

**Max Scheler**

*The Constitution of the Human Being: From the Posthumous Works, Volumes 11 and 12.*

Translated by John Cutting.

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430 pages

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Max Scheler was a German phenomenologist at the turn of the twentieth century often considered the equal of Husserl and Heidegger. Scheler, as the translator's introduction notes, considered himself the only true metaphysician. *The Constitution of the Human* presents an elaborate and developed metaphysics from a phenomenological point of view that could rival any modern Thomistic account of metaphysics.

*The Constitution of the Human Being* comes from the posthumous works saved by Scheler's widow and seems to consist of essays brought together by the translator, British psychiatrist John Cutting. The book consists of eight parts: two sections at the beginning which lay out Scheler's phenomenology; a third section (the largest) on philosophical anthropology; sections devoted to a metaphysics of the human being, a metaphysics of cognition, a discussion of the meta-sciences, and a 'theory of the causes of everything'; and a concluding section of supplementary remarks.

Scheler begins by laying out the typology of metaphysical systems. Knowledge is, he claims, participation of a knowing subject in a being independent of the subject, which entails that metaphysics is the attempt to 'participate in the absolute reality of things themselves' (11). Scheler spends some time distinguishing metaphysics from art, fantasy, and the natural sciences. He holds that metaphysics must incorporate the findings of science and asks, 'How is science possible?' He trenchantly applies the findings of Einstein's special theory of relativity and relies heavily on notions of quantum mechanics throughout the text—an approach that makes his work still relevant today. Human beings take pride of place because they in particular are the things 'in which all essences of the world came together at the same time' (55), which is why metaphysics is possible. The human experience of value proves fundamental, because it drives cognition and makes the link to knowing God, which is the coming-to-be of the world.

Human beings come to know reality through the mental act of love which allows the essence of anything to come into the human being. This move allows the subject 'to grasp the essential structure of the world' (78). Reality makes itself known through resistance to the human being. Any entity can be divided into its meaning content and its image content, which helps reveal the ur-phenomenon. The ur-essence, in contrast, comprises the meaning content combined with the ur-phenomenon. Scheler claims that the ur-essence is an aspect of God's essence, 'making up part of the Supreme Being' (87),

which is the foundation of Scheler's panentheism. The upshot of Scheler's phenomenology is his view of metaphysics as the reproduction of the world as a totality from its divine ground. Where science examines references and foundations, and phenomenology attempts to see the intrinsic nature of matters by shutting off the life-drives, metaphysics encompasses both the natural world of science and the reduced world of phenomenology. Accordingly, metaphysics leads to God, because the reduction is directed toward absolute being, that is "being" whose essence and existence are one and the same thing' (108). This God is not the Christian or Thomistic God, however, but Being-itself which lies under everything.

Having established his basic metaphysical position, Scheler turns to the human being, which is a microcosm of reality. Quickly dismissing the different accounts of the soul in the history of Western philosophy, Scheler contends that, rather than dividing the human being into body and spirit/soul, we should consider a tri-partite division: body, soul, and mind. Body and soul eventually disappear, but mind returns to God. His position rests on two points. First, Scheler dismisses the idea that human beings have something over and above non-human animals. Rather, human beings exhibit a supra-vital interest when mind or consciousness, which in non-human animals serves life, in human beings becomes the master of life. The coming-to-be of a human being is a 'meta-cosmic' event, in which everything comes to serve the goals of mind. Scheler adopts, then, the Hegelian thesis of evolving consciousness in the same manner as Bergson (whom he dismisses) or Teilhard de Chardin. Second, Scheler relies heavily on quantum mechanics to suggest that even matter is not fully real or known, and is in some sense an expression of mind. The argument is interesting and is not fully developed, but it does paint an interesting picture to support Scheler's broader metaphysical claims about mind and God as the conglomerate of ur-essences. Within this discussion, Scheler makes important claims about how the life-drives direct perception, an insight which is often ignored in discussions of philosophical anthropology and which, according to Honneth and Joas, makes an important contribution to the Marxist development in this field. (See, e.g., Honneth and Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, Cambridge University Press 1988, commenting on Scheler's *Man's Place in Nature*.)

The human being's existence is rooted profoundly in the divine being, a being which, as much as the idea of the self, belongs to the world-consciousness of the human being." Yet the human being is not a child of, but rather a co-collaborator with, God. In the human being, as throughout the universe, mind and life-force work together to work out the original conflict of Being-itself. The human being is free to realize itself at the expense of the physical organism and lacks any individual immortality. Rather, the mind of the human being is sublimated into the mental and spiritual energy. Whence our knowledge of the Supreme Being? From the fact that mental and spiritual life force cannot be derived from any evolutionary aspect of nature. The human being, then, is 'an extra-temporal coming-to-be of the very eternally self-positing substance' (222). Scheler's working out of the coming-to-be of the self-positing substance—or Reality or Being-

itself—which is prior to the Supreme Being or God, rests on his notion of eros, as a disinterested drive that brings the human being to objectivity. Perhaps because of the structure of the book, which I will comment on later, the discussion of eros seems the least clear or developed within Scheler's system.

In the last third of the book, Scheler discusses space and time and the evolution of Substance or Being-itself. In our striving for something in life we meet resistance which reveals being, the being of which is independent of us. Thus, Nature must be the 'unique supra-singular, image creating' attribute of Being-itself that presents real being as images. Scheler concludes that 'all real being is therefore a coming forth from something that is a real coming-to-be, and therefore from something that is pre-real and with an unobjectifiable nature' (265). Though Scheler's discussion of space and time is informed by the theory of relativity, it remains unclear whether Scheler has grasped the idea that relativity shows that space-time is one reality, because he writes of them separately and gives them separate qualities. In his discussion of the coming-to-be of Substance, Scheler argues that the human being, as a microcosm, is that 'entity in whom Being-itself becomes aware of its two attributes', which allows the coming-to-be of God to occur (365).

Scheler's focus on eros, on the life drives, on Being-itself, and his panentheism make for a rich and unique phenomenological approach to metaphysics. As such, it presents a stronger challenge to traditional Thomistic metaphysics than has been recognized in the literature. Part of this challenge arises from Scheler's interpretation of the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, which, for Scheler, means that real beings are not subsistent, and reveal the nature of Being-itself as something beyond God. Substance becomes the foundation of everything, and his metaphysics fits well with Hinduism and Buddhism or with the work of Bergson, as mentioned before. While W. Norris Clarke (*The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics*, University of Notre Dame Press 2001) and Oliva Blanchette (*Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*, The Catholic University of America Press 2003) appropriate the findings of science and phenomenology into their reconstructions of Thomistic metaphysics, they assert the unity of beings despite what quantum mechanics reveals. While I think Thomistic metaphysics proves stronger, people working in the field would do well to address the challenges put forth by Scheler in his work.

The text is a worthwhile read, though not for someone new to Scheler. *The Constitution of the Human Being* is a magnum opus that brings together the mature thought of a significant and brilliant thinker. The translator could make the reading easier here. In fact, my main complaint about the work is that the translator leaves too much guesswork to the reader. The short introduction to Scheler, at two pages, says nothing about the content of the work. Further, the structure of the work remains an enigma. Why are these different chapters put together in the way they are, or as a whole at all? The book's cover notes that this work brings together the writings of Scheler on metaphysics and anthropology, but it does not—and the translator does not—say whether this was

written as a complete whole. It is unclear why some sections have dates and some do not. Do we not know when other sections were written? Does this not suggest that these parts might have been intended to be somewhere else? Most importantly, some of the ideas themselves do not seem fully developed where they occur in the manuscript.

In general, while Scheler's book proves a major contribution to the field and having an English translation is invaluable, I caution the reader to be prepared to invest some significant time in working through Scheler's ideas.

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