
The Knowledge of God: Realism as Natural Theology in Max Scheler's Phenomenology of Religion*

El conocimiento de Dios: el realismo como teología natural en la fenomenología de la religión de Max Scheler

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Abstract: Max Scheler's phenomenology of religion aimed at a renewed philosophical approach to the problem of God, willing to unify the modern need for a personalization of religion with the traditional objectivism and realism which, ever since the days of Thomas Aquinas, had been basic for Catholicism. For this purpose, Scheler argued for a return to an original level of the experience which could enable a new approach to the religious phenomenon, which could consider it at the level of a «living evidence», answering to the exigence of realism for which phenomenological philosophy was calling, thereby founding an original natural theology.

Keywords: Scheler, Phenomenology, Natural Theology.

Resumen: La fenomenología de la religión desarrollada por Scheler apuntaba a un renovado acercamiento filosófico a la cuestión de Dios; su intención era unificar la moderna necesidad de una personalización de la religión con el objetivismo y el realismo tradicional que, desde los tiempos de Tomás de Aquino, habían sido básicos para el catolicismo. Para este propósito, Scheler abogó por un retorno a un nivel original de la experiencia que pudiera permitir un nuevo acercamiento al fenómeno religioso, así respondiendo a la exigencia del realismo que estaba reclamando la filosofía fenomenológica, y fundando de este modo una original teología natural.

Palabras clave: Scheler, Fenomenología, Teología natural.

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In the scene of the post-war German philosophy, Max Scheler played a cardinal role, showing an openness to the contradictory currents of that time and trying to speak to the contemporary needs of European man by way of original and consistent phenomenology of religion. His main work in the philosophy of religion, *On the Eternal in Man*, written between 1917-1921, represents one of the first philosophical reflections on the trauma of World War I. The originality of his attempt consists in proposing to restore the rich tradition of Catholic philosophical thought, insisting at the same time on the necessity of a religious renewal – not a nostalgic renewal, but a forward-looking one.

The philosophical situation of those years was characterized, as long as it concerned religious thought, by a dispute between modernist movements and the opposite position of the Catholic Church. The latter, clinging to the fundamentals of Scholastic philosophy, had remained rather antagonistic towards the results of the former – which, assimilating the instances of the recent philosophy of life (Henri Bergson) or philosophy of action (Maurice Blondel), tried to adapt the traditional dogmatic and metaphysical items to the ever-changing historical conditions of spiritual life. If some modern thinkers were endorsing a religious philosophy that could have its starting point in the exigencies of subjective life, the Catholic Church paralleled them by continuing a revival of Thomism – particularly symbolized by the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of Leo XIII, in which the pope recommended the metaphysical system of Thomas Aquinas as the standard philosophy of Catholicism.

This contested ground was the preliminary situation out of which Scheler's phenomenology of religion grew. In considering these two big branches of the Catholic and philosophical thought of the period, Scheler's pursuit aimed at a renewed philosophical approach to the problem of God, willing to unify the modern need for a personalization of religion with the traditional objectivism and realism which, ever since the days of Thomas Aquinas, had been basic for official Catholicism. Traditional realism meant concretely that «the existence of God was no less certain than the existence of the external world»¹: *Deus est maxime cognoscibilis*. The recognizability of God through

¹ HAFKESBRINK, H., «The Meaning of Objectivism and Realism in Max Scheler's Philosophy of Religion: A Contribution to the Understanding of Max Scheler's Catholic Period», *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 2, 3 (1942) 294.

reason, as well as the doubtless acceptance of revelation as the foundation of knowledge and certitude, were the essential marks of Catholic philosophy. The living unity of reason and revelation therefore did not require an independent, but only a subsequent, justification of the assumption of religious objects.

That things changed with modernity is well known. The first big emancipation of philosophical thinking from natural revelation and from a realistic method in the knowledge of reality had already begun with Descartes, who, in opposition to a Scholastic concept of truth – according to which *veritas est adaequatio intellectus et rei* – developed an idea of truth as what is «clearly and distinctly perceived»². This meant basically an overturning of the perspective: if, before, truth was conceived as an adaptation of the intellect to given material, now it is the givenness itself that has to fit into previously defined criteria: in this way the precise conditions of «accessibility» of every possible object of knowledge are established. Another fundamental step in the genesis of modern thought – as Scheler himself notes – was accomplished by Kant, who did nothing else than reaching the conclusions drawn by Descartes³, as he proclaimed the separation of knowledge and faith, banishing the knowledge of God from the realm of theoretical reason to the realm of practical reason. With his work *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* Kant dissolved classical metaphysics into a «rationalistic religion», where the ideas of God, soul, and freedom became postulates: denying that God can be the object of theoretical cognition, he nonetheless asserted that He is an indispensable postulate for any satisfactory grounding of morality and theoretical science.

Consequently, what historically (*i.e.* philosophically) happened was that Schleiermacher operated a transfer of the religious element into the extrarational sphere of «feeling», which separated the kernel of religious truth from every possible theoretical and ethical access.

These historical premises undoubtedly led to the cultural situation of the 20th century and generated both the reaction and the annexed backlash of

² Cfr. DESCARTES, R., *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Sioux Falls: NuVision Publications, LLC, 1988.

³ It is impossible at this point to quote the entire list of fundamental authors, who through their philosophy generated an increasingly distance between faith and knowledge. It would be enough to cite Spinoza, who in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* assigns knowledge to the exclusive realm of philosophy, while faith and obedience to the realms of the scripture/theology, which by its side has the task to regulate common, political life.

modernism, on the one hand, and of the Church, on the other – *i.e.* the complementary necessities of the «subjective» and «objective» elements of religion. The phenomenological movement, which began at the advent of the century, should therefore be considered as a fruitful answer to the circumstances of the time.

1. PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD AND EVIDENCE IN (RELIGIOUS) EXPERIENCE

Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, had inherited from Franz Brentano the appreciation of the Scholastic achievements in the fields of logic and theory of knowledge, and had thereby promoted among his followers an interest in a renaissance of this philosophical tradition. Even if Husserl's philosophy itself was in principle indifferent to the theological implications of its method⁴, its logical and at the same time realistic connotations – in the proper sense of the inaugural motto of the movement as a «return to things themselves» – could not help but awaken among some of his pupils the question about transcendence and its possible philosophical elaboration. In contrast to Kant and in accordance with Scholastic philosophy, Husserl had emphasized that objects of consciousness are not spontaneously formed by the subject, but are given as structural, ideal unity. Phenomenology assumed from its very beginning the task of proceeding on a possible, purely descriptive level – meaning without presuppositions (*in vollkommenster Voraussetzungslosigkeit*) – to be able to interrogate in their «bodily selfhood» (*leibhaftigen Selbstheit*) the «how» of the givenness of phenomena, which are as such *given* to consciousness. From this beginning, observation became the basic attitude of the phenomenologist. To this effect Husserl called for a floating attention or a relaxation of the intensity of attention: what appears to be intuition must be taken as it appears and within the limits in which it appears; any further truth will emerge from this beginning⁵. So says Husserl in *Ideen*: «Every statement which does no more than confer expression on such data by simple explication and by means of significations precisely conforming to them is (...) actually an

⁴ Cfr. ALES BELLO, A., *The divine in Husserl and Other Explorations*, Analecta Husserliana, vol. XCVIII, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2008.

⁵ BALABAN, O., «Époché: Meaning, Object and Existence», in TYMIENIECKA, A.-T. (ed.), *Phenomenology World-Wide, Foundation – Expanding Dynamics – Life-Engagements*, Analecta-Husserliana, Switzerland: Springer, 2002, 107.

absolute beginning called upon to serve as a foundation, a *principium* in the genuine sense of the word»⁶.

According to this, Husserl claimed for a new understanding of evidence. The word «evidence», rooted in the Latin *evidens* (an adjective meaning «evident» in the sense of «visible», «clear» or «plain to see»), derives, as a compound, from the preposition *e* (meaning «from») and the verb *videre* («to see»). Not by chance therefore, Descartes' definition became central, as «clear and distinct perception» (*clara et distincta perceptio*), that, as mentioned, became the criterion of his definition of truth. Although Husserl was quite explicit regarding his philosophical debt to Descartes, especially in his philosophical project of a radical «beginning»⁷ and the will to establish a scientific system of knowledge based on pure consciousness, he gave a step in his comprehension of evidence: while Descartes' concept of a definite, omnipotent and self-structuring evidence indicated a «seeing» (perceiving) something without any doubt, in Husserl this concept does not have an apodictic certainty; in fact, by correlating the concepts of evidence and experience⁸, Husserl's evidence «loses» Descartes' decisive character, as it becomes mediated by possible corrections and deviations in the course of the experience.

This understanding of evidence and experience (as not reducible to empirical data, but as an open field of *Wesensmöglichkeiten*) – as Hedwig Conrad-Martius, a woman phenomenologist from the Husserl circle, was recognizing – would open the door to a category of possibility that would be central for the interpretation of the religious phenomenon⁹: the concept of evidence as a fulfillment of an intention (for example the religious intention – *der religiöse Akt*), and the idea of an intuitive knowledge of essential facts were indeed important philosophical premises for the foundation of a new metaphysical realism.

Nevertheless, precisely understood as the *fulfillment* of an intentional act, the idea of evidence in Husserl became circumscribed to the operative consciousness, being in fact a form of it. Evidence is an act of consciousness

⁶ HUSSERL, *Idea I*, § 24, Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1976.

⁷ Cfr. MACDONALD, P., *Descartes and Husserl. The philosophical Project of Radical Beginnings*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

⁸ ÖKTEM, Ü., «Husserl's Evidence Problem», *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 9 (2009) 3.

⁹ Cfr. CONRAD-MARTIUS, H., «Vorwort», in REINACH, A., *Was ist Phänomenologie?*, München: Kösel, 1951.

which gives (presents) a thing, bringing about an intentional experience; in this sense, although it necessarily maintains a teleological character, it emerges as a concept which refers to the constitutive consciousness and its intentionality: it being linked to intentionality in the sense that the phenomenal character of originary givenness discloses the nature of evidence, intentionality itself is understood by Husserl as «[what] characterizes consciousness in the pregnant sense of the term, and justifies us in describing the whole stream of experience as at once a stream of consciousness and unity of one consciousness»¹⁰.

According to this methodological principle, therefore, the question of transcendence *stricto sensu*, to which Husserl's approach seemed open, ended in a metaphysical absolutization of consciousness, necessarily resulting from the phenomenological «concentration» upon it. Moreover, as a science of pure phenomena, Husserl's phenomenology, being interested in the phenomenal character of its objects, was furnishing an adequate approach for aesthetics, but was not offering an appropriate method for investigating other levels of reality. Indeed, as a science of essences, phenomenology was leaving aside the problem of the effectual reality of the given object, as well as their transcendence to consciousness.

As Hafkesbrink notices, the fact that there are objects which are given to consciousness «as real» did not convince Husserl of the actual reality of these objects, because for him the givenness of reality never is part of their true essence (*Ausserbewusste dingliche Existenz ist nie eine durch die Gegebenheit als notwendig geforderte, sondern in gewisser Art immer zufällig*¹¹). Reality would be also attributed to things through an act of sense-giving on the part of subjective consciousness. In order to find the essence and discover the mode of givenness Husserl introduced therefore the «phenomenological reduction», an operation that, changing the naïve attitude of man towards the world in everyday experience, brackets out the quality of reality and suspends all positing of reality.

No matter what the thing *is* – object or subject – a phenomenological perspective holds in abeyance the pre-positing, pre-supposed acceptance of being, allowing one to comport him or herself differently, from a changed at-

¹⁰ HUSSERL, E., *Ideas*, New York: Humanities Press, 1969, 222.

¹¹ HUSSERL, E., *Logische Untersuchungen*, vol. II, 1, Halle: Niemeyer, 1913, 336.

titude, focusing now on how it appears, the modes of giving and the multifarious ways of meaning-accepting¹².

This, at length, drew a line between the master and his disciples; the transcendence which Husserl had established for the objects of consciousness was – as some of his pupils pointed out – not real transcendence, but a mere «immanent objectivity». This raised in fact the question about the ontological status of the external world as of every possible object given to consciousness (memories, phantasy, and eventually God). Some of his pupils, for example Moritz Geiger, started to claim a preference for a *Gegenstandsphänomenologie* over an *Aktphänomenologie* which, according to him, was the genuine Husserlian approach¹³. Among the phenomenologists of the Munich circle, Scheler in particular worked out an important thesis for the foundation of a new metaphysical realism¹⁴, which functioned as a decisive basis for the later elaboration of his natural theology.

Scheler intended to take advantage of Husserl's method by approaching the religious phenomenon at a pure, descriptive level, namely by showing «essential facts». As seen in Husserl's method, reality has to be brought to self-giveness in immediate, intuitive evidence in those very structures and contents which both every day and scientific cognition leave unconsidered. Scheler in this regard assumed but also refined the theory of his master. He took into account the capacity and the role of phenomenological experience in his earlier phenomenological works, *Phänomenologie und Erkenntnistheorie* (1913-14) and *Lehre von den drei Tatsachen* (1911-12), where he confronted in particular the two other kinds of experience mentioned, typical for the modern man: the scientific, and naïve, every-day experience.

As Scheler affirms: if on the one hand every-day experience lets only those aspects of the world which are of some practical, biological importance emerge, then, on the other hand, scientific experience tends to encapsulate reality in a system of symbols which could be of universal conventionality and

¹² Cfr. FINK, E., «Die phänomenologische Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der gegenwärtigen Kritik», *Kant-Studien* 38 (1933) 321-383.

¹³ GEIGER, M., *Methodologische und experimentelle Beiträge zur Quantitätslehre*, Leipzig: Engelmann, 1907, 355.

¹⁴ This is particularly to be seen in his major work, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values* (1913-14), where the philosopher grounds a new ethical objectivism founded in objective, independent, value-qualities.

communicability. Both world views also seem unable to grasp the pure facts or quality which only the phenomenological consideration – in Scheler’s opinion a *loving*, disinterested consideration of things – can bring to light. This new phenomenological attitude, which in Scheler’s philosophy assumes a more comprehensive, moral meaning compared with Husserl’s theoretical approach, would be all the more necessary because of the prejudice that modernity would enhance with respect to what counts as original, evidential experience. For the modern thinker, only those experiences that can be proven in a rational or logical manner, or that fit into some prearranged criteria, can be true and taken into account. This would have a clear impact on the ordinary understanding of religious phenomena. The prejudice is not that matters of faith or religious experience are not meaningful, but that they are not accessible to critical investigation.

According to Scheler the fundamental misunderstanding concerning this matter consists in the presumption of applying to the religious sphere criteria borrowed from other fields, for instance the empirical criteria of sensory perception; instead, Scheler declares that religious objects are given through a kind of *evidence* that is as origivative as the *religious acts* themselves. Thus, religious evidence should not be brought back to other kinds of evidence, like scientific or even metaphysical evidence, in the same measure that faith cannot be deduced from philosophical theology. This would be as contradictory as the attempt to demonstrate the existence of colors before seeing them, or of sounds before hearing them, affirms the philosopher. Thus, to suggest that the divine is a peculiar mode of givenness is to say that it is given to the person in a unique manner that is wholly distinct from perceived objects or rational judgments. The attempt to describe the essential characteristics of his revelation – in the broad sense – assumes that revelation has its own particular sense of lawfulness. For example, Adolf Reinach, another phenomenologist from the Munich circle, recognized quite early on (1916) that religious experiences have their own integrity. From the perspective of perceptual experience, of course, religious experiences can neither be «understood», nor considered «motivated»¹⁵; but this indicates all the more the necessity to res-

¹⁵ STEINBOCK, A. J., «Evidence in the Phenomenology of Religious Experience», in ZAHAVI, D. (ed.), *Oxford University Press's Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 590.

pect the sense that religious experiences have of their own accord, «even if [their sense] leads to enigmas»¹⁶.

As Steinbock notes, it would be a sign of capriciousness to assume that one must equate «experience» and «presence» with what he calls the «presentation» of object – that is, with a «having» of things, perceptually or epistemically, or with an accomplishment initiated by the self. In fact, Husserl himself was assuming «presentation» as the proper operative model of givenness, a type of givenness which is more or less dependent upon the subject's power to usher things into appearance, either through the «I can» or the «I think»; but, «it is an insidious form of positivism to force all experience into the noesis-noematic logic of appearance and fulfilment under the rubric of being true to “evidence”»¹⁷. Moreover, as will be analyzed, Scheler's understanding of an evidence proper to the religious sphere, which he calls the epistemological principle of self-evidence (*ein Prinzip religionstheoretischer Evidenz*), will imply an investigation about the objectivity of the external agent – differently from Husserl's concept, which focuses on the fulfillment of the intention without asking about the actual reality of the «cause» of this fulfillment. This accounts for a religious phenomenological realism and allows the foundation of a natural theology.

2. THE FOUNDATION OF A NATURAL THEOLOGY – LOVE AND REVELATION

On the basis of these premises, Scheler argues for a return to the original level of the experience which could enable a new approach to religion, so that it could be finally released from the divisions and reductions dominating modern society¹⁸. Scheler takes into account two significant exponents of the genesis of modern religious thought: criticizing Kant and Schleiermacher in respect of rationalism and subjectivism ruling in matters of religion, Scheler expresses the urgency of building up a *natural theology*, where reason and its «acts» can be interrogated anew with a phenomenological approach devoid of presupposition.

¹⁶ REINACH, A., *Sämtliche Werke*, Munich: Philosophia, 1989, 593.

¹⁷ STEINBOCK, A., 599.

¹⁸ Scheler pinpointed among others two kind of «reductions» of religion generated in modern thought, namely «Gnosticism», where the faith is dissolved into metaphysical knowledge, and «traditionalism», where conversely the possibility of rational knowledge of God is completely deferred to religious doctrine.

Therefore, in the first preface to his major work on religion, *On the Eternal in Man*, Scheler declares that «the bases for the systematic construction of a “natural theology”» will be «more assured than traditional bases and also of a nature to encounter a deeper understanding and sounder appreciation from the man of today than the traditional systems of religious theory which lean either to Aquinas or to Kant and Schleiermacher»¹⁹. In particular, according to Scheler, «In the same way as what Kant called the “scandal of philosophy”, it is a scandal of theology and philosophy *alike* that the questions of natural theology, *i.e.* the very thing designed to unite minds irrespective of sectarian differences, should divide minds even more deeply than points of confessional dogma»²⁰. Scheler calls again for a new method in the study of the religious phenomenon, which taking advantage of the most propitious philosophical approach in history, could consider it at the level of a «living evidence», answering to the exigence of realism that phenomenology was calling for, and thereby restoring to it an essential dimension that the «accretions of history» have caused it to lose. Particularly, he affirms that the task of this new philosophy of religion – natural theology – can be performed in getting back the lost truths of Saint Augustine, namely «only once it has delivered the kernel of Augustinism from the husk-like accretions of history and employed phenomenological philosophy to provide it with a fresh and more deeply rooted foundation»²¹. This would basically mean, as mentioned, a return to experience in its essential elements – what can eventually open to religious experience as such. As Scheler says, «only a theology of the essential experience of divinity can open our eyes to the lost truths of Augustine»²². Following Rodríguez Duplá, it has to be mentioned that Scheler’s philosophy of religion not only starts from, but also overcomes Augustine’s one. In fact, Scheler assumes a critical position towards Augustine’s ontologism and Platonism, according to which man’s spirit would know the essences of the world things as «situated» in the divine spirit²³. Nevertheless, Scheler praises and assumes in his philosophy Augustine’s conceptual un-

¹⁹ SCHELER, M., *On the Eternal in Man*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2010, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ivi*, 13.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Cfr. RODRÍGUEZ DUPLÁ, L., «El problema del ateísmo en la filosofía de la religión de Max Scheler», *Estudios Trinitarios* 44, 3 (2010) 372-376.

derstanding of the basic Christian experience of the relation between love and knowledge.

As he affirms in his homonym work *Love and Knowledge*, love, according to Augustine – the taking of an interest – is the most essential tendency of the human spirit. «Indeed, in the final analysis love, for Augustine, is directed not towards happiness as a feeling, but toward *the “holy”*»²⁴. The objects of knowledge, the «images», are a consequence of a «question» asked with love: the world answers and in so doing reveals itself. In this revelation the world comes to its full existence and value. «Thus, for Augustine, the coming into being of the “natural” knowledge of the world, viewed solely according to its objective condition, yields the “revelatory character” that bypasses the concept of “natural revelation”»²⁵.

From these passages it emerges how Scheler calls again for an affective knowledge of reality that could possibly be open to religious experience. Therefore, the first fundamental step in the development of natural theology will be calling attention to the *natural revelation*, meaning the presentation and manifestation of the divine in things, events and orders which belong to the natural reality, accessible in principle to all²⁶. Scheler specifies that speaking about revelation does not imply what positive theologians calls «*the revelation*», but principally the specific manner in which any kind of data relating to an object of divine and holy nature is *received* into the mind via observation or experience – a kind of cognition which would stay in contrast to all *spontaneous cognitive acts*²⁷; this is not about distinguishing two different modalities of causality by which knowledge can enter into the mind, but rather recognizing a peculiar mode of *evidence-forming* which is latent in the observable cognitive processes and basically different from all other modes.

According to this, it can be noticed that the mode of givenness of the natural revelation, in German *Offenbarung*, precisely represents the alternative of *Offenbarkeit* (manifestation, or presentation, as above mentioned), that kind of givenness correlated to spontaneous cognitive acts: Scheler is

²⁴ SCHELER, M., «Love and knowledge», in SCHELER, M. y BERSHADY, H. J. (eds.), *On Feeling, Knowing, Valuing*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, 161.

²⁵ *Ivi*, 164.

²⁶ SCHELER, M., *On the Eternal*, 161.

²⁷ *Ivi*, 147.

able to assume this, *inter alia*, because he assumes a broader order of evidence than that of theoretical reason, which he calls an «order of the heart». Going back to Pascal's «*le coeur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît point*»²⁸, he speaks about the existence of an *ordo amoris* in man, which, far from being a «subjectively human» matter of fact²⁹, possesses its own unique logic, and defines man not primarily as a knowing or willing being, but as an *ens amans*³⁰.

As the philosopher furthermore explains, if natural revelation is one essential stage of study, another one must be *positive revelation* – namely the case where the divine, the «godly», is a being taking the form of personality. «For if the divine reveals itself in some way at all levels of being, it reveals different characteristics of its essence on different levels, and reveals itself with different degrees of adequacy»³¹. This would be the case in which the divine presents or announces itself through the medium of the word and through persons – «*homines religiosi* in the most eminent sense»³².

What now it is important to our argument is that the various forms of revelation are grasped by various forms of *religious act*, which represents the second step in the phenomenology of religion – fundamental for the foundation of the phenomenological religious realism and the natural theology we are describing.

3. RELIGIOUS ACT: KNOWLEDGE OF THE DIVINE AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL RELIGIOUS REALISM AS NATURAL THEOLOGY

In the second preface of *On the Eternal in Man* Scheler had clarified his purpose of a «genuinely unified, essentially supra-confessional philosophy, concerning the nature of religion and the true seat and origin of religious knowledge in “religious acts”, of an “original religious experience irreducible

²⁸ PASCAL, B., *Pensées*, Brunschvicg: Garnier, 1964, art. IV, 277.

²⁹ Cfr. SCHELER, M., *Ordo Amoris*, GWX, Bern und München: Francke Verlag, 1914-1916.

³⁰ It can be affirmed, with Fernández Beites, that what is at stake here is an «enlarged» concept of reason: overcoming a mere «discursive» concept of reason, Scheler claims that reason in man has to be rather understood as «spirit», an intuitive reason that encompasses other levels, like the volitive and the affective one. Cfr. FERNÁNDEZ BEITE, P., «Max Scheler y la posibilidad de una “teología fenomenológica”», *Revista Española de Teología* 68 (2008) 2.

³¹ SCHELER, M., *On the Eternal*, 161.

³² *Ibid.*

in terms of the secular empirical”»³³. Showing his stratified understanding of human nature, Scheler presents a *Fundierungsordnung*³⁴ of spiritual acts (of cognition, love, hate, will...). As mentioned, emotional acts appear to be at the very center, coming before any kind of theoretical – perceptive or epistemic – acts (corresponding to Scheler’s a priori hierarchy of values modality). It is possible to affirm that the religious acts (although Scheler never defines this with precision), being correlative to the emotional ones, resides at the core of the act’s hierarchy: as analyzed, love opens to the very essence of things and to that kind of experience proper to the natural revelation, so it is possible, again, to affirm a strict correspondence in Scheler between affective and religious knowledge.

Nevertheless, Scheler presents religious consciousness as a set of unique *sui generis* acts, identifiable through specific features³⁵. Therefore, phenomenological (religious) consideration appears to be directed to these acts which reveal – thanks to their essential characteristic – the presence and the nature of the divine. It has to be stressed that already in the earlier text *Absolutsphäre und Realsetzung der Gottesidee* (1915-16) Scheler spoke about the «natural» existence of an absolute sphere (*Absolutsphäre*) in man, representing this, as an a priori givenness (*apriorische Gegebenheit*), the necessary intention towards an absolute Being and Value – independently from the different ways in which man decides (consciously or rather unconsciously) to «fill» (*ausfüllen*) this sphere (God or eventually a finite thing, converting this in an idol). We can affirm that later, precisely with his main work, *On the Eternal in Man*, this sphere assumes the connotation of the religious acts, characterized in a more precise way, as it will be now analyzed³⁶.

We can thus see how Scheler calls the religious acts «forms of consciousness» or, in more general terms, «religious consciousness». In this regard, it is important to point out again the fundamental difference between Scheler’s position and Husserl’s. Husserl’s transcendental analysis was descri-

³³ *Ivi*, 16.

³⁴ Cfr. GABEL, M., *Intentionalität des Geistes. Der phänomenologische Denkansatz bei Max Scheler. Untersuchung zum Verständnis der Intentionalität in Max Scheler «Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik»*, Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag, 1991.

³⁵ MCALEER, G., Introduction to *On the Eternal in Man*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2010, XI.

³⁶ Cfr. SCHELER, M., *Absolutsphäre und Realsetzung der Gottesidee*, GWX, Bern und München: Francke Verlag, 1915-16.

bing the act of consciousness immanently, ultimately leading back to its operative capacity the possibility of the appearance and significance of the world. On the one hand Scheler also proceeded with an immanent description of religious consciousness; but on the other hand, as we will observe more deeply, he also shows how the exhibition of the characteristics of religious acts necessarily involves the reality and externality of the object as the cause of the acts themselves – this is an argument for the realism Scheler desires. Thus, even if phenomenological procedure *as such* does not ask about the reality of the investigated acts and their correlated objects, but rather researches their essence, particularly in the case of religious acts, a sort of *methodological reversal* takes place. Here it is a necessity to admit the reality of the divine as their exterior cause, to fully comprehend their being, and in this sense, they cannot be explained immanently: assuming the *existence* of God is indispensable to clarify their inner dynamic.

Scheler distinguishes three essential characteristics of the religious act: 1) its intention is world-transcendence; that is, the correlated object of the intentional, religious act, is a transcendence of anything finite or relative. This does not mean that the religious act is not aroused by something contingent, but that it cannot find its satisfaction in it. This concerns its second characteristic: 2) the objective correlate of the religious intention is also infinite in its meaning and value. Only the divine or the holy can fulfill his intention. This would mean that where the religious act is directed to a finite object, it turns out to be idolatry. As everyone possesses necessarily an intending towards the absolute, a human being is a God-seeker, independently of whether he believes in God or not; Scheler says: «Every finite spirit believes either in a God or in an idol». 3) The third characteristic consists in the possibility of the fulfillment of the religious act only through assimilation (*Aufnahme*) of the divine that reveals itself. The experience of the divine cannot be explained according to Scheler through an objectification of an immanent experience, an experience motivated by and in a person. For the same reason, the religious act is not subjective, but rather is a personal response to the self-givenness of the divine.

These premises assume that the religious act involves in its dialectic something that it cannot provide *itself*, so that the phenomenological, essential, consideration has eventually to turn into religious knowledge. In other words, phenomenology has to limit itself in showing the inner logic of the religious act, which for its part opens up inevitably to the possibility of revelation. This

is the pre-announced methodological reversal, because if the phenomenological method in itself cannot raise the claim of deducing existence (*Dasein*) from the knowledge of the essence (*Sosein*), in this case the existence or reality of the cause of the acts is necessarily involved. This marks the difference between a mere rational knowledge of God (metaphysics) and personal knowledge, which is given in religion: «While for metaphysics the personhood of the Divine forms a never-attainable boarder of knowledge, for religion this personhood is the beginning and end. Where it is not accessible to the eyes, thought, believed, internally heard – there comes from religion, in the strict sense, no speech»³⁷.

For these reasons, again, there is no way to «support» or to prove deductively the efficacy of the experience of God: Scheler uses the German term *Aufweis* to distinguish the right way to show or point out the reality of revelation, which is different indeed from *Nachweis* or *Beweis*, which properly speaking mean a demonstration of something. This «personal religious knowledge», based on the objectivity of the facts that the phenomenological analysis brings to light (*aufweis*), pretends thus to overcome and at the same time synthesize modern subjectivism and rationalism ruling in matters of religion: just a *personal* experience (though not meaning subjective experience) can reasonably («rationally») give an account of the religious reality.

These last observations bring us back to the problem of revelation, about which a last observation can be made. As said, the religious act involves necessarily in its logic the presence of the divine as its external agency. In this sense, religious acts exhibit a sort of «impotency», showing that the possibility of the knowledge of God is not something that can be spontaneously produced, but it is rather dependent on God's possible, free, self-communication (*Selbstmitteilung*) – which would carry further to the problem of an «election» or donation of grace; nevertheless, the precedent analysis on natural revelation would show an alternative. As mentioned, positive revelation means the experience of a wholly unique relation, as God communicates himself through persons (*der Heilige* – the saint). The kind of revelation found in natural religion is a generic one, and accessible to everybody, as God is given in nature for all to see. Scheler refers explicitly to the words of Paul

³⁷ SCHELER, M., *Das Ewige im Menschen*, GWV, Bern und München: Francke Verlag, 1917-1921, 248. My translation.

in Rom 1:20. The Apostle says: «For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God». Thus, as the artist is knowable through his art, God becomes knowable through his creation. In this regard Scheler's position is clearly Augustinian: his natural theology is based on the possibility of an immediate contact between finite reason and infinite reason, so that «*omnia cognoscimus in lumine dei*»³⁸ («we may understand everything in the light of God»). According to Scheler, it concerns an origivative *Intentionsrichtung* («direction of intention») of man towards God, so that this natural knowledge of God can be acquired by everybody, independently of the degree of their own scientific-methodical education, to the extent that the way this knowledge is achieved does not need be brought to clear consciousness in the reflection. In particular, this natural, religious knowledge entails two axioms: 1) the intuition of a necessary, absolute Being, that «is» only through itself and is given with every consideration of the «moments of contingency» of nature or the soul; 2) the «value-character» or *Kreatürlichkeitscharakter* («creaturely character») of every figure of nature, and the symbolic «meaning» situated in the things themselves, the «pointer» that indicates their creator.

It has to be stressed that Scheler's phenomenology of religion leads to these conclusions, which represent the two principal axioms of the system of the natural theology he wants to establish, thanks to the phenomenological examination of religious acts and the methodological employment of the principle of religious self-evidence: it is precisely from that act and its internal logic that it is possible to see plainly, as the author affirms, «how there may come into being a religious self-evidence which, residing in faith, resides in itself, and how religion proceeds to unfold and throw out new and higher structures in conformity with its own autonomous law»³⁹. The axioms presented by Scheler are for the philosopher religiously evident truths that can be discovered in that kind of loving, «religious» attitude that his phenomenology of religion encourages.

Making a last observation on this point, we can emphasize how Scheler's *religionstheoretische Evidenz* pretends to establish itself as the ultimate *criterion*

³⁸ Even if, as already stressed, Scheler takes distance from Augustine's ontologism.

³⁹ SCHELER, M., *On the Eternal*, 162.

of truth – or, with the words of Fernández Beites, it possesses a *normative value*⁴⁰: thanks to this principle alone it is possible to distinguish later between authentic, non-authentic, illusional, adequate, non-adequate... religious experiences (those experiences that William James, according to Scheler, was «chaotically» listing, without being able to clearly distinguish their possible validity). The alternative to this would be to introduce a principle external to the religious sphere, and to measure natural religious forms according to it – as the old rational theology was doing with its causal principle (*i.e.* the rational proofs of God's existence by Thomas Aquinas⁴¹); or, to «prove» religion on the basis of a preliminary moral norm (as it happens Kant's philosophy), or even, as in some pragmatic philosophical approaches, on the basis of the general, spiritual, cultural products of an epoch and the eventual development of its basic values. In any of these cases, starting for the premises exposed by Scheler in *Formalismus*, according to which religious values (as the religious acts) are at the basis of the values hierarchy, even the meaning of not-religious values, as products of a spiritual culture, would be somehow diminished, if they are not considered according to that kind of ultimate religious evidence they bear in themselves («...wenn sie nicht um dieser Bedeutung willen, sondern aus dem heraus anerkannt und geübt wird, was in ihr selbst an Evidenz und Sicherheit gelegen ist»⁴²).

4. CONCLUSION

Since Kant, and as the knowability of God was banished into the realm of ethics, religious experience as such was denied access to a genuine philosophical approach and therefore the possibility of being reasonably justified. Phenomenology offered a way to newly investigate the «how» of phenomena's givenness, and their proper modes of evidence. As seen, especially for Scheler, criticizing the presentation of perceptual and categorial objects as the

⁴⁰ Cfr. FERNÁNDEZ BEITES, P., «Max Scheler y la posibilidad de una “teología fenomenológica”», 4.

⁴¹ Leonardo Rodríguez Duplá underlines in his aforementioned article how, according to the philosopher, this kind of rational proofs, despite their relatively logic and simple structure, in principle comprehensible to everyone, would be convincing just for believers; outside of the Catholic context, they would lose their persuasive character, and this would reveal their implicit theistic premises. RODRÍGUEZ DUPLÁ, L., «El problema del ateísmo en la filosofía de la religión de Max Scheler», 371.

⁴² SCHELER, M., *Das Ewige im Menschen*, GWV, 287.

parameters of experience, and the presentative consciousness as its ultimate judge, opened phenomenology to other modalities of givenness that could offer a structural account of religious experience and knowledge. According to this, calling for a principle of self-evidence in the religious sphere, Scheler makes the claim for a new realistic phenomenological method that can provide an autonomous grounding of religion and its essential, correlated experience, and found a new natural theology that has its basis in this specific experience.

Scheler's method and phenomenology of religion can be designated as realistic basically on two levels: firstly, trying to describe the unity of meaning that determines religious acts as religious, Scheler involves in the investigation the externality and the necessary existence of the real «cause» of these investigated «acts of consciousness» – which is the first givenness, whence the phenomenological analysis starts. Secondly, his realism will presume the inclusion of the origin and the ground of things and figures of the world themselves, namely the «Creator», whose presence, according to the philosopher, is necessarily given in any religious consideration of reality. In this regard, he speaks of *natürlich religiöse Weltbetrachtung*, «a natural religious observation of the world». In this sense, it can be affirmed that Scheler's phenomenology of religion is a philosophy of the *presence*, rather than of the «present» understood as perceptual or epistemic unity, that the mentioned «presentative consciousness» can intellectually grasp and organize according to its structures. This means that man has a natural openness towards the Holy, that can be symbolically experienced in every figure of nature.

All this is to raise the question at the end of his *Wesenlehre der Religion*: Can we conclude the existence of God from an originary *Intentionsrichtung* of man towards Him and from the fact that specific religious acts are part of man's natural equipment? Scheler went beyond the limits that Husserl had methodologically imposed on his phenomenology, offering a modern, but at the same time «traditionally» realistic way to think about the reality of the religious objects. In accordance with the modern refutation of Thomistic proofs, rejecting them as being based «on truths that are only truths about the world», Scheler affirms that the existence of God has a qualitative difference from worldly objects that requires a distinct philosophical method, and there cannot be an analytical transition from one sphere of essences to another. At the same time, however, he calls for a broader sense of

«objectivity», which is not confined in the subjectivity of intentional acts – claiming for the knowledge of an «intrinsically individually» but at the same time «intrinsically universally valid truth»⁴³. So, an adequate characterization of religious acts can guarantee the authenticity and realism of the religious object and is therefore fundamental for the establishment of the philosophical autonomy of the religious sphere, and for the foundation of a natural theology.

⁴³ SCHELER, M., *On the Eternal*, 23.

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