe as seen from the year 1994. How can Scheler's principle of solidarity, as formulated in 1917, give us direction as we face our future? I offer here only a few suggestions, which I believe are according to the mind of Scheler.

1. If Scheler were still alive and we were to ask him about the guilt for the murderous war in the former Yugoslavia, we can be sure that he would answer, not by accusing Serbians, or the former Communists, but by saying,

You who ask the question – you are guilty, too. You Europeans, and you Americans as well, beware of the idea that these crimes, crying to heaven for vengeance, are taking place completely apart from you. It is not enough to establish the fact that you did not commit the crimes, and in fact did not even instigate them, and have even officially disapproved of them. If you people lived juster lives, it would be that much less possible for such a war to take place. You stand in a fundamental human unity with the Serbs, Croats, and the others, who are fellow human beings as well as fellow Europeans; the result is that your wrongdoing, which you think remains within the bounds of your own nation, spreads beyond them and has its effect on the combatants in the former Yugoslavia. You are all implicated in an immeasurable reciprocity of guilt in the international realm of Europe.

Scheler I believe, would, be quick to reject any quietistic consequences that one might try to draw from his idea of solidarity. Let us suppose that certain statesmen have some opportunity of restraining the aggressive Serbians and of protecting the children endangered by the fighting. Scheler would not say, "Who are you to oppose the aggressors and to defend the innocent? You are yourself one of the aggressors. It is hypocrisy in you to take sides in this way." He would not say this, because he never intended that his *Gemeinschaft* should substitute for the other level of political guilt, where guilt is really more localisable. And yet it is true that the statesmen trying to mediate between aggressors and victims will be preserved from a certain pharisaism by remaining mindful that at the deepest level of guilt they share in a certain common guilt for the war.

2. One of the most appalling developments since 1989 is the eruption in various places of ethnic hatred, which shows itself whenever one people rises up against another to drive it out of its midst. The atrocities that one people

Gemeinschaft ebenso ursprünglich, wie sie selbstverantwortlich ist, in ihrer notwendigen Eigenschaft als "Glieder" von Gemeinschaften vor Gott alles mitzuverantworten habe, was das Ergehen und Verhalten der je umfassenden Gemeinschaft in geistiger und moralischer Hinsicht betrifft." VEM, p. 375.

is ready to commit against a foreign people are usually prepared by a certain dehumanization of those who are foreign. The foreign people are taken as somehow sub-human, indeed as a source of cultural pollution. This has the result that one can no longer feel the infinite value of each person in the foreign people. It also has the result – and this is the point that particularly concerns us here – that one banishes the foreigners from the fundamental solidarity of all human beings and of all peoples. One gets rid of any feeling of having-to-do-with-one-another. The foreign people are cast completely outside the realm where the aggressive people dwells with all those of its kind. In this way the foreign people are largely deprived of a certain moral protection, and in the end we see an otherwise cultivated and even Christian people becoming capable of doing dreadful things with an apparently conscience. Scheler would say to us that we set up one main bulwark against such moral lapses by deepening our sense of the moral solidarity of all men and of all peoples, and of our sense of their underlying metaphysical solidarity. He would say to us that it is relatively easy to feel oneself united with others in the same tribe or in the same nation, but that it is much more difficult to experience that unity which springs from a much deeper place in the person and which unites all fellow human beings. But until we learn to cultivate this deeper experience of unity, we will continue to have Bosnia's and Ruanda's.

3. Scheler's principle of solidarity has consequences even for the way in which economic life is to be organized in the future. Let us recall what in the social teaching of the Church is called the universal destination of the material goods of the earth, which simply means that these goods belong to the whole human family. If some economic group were to gain exclusive control of one basic good of the earth, so that none of it remained for anyone else, while that group had far more of it than it could ever reasonably use, then the group would be committing a serious offence against human solidarity, even if it acted legally in the acquisition of the good. It does not suffice to attain the goods of the earth without violating anyone's rights; one must in addition take account of the fact that these goods "address themselves" to all human beings. All men are comprehended in such a unity that the use of the elementary goods of the earth could never be reserved only for some people and denied to others.

4. The insights of Scheler into the solidarity of human persons also have consequences for one of the most burning issues of our time: the issue of abortion.

I recently heard an impressive lecture by the outstanding American student and critic of religion and public life, Richard Neuhaus. He said that the abortion debate does not turn only on the question of the being of the human embryo, on whether it is a human being or not. He said that the humanity of the embryo is so firmly established that there is not a great deal more to say about it. The question of abortion has its real centre of gravity in another place. He

said that "the great question is, who belongs to the community for which we accept common responsibility?" This means that it is not enough to appeal to the right to life of the unborn. Important as it is, indispensable as it is, it is not enough to affirm that in every abortion a right is violated; this has to be completed by another affirmation. If our stance in this great moral question of our time is not to suffer a certain individualistic distortion, then we must also appeal to the moral solidarity of all men, to the fundamental responsibility that we have for one another. Abortion is not only a violation of a right, but also a betrayal of a brother or a sister. It not only violates the rights of the aborted person, but also the fundamental solidarity in which we stand with him or her.

Some years ago an article appeared in a philosophy journal entitled, "A Defence of Abortion." It was very widely read and exercised no little influence. For the sake of her argument the author assumed that the human embryo which is aborted is a person. She argued as follows. It is indeed very generous if a woman lets live the child which she has conceived, but the burdens of pregnancy are such that she has no obligation to keep it; the mother performs a work of what ethicists call supererogation if she keeps it. Abortion is justified from this point of view not on the grounds that the embryo is not *a human being*, but rather on the grounds that it is not *a fellow human being*. This justification seems to express the sense that the mother has, morally, nothing to do with the child until she decides to act on its behalf. What is needed to overcome this point of view is some understanding of Scheler's principle of solidarity and of the co-responsibility for others in which we are established, in virtue of which we have morally to do with others even before we do anything in their regard.

CONCLUSION

We all know the magnificent final chorus of the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven. The text of Schiller and the music of Beethoven celebrate a fundamental solidarity of all men, which is a source of profound joy for them. Dostoevsky has explored this solidarity in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Now Max Scheler has explored it philosophically in his elaboration of "the principle of moral and religious solidarity." It has lost none of its timeliness since Scheler formulated it at the time of World War I, indeed, it has much to say to us today as we deliberate about the future of Europe and the rest of the world.