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## Sympathy and the Non-human: Max Scheler's Phenomenology of Interrelation

by David Dillard-Wright

### Abstract

*German phenomenologist and sociologist Max Scheler accorded sympathy a central role in his philosophy, arguing that sympathy enables not only ethical behaviour, but also knowledge of animate and inanimate others. Influenced by Catholicism and especially St Francis, Scheler envisioned a broad, cosmic sympathy forming the hidden basis for all human values, with the "higher" religious, artistic, philosophic and other cultural values enabled by a more basic regard for non-human nature and insights gained from the human situation within the non-human world. Sympathy for the non-human is thus both integral and fundamental to the cultivation of other values in the development of both the human person and humanity in general.*

*Scheler's concept of sympathy is valuable for contemporary animal ethics because it insists on acknowledgement of and respect for difference as constitutive for the experience of sympathy. By thus allowing for sympathy to occur in the absence of complete knowledge of other subjectivities, Scheler's phenomenology of sympathy eliminates the need for complete understanding of the consciousness of other animals as a prerequisite for interspecies sympathy. Despite their inability to completely inhabit non-human perspectives, humans can thus sympathize with other creatures.*

*While Scheler is a foundational thinker and, to a large degree, maintains hierarchical structures contested by many contemporary animal theorists, he remains a valuable source for contemporary theory insofar as he acknowledges a "fundamental basis of connection" between species and affirms that all animal bodies are communicative. The occasioning of sympathy by gestural signification opens a path of insight that can increase human openness to non-human others.*

Sympathy for other animals is not a "special interest" province of philosophy, is not a sidecar to ontology or ethics. Rather, understanding animals is a crucial key to philosophical anthropology in a post-Darwinian, ecologically conscious era. Scheler's philosophy of sympathy is valuable because it provides a point of entry into the experience of animals, which can lead to a more humane and sustainable future for life on Earth. This essay will analyse Scheler's philosophy of sympathy, with special concern for human/animal

interactions, and conclude with some suggestions as to how this phenomenology of sympathy can mobilize concern for the extra-human orders of nature, arguing throughout that concern for the extra-human is also deeply humanitarian.

Beware the child who burns ants with a magnifying glass, the now widely recognized wisdom goes, because cruelty to non-human creatures results in abusive human relationships later in life. This

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realization has a precursor in Max Scheler's careful phenomenological description of sympathy. Scheler underscored the importance of sympathy with nature in the formation of human morality: human sympathy, he argues, is impossible without concern for all forms of life, including plants and other animals. Scheler's concept of sympathy or "fellow-feeling" resolves many problems in environmental and animal ethics, as it eliminates a major stumbling block when it comes to ethical treatment of animals: the notion that humans can never fully understand what it is like to be a non-human animal and therefore cannot enter into moral relations with them. Scheler resisted concepts of sympathy that rely on some form of mental substitution or reconstruction from prior experience that enables the sympathetic response by the sympathizer. Similarity of experience is not a prerequisite for inter-human sympathy, nor is it necessary for sympathy with other animals. Using St Francis as an example, Scheler even holds open the possibility that one can sympathize with inanimate nature. By holding open the door to sympathy as widely as possible, Scheler articulated a philosophy that was ecologically aware and yet appreciated the significant differences between humans and other creatures.

Until recently, Scheler enjoyed little of the posthumous attention that contemporaries like Heidegger and Sartre received, partially due to Nazi censorship of his writing as well as the relatively slow publication of the complete works (Frings, 1998, p. 271). The recent upsurge in scholarly interest in Scheler's work corrects the gap between Scheler's writing and the available secondary literature. Several recent commentators have shown how Scheler's personalism improves upon neo-Kantian rationalism in developing an ethics that precedes logical constructions. Manfred Frings (1998) argues that Scheler's extension of Pascal's "*ordre du coeur*" in his value ethics is a correction to rational moral calculus in that it precludes the possibility of thinking of ethics in terms of cost-benefit analysis. The actions that one "ought" to do can and should be determined not only by a reasoned internal dialogue, which is actually secondary to the properly ethical sphere, but also by emotive factors linked to a scale of values and a radical personalism (Frings, 1998, pp. 272-274). John Crosby stresses this radical individuality in Scheler's ethics as one of its strong points: each person has moral requirements that are completely unique, because each individual possesses a distinct essence which can properly be called an essence despite its dependence on biological and social factors (Crosby, 1998, p. 26). Dennis Weiss (1998) stresses Scheler's role in reconciling the human person in

relation to its disparate descriptions in the sciences: philosophical anthropology is in the unique position of articulating a unified picture of human nature that draws from these disciplines (the social and "hard" sciences) without being overwhelmed by them. While Weiss faults Scheler for drawing too strong a division between the matter and the spirit of the human, he recognizes that Scheler's "wholeness task" is relevant in a time in which humans are beginning to recognize commonalities between human intelligence and the capabilities of other animals and even machines (Weiss, 1998, pp. 239, 247). These recent discussions reveal how Scheler breaks with the Kantian tradition by insisting on moral obligations that relate to individual personality and emotional states, by breaking with the demands of formal duty ethics in favour of intuition and sympathy, and by situating humankind within extra-human nature while yet claiming human distinctiveness.

Efforts to apply Scheler's work to a variety of ethical situations outside the bounds of phenomenology demonstrate the viability of sympathy to transcend subject-object boundaries (Gallagher, 2004; HaCohen, 2001; Jeffreys, 2006; Reilly, 2006). Richard Zaner (2003), for example, examines real and fictional instances of extreme disability occasioned by stroke and battlefield trauma and the ways in which severely disabled people are able to reach outside themselves through the sympathetic link with a caregiver. Zaner describes how magazine editor Jean-Dominique Bauby lost almost all of his motor functioning after a massive stroke (2003, p. 188). Able to move only his left eyelid, Bauby painstakingly dictated his memoir using a letter chart and sequences of blinks. Bauby's loss of his usual ability to communicate with family and friends was maddening, but, if it had not been for the sympathetic attention of his caregivers, even that fragile thread of communication would have been lost. It would have been easy to have missed that one fluttering left eyelid; it would have been easy to have discounted its series of blinks. A "*readiness to listen*" is constitutive for the experience of sympathy, and such care and concern has not only ethical but also epistemological significance (Zaner, 2003, pp. 201-203). Sympathy is a precondition for knowledge of other subjects. For Scheler, "the heart has a place even in the knowing operations performed by persons, even to the point of making them possible at all" (Crosby, 1998, p. 39). Human beings know each other and themselves by acts of sympathy that take place in co-responsibility (or what Merleau-Ponty called intersubjectivity or even "interanimality"), and without this "fellow-feeling", the human intellectual/ emotional world is impoverished (Crosby, 1998, p. 39; Merleau-Ponty

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1964/1968, p. 172; Scheler, 1912/ 1979). Failure to sympathize with other creatures is failure to understand them, and failure to understand them is failure to understand ourselves.

The term “sympathy” was used by Max Scheler as a blanket term for the host of states explored in *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (1912). In choosing the term “sympathy” (*Sympathie*) as the “generic term” to encompass such diverse notions as *Mitgefühl* (fellow-feeling), *Mitleid* (pity, commiseration), *Einfühlung* (empathy), and even *Cosmovitale Einfühlung* (defined as “identification, etc. with the ... Cosmos”), Scheler gave priority to sympathy, signalling that the diversity of states described in the book are all variations of sympathy, or different rooms within the house of sympathy (Scheler, 1912/1979, p. liii). That said, Scheler does articulate his own theory of sympathy, which seeks not only to describe the different types of sympathy, but also to understand how the diversity of sympathetic experiences are possible at all. Scheler situates the experience of sympathy within the development of the human person and humanity in general, giving sympathy an absolutely central role. Before turning to these larger implications, Scheler must explain what he means by sympathy and how sympathy takes place.

Throughout his writing, Scheler works to preserve difference as a foundational part of the experience of sympathy: sympathy need not form an ecstatic union between two people nor convey positive knowledge about another’s inward state. Scheler argues against theories that would blur the boundaries between individuals or between people and the natural world. His careful, methodical parsing of terms is an expression of this concern for preserving the integrity of human subjects and non-human entities. In his theory, sympathy is not a transfer of another’s experience into my own consciousness, nor is it a reproduction drawn from my own experience in order to approximate the other’s experience. Scheler preserves a sphere within the other that remains unknown to me, that is forever private and enclosed, which he refers to as the “permanent limit of advance” (1912/1979, p. 71). Sympathy can advance to the boundary of that inner realm, but never beyond. For Scheler, the knowledge conveyed by sympathy is metaphysical, not strictly “data”, in that it is a realization, on my part, that the other possesses the same hidden inner life that I also possess. The foreign subject then becomes not only relatively equal (“relatively real”) to me but actually equal (“absolutely real”) (1912/1979, p. 59). The reason Scheler spends so much time separating arguments based on emotional “infection” and “vicarious re-

enactment” (1912/1979, p. 42) from sympathy proper is that he sees that, in order for sympathy to remain genuine, it must preserve both the foreign nature of the other and my own *wilful* capacity to sympathize. Scheler reserves the label of sympathy for cases in which I feel for another *despite* my inability to really know what the other person is experiencing.

Scheler even goes so far as to say that the “truer” the sympathy, or fellow-feeling, the less reproduction - understood as an interior rehearsal or representation - happens in the person sympathizing. In the experience of sympathy, I am so involved in feeling *for* the other that I do not reconstruct what the other might be feeling on the basis of my own experiences, or, worse, recount a story of my own to make the other feel better (1912/1979, p. 47). If reproduction were necessary for sympathy, I would have to have had the experience of drowning in order to sympathize with a person who is drowning. I need not go through a process of deliberation or ask myself how the other person might be feeling in order to sympathize: sympathy happens on a more basic, visceral level and only secondarily results in a reconstruction of the foreign subjectivity in my own terms. Sympathy operates on an intuitive level for Scheler, working in concert with the bodily organism. His explanation of gesture is crucial for understanding his theory of sympathy and would later inspire Merleau-Ponty, whose discussion of gesture in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is directly indebted to Scheler (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 214 & note 13).

In gesture, the expression is given simultaneously with the object, such that clasped hands mean “please”. “It is *in* the blush that we perceive shame, *in* the laughter joy” (Scheler, 1912/1979, p. 10). We do not have to go through a process of interpretation to know what these bodily configurations mean. Gestures are not signs that refer to something else; rather, the sign itself *is* the signified (Scheler, 1912/1979, p. 10 & note 1). In this way, Scheler avoids overly rationalistic, disembodied analyses that would place our comprehension of others in a mental formula of reconstruction. He cites the example of babies recognizing their mothers’ pleasure or anger as evidence that no process of extrapolation need take place for the understanding of gesture (Scheler, 1912/1979, p. 12). Just as a baby does not need to mentally reproduce its mother’s perceived mental states in order to understand her joy or displeasure, fully developed human beings can also sympathize with their fellow human beings and with other animals based on the signing activities of the body. These outward “signs” are not separate from the inner states which they “represent”. Scheler insists that this is no

question at all of “re-presentation”: the frown *is* the sadness or anger, and it is in this fleshly medium that both the “sender” and “receiver” correspond. Such “correspondence” does not imply, as in a letter, a message encoded, sent and received, but rather the sense of paralleling one another. The frown itself is thus the medium through which the two interact, with or without the mental processes that accompany this event or attempt to reproduce what the other might be thinking.

It is important to note Scheler’s exclusion of reproduction - the imaginative rehearsal of another’s inward state - from genuine sympathy, because it has consequences for the scope of sympathy’s reach. If sympathy is based on my own experiences, and not those of the other, it is not sympathy at all, but an act of introspection. Sympathy based entirely on introspection must thus be a contradiction, in that sympathy must necessarily reach beyond solipsistic analysis and attend to the other. Beyond this objection, my ability to sympathize would be greatly limited if sympathy depended upon reconstruction, because I could only sympathize with those sharing similar experiences to those I’d already had, or with those sufficiently similar to myself that I could extrapolate from my experiences to make up the difference. If sympathy is primarily cognitive and primarily reproductive, the picture that emerges is a pastiche of various memories that achieve a simulacrum of what I believe the other person might be experiencing. Having said this, Scheler does not believe that reproduction is without value. Surely people *do* draw from their own experiences in order to understand others. Scheler only wishes to place reproduction, however valuable it might be, in a different category from sympathy itself. Reproduction may take its place alongside fellow-feeling and understanding as among those phenomena that allow us to “enlarge” our own lives and “transcend” our own limitations (Scheler, 1912/1979, p. 49). In his theory, sympathy acts as a kind of leading edge in the understanding of an/other; without this sympathy that goes beyond my capacity to reconstruct the other’s inward life, it is doubtful that any further attempts to understand would be made.

Just as Scheler wants to preserve the boundaries between individual humans, he also works to preserve the distinctions between humans and the natural world. Scheler’s concern is not that humans might anthropomorphize nature and thus think that they could sympathize with animals. On the contrary, human beings are already “*cosmomorphic*” (Scheler, 1912/1979, p. 105), made of the same stuff as the “natural” world, and discussion of the human already

entails a discussion of the natural. The “cultivation of human nature”, then, requires a cultivation of identification with nature in general, a task which Scheler regards as “the first task of our educational enterprise” (ibid.). Realizing the interconnections between humans and the natural world on an intuitive level is foundational for Scheler, the basis for all humanitarian values. We might expect, then, that Scheler would agree with any theory that might bolster his case for greater human identification with the natural world, but he does not. For example, Scheler believes that Nietzsche mistakenly identifies certain negative human emotions on seeing the suffering of animals, such as “seeing a fowl’s neck wrung”, as fellow-feeling. Scheler sees this as an example of a form of selfishness masquerading as fellow-feeling, in which it is unpleasant *for me* to see the sight of blood, to see the dead bird, and so forth. In my selfishness, the pleasure or pain of the other is actually masked by my own sensitivities (1912/1979, p. 41).

Scheler does not believe that we can have access to the sensory experience of animals. This would not be an obstacle to fellow-feeling in and of itself, because Scheler associates sensory experience not with fellow-feeling but with reproduction. The more pure the fellow-feeling, then, the less the sensory element. While not having access to the sensory lives of animals could thus be said to heighten the possibility of fellow-feeling with them, Scheler categorically states that “fellow-feeling is no longer operative in such cases” (1912/1979, p. 48). However, he goes on to say, somewhat contradictorily:

Nevertheless so far as the various modes of *vital feeling* are concerned, understanding and fellow-feeling are able to range throughout the *entire* animate universe, even though they rapidly fall off in respect of specific qualities as we descend the organic scale. (1912/1979, p. 48)

This passage indicates Scheler’s ambivalence about extending fellow-feeling to animals, an ambivalence which interpreters of Scheler need not share. In light of his concern for preserving the differences between animals and humans, Scheler interpolates the term “vital feeling”, but falls short of adopting it as a separate category, in that he says that, in this respect, fellow-feeling *is* operative. Insofar as he feels that human identification with nature is necessary for identification with other humans, he feels an attraction towards including animals in fellow-feeling, albeit with the qualification that it is only in respect of a “vital feeling”. Despite his ambivalence,

Scheler does say that, in our dealings with animals, we do have access to the (non-sensory) experiences of animals, and this is via what he calls a “*universal grammar*” or a “*fundamental basis of connection*” (1912/1979, p. 11). This takes place in much the same way as we understand human gestures. To extend this portion of Scheler’s argument further than he does himself, we can tell when an animal is afraid because it cowers, that it is in pain because it cries out. By “as we descend the organic scale”, Scheler is saying that this basis of connection becomes more tenuous as we get to animals that are further removed from ourselves. However, the connection is not completely absent so long as we remain within the sphere of animate living creatures.

Although Scheler does not delineate them, he discusses fellow-feeling, or something akin to it, on at least three levels: between humans, between humans and animals (bracketing certain false types, as in Nietzsche’s case), and between humans and the inanimate natural world (for example, St Francis calling a flame his “brother”). At every point, Scheler tries to preserve the distinctions between the sympathizing person and the “object” of sympathy, because, for him, “fellow-feeling does not presuppose essential sameness but essential difference” (1912/1979, p. 65). Although this position runs counter to the claims of some proponents of animal rights who say that animals should be protected because they are essentially the same as human beings, Scheler’s theory shows that difference need not be an obstacle for - and, indeed, is constitutive of - human concern for the other.

Concern for difference is also at the heart of his critique of theories of “metaphysical monism”, which posit one spiritual substance underlying the whole universe. Regarding it as representative of this type of view, Scheler negates Schopenhauer’s notion that pity gives us access to the one self-negating will that underlies our illusory, individual selves (1912/1979, pp. 51-54). Bergson’s “*élan vital*” and Plato’s “world-soul” are critiqued along similar lines (1912/1979, pp. 63, 82). Such theories cannot help to explain sympathy, because they portray a fusion of individuals into an underlying impersonal mass. Sympathy, which is feeling of one for *another*, becomes impossible in such a metaphysic. (Scheler says that his own metaphysical claims for sympathy lead him to theism, but it would be a panentheistic sort of theism that would not fuse God with the world.) Here again, Scheler maintains a distinction, this time between God and the universe.

As has already been stated, Scheler believes that

identification with nature is the point of entry into other, “higher” modes of connection, such as sympathy between humans and human love of God. Scheler stridently criticises Western culture for imagining that it could bypass a sense of connection with nature and still cultivate the other human values. However, Scheler’s own presentation of the issues still, at times, works within the framework of human dominance over nature. For example, Scheler envisages a continuum of types of identification moving hierarchically from union with nature all the way to love of God:

Thus among all the forms of sympathy and varieties of love, the sense of vital unity with the cosmos stands, so to speak, at the opposite pole to the non-cosmic love of persons, founded upon the love of God. All the other forms lie, as it were, in stages between them. Those who seek to *ascend this scale* [italics added] will surely fall if they insist upon taking the second step before they have made the first. (Scheler, 1912/1979, p. 129)

This might at first seem to be an improvement on the Aristotelian chain of being so prevalent in the West, in that it speaks of a movement from one pole to another, but, even in this passage, Scheler describes a “scale” which can be “ascend[ed]”. Scheler also speaks elsewhere of “higher” and “lower” faculties (1912/1979, p. 104), of which identification with nature seems to be lower. While Scheler does make the first step, as it were, obligatory, the structure of his thought still falls within the dominant paradigm, and, therefore, undergirds human domination. Scheler elsewhere excoriates Aristotle’s philosophy for making the relationship of master and slave seem “natural”, but his own implied hierarchy accomplishes the same thing for the relationship between human and non-human. He claims that he does not, like Plato and Aristotle, see humanity as the “glittering apex of Nature’s aristocracy” (1912/1979, p. 79), but traces of this view remain in his writing.

Despite the revolutionary nature of Scheler’s critique of Western culture, he still never imagines the possibility that identification with nature could be the “apex” of human sentiments, or that love of God could serve as the point of entry into an appreciation of nature rather than the other way around. So long as appreciation of nature remains primal, basic, and identified with non-Western marginal cultures, it will continue to be devalued. Nevertheless, Scheler’s argument would certainly bring up short those who think that nature could somehow be bypassed

altogether, as somehow irrelevant to human life.

So far, we see how Scheler preserves a strong sense of difference as absolutely foundational for the experience of sympathy. The sympathizing person must not imagine that he or she really understands what the suffering person or animal is experiencing; this kind of presumption violates the integrity and uniqueness of the Other and substitutes or erases the other's difference for a reconstruction based on the would-be sympathizer's prior experience. In truly sympathetic encounters, no imagined or real fusion takes place within the minds of the two partners in the encounter. They remain separate entities throughout the encounter, but this does not prevent the moral choice or act of sympathy from taking place. The body communicates its pleasure or pain, and this communication can be apprehended by others; but this knowledge is never exhaustive, nor does it necessarily elicit the sympathetic response. No one will ever understand another's experience to the extent that it is possible to understand one's own physical and emotional states. While there is a certain truth in the adage that "your friends know you better than you know yourself", the transparency that characterizes our relations with others does have limits. Sympathy happens when, on the basis of admittedly partial information, the sympathizer knowingly feels for another, passionately attending to the pain of this other who remains mysterious throughout the event.

Scheler's philosophy is valuable for animal ethics insofar as it means that humans need not have an exhaustive understanding of how animals experience the world in order to sympathize with them. While it is true that objective knowledge of an animal's interior state is impossible (just as it is impossible to have such knowledge of another human's interior state), the gestural significations of animal bodies convey enough information about their interior states to justify the sympathetic response. The ethical decision to sympathize has its basis in a prior order of signification, Scheler's "universal grammar" of gesture. It is this prior signification that makes sympathy possible, and even religious feelings appear as articulations or folds within the intersubjective act of gestural recognition.

Scheler's cautions about preserving difference and yet insisting on certain continuities between the animal and the human are key contributions to contemporary animal ethics. The social contract and utilitarian approaches favoured in the animal rights discourse of previous decades simply extended an already inadequate moral calculus to include animals as

participants in an overall economy of pleasures and pains, interests and duties (McReynolds, 2004, pp. 63-85). This approach, favoured by theorists like Peter Singer and Tom Regan, inevitably ran into problems when human rationality became the fulcrum upon which sympathy for animals and extension of rights to animals rested (Acampora, 2006, p. 73; Bailey, 2005, p. 2). By an over-reliance on rational argumentation for animal rights, theorists in animal rights (perhaps unwittingly) re-entrenched themselves in a Western essentializing tradition that made an invidious comparison between human (male) rationality and animal (female) passion. As Cathryn Bailey writes, "Reason did not first come into existence and then look for a venue to exhibit itself; rather, what much of philosophy came to define as reason only came into being as a result of denying and quashing those attributes regarded as feminine or bodily" (2005, p. 4). The vitriolic denial of relational and emotive capacities in Western philosophy on the discursive level obscured and sanitized the violence perpetrated against women and animals on the fleshly level (Bailey, 2005, pp. 4-6; Merchant, 2001, pp. 68-70). Ethical speculation authorized this violence while at the same time covering its tracks through appeals to universal reason.

Recent attempts to reformulate animal ethics have sought not only to question the unfounded dualism between human and animal, but also to question the dominant role that a narrow conception of rationality has played in philosophy (see, for example, Abram, 1996; Acampora, 2006; Hamington, 2004; Light & Katz, 1996). Animal ethics, then, becomes a shift from moral ratiocination to embodied relationality and insists that formal reflection arises from the lived body and returns to engaged contexts of meaning. The animal rights and animal liberation perspectives that arose in the 1970s (with roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) are now being challenged by pragmatist and Continental thinkers who emphasize the semiotic role that the body plays in the formation of meaning and then seek to think in terms of the human body's significant interrelations with non-human entities. With this return to the corporal, experiential-existential dimension of interrelatedness with others, current pragmatist and phenomenological theorists hope to avoid the over-reliance on rationality found in Animal Rights and Animal Liberation theorists.

Scheler's philosophy has much to contribute to current discussions of animal ethics, not only as an important source for Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied perception, but on its own merits. Three trajectories of Scheler's philosophy of sympathy outlined above can clarify human thinking about

animals and human relationships with animals. First of all, Scheler insists that sympathy with non-human nature is foundational for other forms of human feeling. Religious feelings, for example, have their basis in the impulse to sympathize with animal and human others, and without this “fundamental basis of connection”, all “higher” human aspirations and ideals collapse. Notice here that Scheler continues to operate within a hierarchical and foundational construction that would be distasteful to many contemporary animal theorists. Scheler does posit a hierarchy of values, but, careful thinker that he is, Scheler does not imagine that sympathy for non-human nature can simply be by-passed on the way to higher, more philosophical modes of reflection. For Scheler, human beings are “cosmomorphic”, and that means that they cannot simply extricate themselves from embodied relationality. Sympathy with non-human nature is built into the very structure of human being, and ignoring the impulse to sympathy comes at the cost of being less human. Religious and philosophical values of love and justice collapse like a house of cards if they do not allow for sympathy at this most basic level.

A second valuable attribute of Scheler’s philosophy is that it acknowledges that sympathy need not be based on a reconstruction from prior experience. Human beings need not know what it is like to be another animal in order to sympathize with that creature, just as they need not know what it is like to be another human being in order to sympathize with him or her. Knowledge of other subjectivities is never exhaustive and only provides clues to that person’s or animal’s “interior” state. Strictly speaking, the interior/exterior dichotomy falls apart, and gesture provides a linkage between these two modes of knowledge. Claims to knowledge of another subjectivity are always partial, and would-be sympathizers should recognize that they do not have exhaustive knowledge of another’s thoughts, feelings, and intentions. This part of Scheler’s philosophy is critical, because, without a certain epistemological humility, sympathy can go awry by failing to attend to the differences that separate species.

Would-be sympathizers overstep the bounds of sympathy when they assume an exhaustive knowledge of the other. I think right away of Werner Herzog’s recent documentary, *Grizzly Man* (Beggs & Herzog, 2005), in which an errant naturalist, Timothy Treadwell, supposes that he can save Alaskan grizzly bears by communing with them. Although Treadwell displays an uncanny knowledge of the gestural “language” of the bears, a fact which no doubt kept him alive longer than would otherwise have been

possible, he allowed himself to believe that his knowledge was somehow exhaustive and would shield him from harm. Inasmuch as Treadwell believed himself to be one of the bears, Scheler would say that Treadwell did not sympathize with them, because sympathy must be a feeling for the other *despite* real difference between the subjects involved. The film shows Treadwell, in his own video footage, talking to the huge creatures in a patronizing sing-song voice, standing mere inches away from the animals while imitating their gestures. Failing to attend to the wildness of the bears and his own status as an invader of bear habitat, Treadwell allowed himself to become too complacent in his dealings with the animals, which tragically brought about his own death and the death of his girlfriend, Amie Huguenard. The two were attacked, killed and eaten by an unfamiliar group of bears who had wandered south in search of food. The bears were subsequently killed by rangers. In watching the documentary, one cannot help but think that Treadwell crossed a boundary, that he forgot that bears and humans are not the same. Scheler would suggest that sympathy is not a simple fusion of two subjectivities or a return to a primal unity, but is, instead, a feeling that can only exist when difference is acknowledged and preserved.

A third valuable aspect of Scheler’s philosophy for contemporary animal studies is his emphasis on sympathy as a *moral* act occasioned by pre-rational, bodily communication. Scheler insists that it is perfectly possible for human beings to understand the pain of others, human and non-human, without therefore being affected by that understanding. The attention to the bodily, affective dimension in recent philosophical treatments of animals is no doubt an improvement upon the stance of the detached observer that plagued Animal Rights perspectives. Scheler, however, might caution that, without the moral act of choosing to sympathize, bodily knowledge accomplishes nothing in the active, political sphere. Animal theorists must, in addition to delineating the corporal crossings of species boundaries, en flesh those theoretical perspectives with reflection on concrete situations, as Ralph Acampora does in his treatment of zoos (2006, pp. 95-115). Phenomenology attends to the dimension of lived experience, and, in addition to arising from reflection on the lived world, it must return to that lived world. Animal ethics must respond to the summons that it invokes and thus avoid stances of pure reflection and attend to creatures.

Although Scheler retains a hierarchical attitude towards nature and situates humanity and human values above non-human nature, his philosophy

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remains valid, because it does not view sympathy with the non-human as an optional step on the way to care for other humans or love of God. He also acknowledges the sphere of corporal knowledge to be later elucidated by Merleau-Ponty, but does not rely on gestural forms of communication to do all of the work of ethics. The knowledge of the other that begins at the lived, gestural level must be carried into the existential, ethical decision to sympathize. This fundamental sympathy with the non-human then becomes the basis for other human values. Scheler's philosophy is valuable because it speaks to those who would not want to espouse positions of animal rights or animal liberation. Even those who remain within an anthropocentric, essentialist stance can recognize that sympathy for animals develops the traits and characteristics normally valued in members of human society (such as caring, concern and cooperation). The treatment of animals in a society serves as a "canary in the coal mine" for the well-being of all of

its members, and the capacity for sympathy that is preserved for animals will be preserved for humans as well.

Those working in contemporary animal studies will find in Scheler's philosophy a welcome voice, one that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all creatures without therefore lumping species together in a homogenous fashion. Scheler's attention to difference avoids metaphysical monism that would posit of an actual fusion between sympathizing subjects. Sympathy is valuable because it operates even in the midst of the extreme diversity of species on Earth. Despite the vast differences that separate the canary from the gorilla, the cicada from the whale, and the salamander from the human being, facets of gestural communication still operate between those species. When that understanding is viewed sympathetically, the possibility arises for a politics of interspecies concern of benefit to all creatures.

### About the Author



David B. Dillard-Wright teaches philosophy and ethics at the University of South Carolina in Aiken. His research centres around phenomenological explorations of human interactions with other animals and the environment. His doctoral dissertation, completed at Drew University in 2007, is entitled *Ark of the Possible: The Animal World in Merleau-Ponty*. The dissertation explores non-human animals in Merleau-Ponty's works, using the concept of "flesh" to trace the emergence of linguistic and cultural forms from a prior layer of "wild Being" in which animate and inanimate entities affect one another.

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