

## **The *Einsfühlung* in Max Scheler and the possibility of a dialogue with Edith Stein on empathy for a new philosophy of life**

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**Abstract:** From the first pages of Scheler's *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, the *Einsfühlung*<sup>1</sup>, which is the focus of this article, is analyzed in details. We will concentrate on this long Schelerian route, to distinguish the derived meanings of fellow-feeling (*Mitfühlen*) from the primitive one, i.e. the fusional emotional fellow-feeling, which occurs in subjects who participate with their own *Leib* to the same universal life-stream. Subsequently, we will pay attention to the similarities and the differences between Schelerian *Einsfühlung* and Edith Stein's conception of empathy (*Einfühlung*), to explore the fascinating possibility of a debate that unfortunately has never occurred. The thesis discussed in this paper is that a new philosophy of life can flourish from the meeting of these two different philosophical standpoints, a philosophy aware of the importance in relationships both of the emotional participation and of the knowledge of the real-life of the other. This kind of philosophy is obviously open to metaphysical experiences, intended in terms of relationships with the living otherness in us and beyond us.

**Keywords:** *Einsfühlung*, empathy, Max Scheler, Edith Stein, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, philosophy of life

### PHILOSOPHICAL INTRODUCTION TO *WESEN UND FORMEN DER SYMPATHIE*

The first edition of *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie / The Nature of Sympathie* came out in 1913 and its aim was declared openly by

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<sup>1</sup> *Einsfühlung* is a German term not easy to translate. In the Schelerian vocabulary, it indicates a sort of fellow-feeling that is also a participation to the same life-stream in which the subjects are in fusion, even though each of them experiences this stream with his own *Leib*. Following the advice of the English translator of *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, Peter Heath, I will express the concept of *Einsfühlung* with utterances regarding affective or emotional identification, even though the hiatus with the German meaning is substantial.

Scheler himself: “The present work is the outcome of a wider range of enquiries designed to provide a phenomenological basis for a philosophical ethics” (1913/2017, li). One of the peculiar features of the Schelerian thought, compared to the thought of many other representatives of the emerging philosophical anthropology, is actually the capacity to maintain a direct relationship with the phenomenological thought, especially Husserl’s, but also partly Edith Stein’s. Comparison with Theodor Lipps’ thought was inevitable, too.

If we consider Scheler’s reference points, it is not surprising that he tries to clarify the concepts of empathy, sympathy and fellow-feeling, starting from the countless meanings they have already assumed. However, we must note that, if on one side Scheler restores a bit of order in that *mare magnum* which the debate on empathy had become by then, on the other side, as Laura Boella (2018) observes, he restricted to consider empathy only to Lipps’ interpretation, ignoring Edith Stein’s philosophical position. It is sad that Stein’s idea, according to which empathy is the experience of an other-than-self conscience, that allows us to pick up other’s people psychic life (Stein 1917/1989, 11), was not successful at the time.

In any case, concerning the analysis of Scheler’s thought, the only consideration is that empathy is intended almost exclusively as Lipps’ projective empathy and this is the reason for its negative assessment. Knowledge of the others cannot be reduced to an inner imitation or to an analogic projection. Instead, a remarkable importance is assigned to sympathy, which, according to Scheler, is the true fundamental for an authentic intersubjective relationship, because it allows to preserve the autonomy of the involved subjects and, at the same time, to be open to the communication and to the comprehension of the others (Pansera 2001, 41). Scheler himself admits that his interest for sympathy and its insight has exponentially grown, as explicitly he declared in the preface to the second edition of *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* published in 1923.

Going into more details, on the basis of a comparison with the first edition, we can state that the extension involves sociological and psychological considerations, among which we should mention the idea that each form of human grouping must be kept together by specific structures of the sympathetic behaviour, as well as gnoseological ones, such as the idea that sympathy exists together with intellect and perception (Scheler 1923/2017, xlvi). This latter aspect is specifically relevant because it shows that, while Edith Stein has

assigned a cognitive function to empathy, in Scheler this fundamental role is transferred to sympathy. In the third edition of his work (1926), Max Scheler confirmed the line taken in the second edition.

We are able to understand how much importance Scheler assigns to a real identification, i.e. to a fusional emotional identification. As we will see, after going through the previous conceptions of *Einsfühlung*, he ends up referring to a fellow-feeling that not only doesn't delete *Leib* of all the involved subjects, but also allows to recognize ourselves through our "vital consciousness" (1923/2017, 34-35) in a unique life-stream.

### THE THEMATIZATION OF *EINSFÜHLUNG* IN *WESEN UND FORMEN DER SYMPATHIE*

From the first pages of *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* Scheler's desire to create comparisons on various aspects with his contemporaries and great thinkers before him is quite evident. The structure of *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* and its schematic setting are perfectly adequate from this point of view because they allows him to honour his interlocutors appropriately, highlighting the strengths in their thinking, starting to define his own specific philosophical position, even simple by distancing himself. Namely, he disagrees with the Scottish present love and hate concepts, replacing these theories with one according to which the processes of co-enjoyment and co-suffering allow us not only to understand, but to share as well.

A first fundamental consideration is that the ethics of sympathy always presume what it wants to deduce. The German philosopher notes that "clearly the sharing of another's pleasure can only be moral when the latter is *itself moral*, and warranted by the value-situation which evokes it [...] In acts of love and hate there is certainly an element of valuation present, positively or negatively; but mere fellow-feeling, in all its possible forms, is in principle *blinded to value*" (Scheler 1923/2017, 5). We can deduce that the fellow-feeling of the Scottish moralists, differently from love, does not focus on the value of the *Erlebnisse* of the others.

It is impossible, according to Scheler, to obtain the ethical values only by identifying ourselves with the vision that the others have of us. On the contrary, he states that when people's behaviour exercises on us what he clearly defines as an emotional infection we are instead faced with a deception of our own conscience. So, "the ethics of sympathy is

found wanting in that it clashes from the outset with the self-evident law of preference, whereby all positively ‘spontaneous’ acts are to be preferred to merely ‘re-active’ ones” (Ibid, 6).

The philosopher concludes this dialogue with the Scottish moralists reminding that not just self-judgement can and must avoid the interference of sympathetic acts, but also the judgment of others must refuse this kind of inauthentic fellow-feeling.

Scheler cannot avoid taking distance from Lipps’ theory on projective empathy, which had erroneously confused and equated fellow-feeling with apprehension, comprehension and, in a certain way, with re-experience in mind<sup>2</sup>, too. He observes that we cannot talk about apprehension, comprehension and re-experience in mind without a previous givenness, especially considering that the being of this living experience does not constitute itself in the co-feeling. On the contrary, the fellow-feeling would be impossible without a givenness to apprehend and to comprehend; and even to re-experience in mind is possible merely by the intention toward an object, which must be brought back to our attention. In addition to that, each form of knowledge of the *Erlebnisse* of others cannot disregard the assumption of the existence of the others’ psyche.

These pregnant reflections highlight the full scope of the phenomenological references of the Schelerian thought that inspired by Husserl, reminds us the importance of distinguishing the intentional act from the intentioned object and, above all, that there cannot be any intentional act without the I who carries out that act. Therefore, his previous phenomenological studies enabled Scheler to dispute Lipps’ theory of projective empathy, avoiding at the same time the semantic confusion many of his predecessors have experienced:

We shall not, at present, give any very detailed account of those acts which serve to establish the existence of other people and their experiences. It only needs to be emphasized that this acceptance and understanding does not come about as the conclusion to an ‘argument from analogy’ or by any projective ‘*empathy*’ or ‘mimetic impulse’ (Scheler 1923/2017, 9).

The debate with Lipps is crucial because, ultimately, Scheler states that we are only able to perceive the others because we are not limited to

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<sup>2</sup> A periphrasis of *Nachleben*, that is not only a dead reproduction, but a living experience.

grasping their *Körper*, but we get their *Leib*, i.e. their living body and its living experiences. It is also clearly why, despite the 'self' of the others having an absolute sphere of intimacy, the evidence of the presence of living experiences in it is not given by complex reasonings from which we draw inferences, but by the expressive phenomena related to our primary perception.

Scheler considers this presence of an essential relation between the expressive phenomena and the *Erlebnisse* to be worth of further study. Noting that these relations have foundations independently from our specific expressive movements, he observes that they are possible due to the presence of a universal grammar, valid for all expressions and which is the supreme foundation for the comprehension of all forms of living mimic and pantomimic. The role of imitation, at most, can be the possibility to reproduce a real living experience in the 'self' that is objectively similar to the one of the others, but evidently without any relation with the comprehension of that specific and unique living experience (Scheler 1923/2017, 11).

After these necessary premises, Scheler shifts attention to the fellow-feeling. He proposes to distinguish four completely different experiences: the immediate community of feelings, the fellow-feeling about something, the mere emotional infection and the true *Einsfühlung* (Ibid, 12). This classification is functional to restore some order by identifying different phenomena, to prove that a true fellow-feeling is possible only in a specific way of living an experience of identification.

It is quite easy to understand what an immediate community of feelings is. However, we refer to the tragic Schelerian example of two parents facing their dead child's body. Scheler notes that they feel the same pain, but the mother's pain is different from the father's and vice versa. In this case, in fact, the suffering of a parent never becomes objective for the other one.

The fellow-feeling about something implies a real intentionality because in this case the fellow-feeling is affectively directed to the affective state of the other. This second meaning of intentionality is a way of remembering that we feel the sufferance of the others through a phenomenological act, which brings it to the subject's intentionality, but which considers the others' feelings. (Ibid, 13-14)

The third declination of fellow-feeling is not properly a form of fellow-feeling. Scheler calls it so only because in the past it has been confused with this term, and he tries to clarify the situation. Scheler

opposes Nietzsche's idea of compassion as a multiplier of misery, stating that such an amplification of misery can only happen in the unnecessary case when there is an identification of compassion with the emotional infection (Ibid, 17). In the emotional infection there is neither an affective intention towards the emotional state of the other nor a participation in his feeling. The emotional infection, in fact, implies an ignorance of the affective state of the other and this is the reason for which it is possible to be infected by the joy or by the suffering of others without knowing anything of them. It is therefore evident that putting emotional infection and the fellow-feeling on the same plan is a serious *metabasis eis allo genos*.

We can finally focus on the fourth and last mode of fellow-feeling, i.e. what in *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* is called the true emotional identification. Scheler starts to examine this kind of fellow-feeling *via negationis*, i.e. showing that his conception of fellow-feeling is different both from Edith Stein's idea of empathy and from Lipps' aesthetic empathy. The way in which Scheler speaks about the case of acrobat studied by Lipps is emblematic:

According to him [Lipps], the absorbed spectator of an acrobat in a circus turn identifies himself with the performers, whose movements he reproduces within himself, in the character of an acrobat. Lipps believed that only spectator's real self remains distinct here, his conscious self having sunk itself completely in that of the acrobat. Edith Stein has interposed a just criticism on this point. 'I am not' she says 'the "one with" the acrobat' '. I am only "with" him (Scheler 1923/2017, 18).

For Scheler there is no identification with the acrobat, but rather, following Stein, he states that the attention is fixed passively on the 'self' of the other inasmuch as given to our own 'self'. Nonetheless, distancing himself from Stein too, he states that there are other cases, not considered either by Lipps or by Stein, in which this fellow-feeling is not only a short trance, but it is complete (Ibid, 18).

Scheler now goes on to explain that this complete identification can happen in two negative ways: idiopathic and heteropathic. We assist to an idiopathic identification when the 'self' of the other is completely absorbed in our own, in which it is included at conscience level, becoming deprived of its own being and conscience. We witness a heteropathic identification when our 'self' is captured by the one of the other, resulting in a formal 'self' that substitutes our real 'self'. The

philosopher adds that the possibilities of a negative identification are high, but human beings can avoid this kind of fellow-feeling.

The real Scheler's smart intuition is the discovery of a genuine identification, neither idiopathic nor heteropathic, which occurs when the fellow-feeling is characterized by a reciprocal fusion. This identification between two subjects occurs when they are involved in "a *single* life-stream in which nothing of their individual selves remains any longer distinct, though it has equally little resemblance to a consciousness of 'us' founded on the respective self-awareness of each" (Ibid, 25).

Our author shows various examples of an authentic fusional fellow-feeling. Just to mention some of them, this occurs in the sexual act inspired by love (i.e. when the sexual act is not exploitative or aimed at a specific purpose) and also in the love between mother and child (when it is not an attempt to delete the child's otherness).

Finally, the *Einsfühlung* begins to emerge as a way of overcoming the dualism between the vital sphere and the biological one:

We know that evaluation takes *precedence* over perception in the constitution of the given, as it also does at the higher level of human mentality, and even at the intellectual plane. Is it not possible, therefore, that identification with the specialized vital principle peculiar to another organism might yield a *pattern of the dynamic build-up* of that principle and an insight into the specific biological *value* of its various instinctive tendencies, which was *prior* to and independent of perception? (Scheler 1923/2017, 30).

This intersection between the dynamism of the vital urge and the biological structure is made possible by the spiritual sphere present in the human being, and it is the fascinating way in which Scheler keeps together the scientific aspect of the philosophical anthropology and the phenomenological one. This is why Scheler writes textually that "the only 'region' in the whole framework of man's unitary intellectual and psycho-somatic nature, where identification can take place, is invariably to be found as *midway* between the *bodily* consciousness, which embraces in its own specific fashion all organic sensations and localized feelings, and the intellectual-spiritual personality that is the center of activity for all the 'higher' acts of intention" (Ibid, 33).

To reach authentic fellow-feelings, human beings must rise heroically over their corporeality and, at the same time, they must forget their spiritual reality by no longer concentrating on it.

It's worth noting the use of expressions that describe the human being as continuously in tension between earth and sky. The religious inspiration is a peculiarity of Schelerian thought, specifying that the *unyo mystica* with God is not a kind of fellow-feeling because God is only pure spiritual essence. Nonetheless, according to Scheler, there is a close relation between fellow-feelings and metaphysics. As he states, metaphysical theories "can have *meaning* only in the *organic* sphere, i.e. as evidence for the metaphysical reality of a supra-individual 'life' in all living things, of a primal entelechy in everything subject to biological laws" (Scheler 1923/2017, 36). Thus, the old metaphysical systems must not be totally abandoned, but they can be regained as long as they are inscribed in the sphere of the *Lebenswelt*, which gives sense to a metaphysically oriented life. The idea of the possibility of rethinking the metaphysical systems from a phenomenological point of view with a particular attention to the *Lebenswelt* and to the life-stream is maybe one of the most interesting possibilities for establishing a dialogue between Max Scheler and Edith Stein. The Schelerian reflections on the *Einsfühlung* and Stein's paid attention to the cognitive aspect related to the experiences of the phenomenological ego are an important inheritance for our time.

#### A DIALOGUE THAT UNFORTUNATELY DID NOT EXIST: A POSSIBLE COMPARISON BETWEEN MAX SCHELER AND EDITH STEIN ON EMPATHY AS A SOURCE OF A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

It is well known that there is not a real comparison between Max Scheler and Edith Stein on the notion of empathy, especially because Scheler avoided taking into account Stein's conception of empathy and he focused on the critic to Lipps. It would be interesting to make a space for such a dialogue that would be productive.

Both Scheler and Stein considered 'knowing the others in their otherness' to be important, without desecrating it. Edith Stein assigns this function not to the *Einsicht*, but to the *Einfühlung*. This meaning of empathy can be initially disappointing or less attractive; but certainly it deserves attention. This more neutral meaning – not simple belittling empathy - invites to consider the urge to put us in someone else's shoes can be sometimes negative, because it would mean invading his/her own space and affecting the otherness. It can mean attempting to obstinately deny an inaccessibility that the others have in their otherness that must not be violated. It is to be mentioned an

example about a woman, Leslie Jamison, who, for a long time being the subject of medicine students' empathy exam, pointed out that empathy is like travelling to a foreign country: it implies crossing the borders, showing documents and learning about the laws and customs of that foreign land (Boella 2018, 21-25).

From such a vision, a more neutral meaning of empathy is a way of learning to let others to put their shoes on, instead of putting ourselves on. In this sense, Edith Stein was a forerunner, through her understanding of empathy. And Max Scheler teaches us somehow in a similar manner; especially when he emphasizes the mere comprehension of the emotive state of the others is widely insufficient. Empathy is not sufficient for healing the wounds after their infliction. Sometimes it is necessary the distance to become closeness; but a closeness that does not crush or deny the other. Consequently, the fusional emotional identification, which is intended as participation with our *Leib* to the same universal life-stream, is extremely important. Obviously, this participation always preserves and values the difference and the distance.

Knowing the others, so that their real-life gives itself objectively to my 'self', is fundamental because otherwise a complete unity would be impossible, but it is not sufficient. Only if we are involved with our *Leib* in the relationships with the others, accepting to be even hurt, it is possible to reach an authentic fusional identification; i.e. a union in which we are with the other and for the other, but remaining ourselves and letting the other to be different, despite the fusion.

We cannot only know the other; we can also love him/her. But a real love is only when we know the otherness of the other, only when, as pointed out by Leslie Jamison, we know and respect the laws and the customs of the foreign land that is precisely the other. So, a real fusional identification is impossible without the Steinean empathy.

At the same time, a dialogue between Scheler's reflections on the participation with our *Leib* to the life-stream, on one hand, and Stein thoughts on the necessity to perceive the real-life in terms of knowledge, on the other hand, can be the base for a new philosophy of life's flourishing. The reference is to a philosophy of life where human beings are involved in a life-stream and, at the same time, have continuously a critical existential position; where the corporeality is a limit but it also opens up a metaphysical relation with what is absolutely 'other' because it is beyond the corporeality itself.

The present approach is just a challenge for further research as regards a needed dialogue between two great thinkers, Max Scheler and Edith Stein, on the topics of *Einsfühlung* and empathy.

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