

GUIDO CUSINATO

BODY ENACTIVISM AND
PRIMORDIAL AFFECTIVITY.
MAX SCHELER AND JACOB VON
UEXKÜLL'S APORIA

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1. *Introduction*

In this paper, I show that the philosophical discovery of Uexküll's biological reflections must be traced back not to Heidegger's 1929 course, but to a series of Scheler's writings dating back to the years 1909-1916. I argue that Scheler relied on Uexküll's biological notions to rethink Kant's transcendental aesthetics and thus to develop a new ecological approach to the philosophy of perception. However, Scheler's reception of Uexküll's works was not straightforward. At first, Scheler read Uexküll against Kant and interpreted the theory of *Bauplan* in the sense of a merely selective activity (1909-1916). Subsequently, he used the notion of *Bauplan* to develop his own concept of body schema (*Leibschemata*) as the center of perception. At this point, Scheler was forced to tackle the fundamental aporia at the core of Uexküll's system: How do different living species communicate with each other if they belong to different environments (*Umwelten*)?

In order to find a way out of Uexküll's aporia, Scheler posited the existence of a «primordial affectivity» (*Gefühlsdrang*). According to this thesis, every living organism is endowed with a «grammar of elementary expression», which lets it interact on a biosemiotic level with its surrounding environment and with the expressivity of other living

forms. The notion of an organism capable of “feeling” and endowed with a primordial grammar of expression radically transforms the traditional image of life and organisms. In fact, this is an organism that can actively orient itself in its environment. Thanks to these notions, Scheler could establish an enactive perspective of the organism without falling into Uexküll’s aporias of Kantian subjectivism, which instead recur even in several forms of contemporary enactivism.

In Scheler’s perspective, the environment (*Umwelt*) is not a neutral container of the organism, and perception becomes the embodied activity of an organism in interaction with its environment. This thesis anticipates nothing less than the idea at the core of enactive theory today. Largely developed by Scheler in *Formalismus* (1913-1916), during the second half of the 20th century this perspective was dismissed also due to its opposition to cognitivism, only to re-emerge in the contemporary debate thanks to the enactive perspective [Varela *et al.* 1991]. Nonetheless, while the convergences between enactivism and Uexküll’s theory have already been explored, leading for instance to the development of a *biosemiotic enactivism* [De Jesus 2016], the common ground between enactivism and Scheler’s thought has remained completely unnoticed.

The aim of this paper is not to draw attention to these convergences, but rather to Scheler’s position, which sheds light on important aspects hitherto little examined in current enactive theory. In particular, four aspects of Scheler’s perception theory can acquire a central significance in today’s enactive perspective: 1) perception does not attempt to represent the world to the intellect but aims at the survival of the organism, which, by means of its drive structure (*Triebstruktur*), perceives only what is within the horizon of its vital relevance, which defines the boundaries of an organism’s *Umwelt*; 2) perception has an axiological character or, more precisely, the mapping of the *Umwelt* takes place thanks to a valueception (*Wertnehmung*) that precedes and founds perception (*Wahrnehmung*) on a pre-representative level; 3) perception is rooted in the affective sphere; 4) in addition to the basic enactive logic regarding the correlation between *Leib* and *Umwelt* analyzed by Varela, it is also necessary to envisage an enactive logic that concerns the correlation between *person* and *world*.

2. The concepts of “environment” and body in Scheler

Understanding the problem of organisms entails redefining notions that in many cases are initially conceived either as “categories”, in the sense of the predicates of being, or in reference to inorganic matter. There is nothing new about the thesis that organisms and life require their own conceptual tools in order to be understood – concepts that are frequently inconsistent with the attempt of classical science to focus on what is general, repeatable, and reversible while excluding what is singular, unforeseeable, and irreversible. This idea was already present in Bergson and exerted a considerable influence upon Scheler.

It is little known that Scheler, between 1909 and 1928, developed a phenomenology of corporeality independently of Husserl, mainly drawing on Uexküll and Bergson. In particular, in the notes for the biology lectures given in the academic year 1908/09 («*Biologie Vorlesung*»), Scheler uses several terms to indicate the concept of environment. He often uses the Gallicism “*Milieu*” [Scheler *GW XIV*, 270-271]. However, there is also a passage in which he uses the German term *Umwelt* in a very peculiar sense:

the environment [*Milieu*] of an amoeba or of a mole differs from that of a horse. [...] There is [therefore] no point in saying that a living being with a more complex organization is better adapted [*angepaßt*] to the environment [*Umwelt*], since it has a completely different environment [*Umwelt*] [Scheler *GW XIV*, 274].

This passage leaves no doubt that, already in 1909, Scheler took up one of the main theses set out by Uexküll in his work *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* [Cusinato 2018, 70-72]. After 1909, Scheler largely dealt with Uexküll in the 1914 review of his work *Bausteine. Zu einer biologischen Weltanschauung*, whereby Uexküll was brought to the attention of the philosophical debate in Germany [Scheler *GW XIV*, 395-397]. Indeed, Scheler already discussed Uexküll’s positions extensively in the manuscript *Die Lehre von den drei Tatsachen* (1911-12). This shows that Scheler discovered and understood the outstanding philosophical importance of Uexküll’s biological reflections already between 1909 and

1912, and therefore much earlier than Heidegger did in the late twenties.¹ In particular, Uexküll disputed two theses shared by Lamarckian and Darwinian evolutionism, which were dominant at the time. According to the first, there is only one *milieu* that anthropocentrically corresponds to the world of the human being which can be used for measuring the degree of adaptation of the different living species. Against it, Uexküll maintained that there are as many environments as there are living species, and it makes no sense to establish hierarchies of adaptation because each species is perfectly adapted to its own specific environment. The second thesis maintained by popular Darwinism held that all organisms passively adapt to this unique *milieu*. Uexküll, instead, asserted that each organic species interacts with its own specific *Umwelt*.

Scheler took up both of Uexküll's assertions by rethinking them through Nietzsche's philosophy. In his essay *Ressentiment* (1912), Scheler refers to Nietzsche's criticism of civilization as the expression of a degenerate form of adaptation, which is typical of a biologically deficient being such as the human being. In Scheler's view, civilization is an "unfair" form of adaptation that is achieved not through organ formation (*Organbildung*), as is the case of other animals, but by means of the artificial construction of instruments (*Werkzeuge*).

The mechanistic conception of nature, for Scheler, reflects this resentful mentality, which would have led the human being to exalt the instrument (*Werkzeug*) and to understand and explain the organism as a set of mechanical parts [Cusinato 2008, 142-143]. Moreover, Scheler also maintains that there is more than one arena of struggle for existence designed after the human model [Scheler *GW* X, 312] and that each animal species thus has its tailor-made environment.

We can also find complete convergence between Scheler and Uexküll concerning the second assertion. By criticizing the idea of a purely passive adaptation, Scheler says that the variety and morphological richness of life proves that the very «formation of the organ is not an adaptation [*Anpassung*] to a natural environment [*Umgebung*] given as

¹ Heidegger's analyses of Uexküll (in particular during the Winter Semester of 1929-30) lack the depth that characterizes Scheler's reflections on the same theme in *Formalismus* (1913-1916). On Scheler and Uexküll, see Cusinato [2008, 179-182]; Brentari [2015]; Guccinelli [2016]; Cusinato [2018, 70-79].

dead, since the same process in which the organ is formed also determines the essence and structure of the milieu or nature» [Scheler *GW* III, 143].

Scheler tackles in greater depth Uexküll's theses, which he reinterprets through Bergson's thought, in the manuscript *Lehre von den drei Tatsachen* (1911-1912). Here Scheler describes the symbolic relationship between *Umwelt* and *Leib* in terms of selection in accordance with the thesis of the lived body (*Leib*) as analyzer (*Analysator*) [Scheler *GW* X, 437-440, 478]. On this basis, Scheler establishes an ecological theory of perception in which stimuli are defined as aspects of the world (*Welt*) around (*um*) the organism whose variations lead to changes in its vital processes.

It is interesting to observe that Uexküll's influence is also visible in *Ordo amoris* (1914-1916), albeit from an unexpected ethical perspective. The expression «*moralische Umwelt*» indicates the dynamic «moral environment» as opposed to the rigid and immutable environment of destiny (*Schicksal*) [Scheler *GW* X, 348; 352-353, 374]. In this way, Scheler transfers Uexküll's ecological thesis to the ethical sphere. *Ethics is no longer conceived under the banner of a passive adaptation to what ought to be* (Seinsollen), *but as the result of a dynamic correlation between one's ordo amoris and the ethos of the society in which one lives.*

3. Leib and Umwelt

In explicit reference to the theory of *Umwelt*, as early as 1909 Scheler distinguished between *Lebewesen* and *Körper*, which would be the starting point for the further distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*: The *Lebewesen* has an *Umwelt* while the *Körper* does not. A «living being is not a body [*Körper*]» [Scheler *GW* XIV, 314] since what corresponds to it is not the spatiotemporal world of the inorganic but an environment [Scheler *GW* XIV, 271] that has its own categories of time, space, and movement irreducible to those of a physical object [Scheler *GW* XIV, 335]. Also in 1909, Scheler argued that these categories can be conceived only in relation to the lived body so that one can maintain that «presence, past, and future do not have any significance independent of the vital world» [Scheler *GW* XIV, 335]. For Scheler, this means that a

Lebensphänomen, as opposed to a *Körper*, turns out to be irreducible to the Cartesian dualism of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* and consequently, from the point of view of its content, is a «psycho-physically indifferent phenomenon» [Scheler *GW* XIV, 325]. All of these attributes, including the psycho-physic indifference, which would become crucial both in Plessner's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of corporeality, are thereafter ascribed to the *Leib* [Scheler *GW* II, 388].²

What still appeared as a sketched phenomenology of corporeality in the semester 1908/1909 took on a more distinct aspect in the following years, especially through the manuscript *Die Lehre von den drei Tatsachen* (1911-12) and the essay *Über Selbsttäuschungen* (1912). In the first text, the *Leib* has the function of an analyzer (*Analysator*) of the stimuli coming from the *Umwelt* [Scheler *GW* X, 437]. Here, Bergson's influence is evident: according to him, perception «consists in detaching from the whole set of the objects my body's possible action on them. Perception is nothing but a selection. It creates nothing» [Bergson, 1959, 360]. Scheler further develops this perspective in his 1912 essay *Über Selbsttäuschungen*, where he states that the *Leib* is «a notion that should be clearly distinguished from that of *Körper*» [Scheler 1912, 105] since it is the premise for inner sense and outer sense.

It is in this passage that, for the first time, *Leib* and *Körper* are distinguished in a published text in the field of phenomenology.³ Inner sense and outer sense are selection organs, and each of them functions as an «analyzer of perception» (*Analysator des Wahrnehmens*) [Scheler 1912, 108]. Perceiving, therefore, means selecting through inner and outer sense what proves relevant to the *Leib*. What is perceived in the first instance, on the pre-representative level, are the value units (*Werteinheiten*) and their qualities [Scheler 1912, 142]. According to Scheler, the *Leib* becomes the «material a priori» of perception. Perception, thus, is

² Later, in *Formalismus*, Scheler returns to the crucial importance of this point: «The lived body, or rather its immediate perception as totality, founds both the givenness of the psyche of the lived body and that of the physicality of the lived body. And it is precisely this original phenomenon, the phenomenon of a double foundation, that constitutes the lived body in the strictest sense of the term» [Scheler *GW* II, 399].

³ On the origin of the distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* in Scheler and Husserl, cf. Cusinato [2018, 81-86].

no longer considered in reference to the categories of the intellect, as was the case in Kant, but to a relevance order determined by the *Leib*. Such a relevance order results from the Uexküllian perspective. Only what has the «meaning of a signal from the environment [*Umwelt*] for our practical steps» [Scheler 1912, 140-141] can be perceived. The value qualities, therefore, are not “subjective” but rather «understood as signals for certain actions, [they are] separated and translated into notions and words only insofar as they are signals for different actions united by certain ends» [Scheler 1912, 140].

4. *Body schema*

There are two different phases in Scheler’s reflection on the phenomenology of the *Leib*. In the first phase preceding *Erkenntnis und Arbeit*, the *Leib* carries out a pre-representative categorial function: «It functions as a form [...], we can also say, as a category of perception» [Scheler *GW* II, 397]. We are dealing here with a categorial function, though, that is not productive but merely *selective*: The *Leib* «is only an analyzer» of givenness [Scheler *GW* VII, 248] that scours the surrounding environment in order to select relevant elements [Scheler *GW* X, 437]. In this way, Scheler transforms Kant’s “schematism” into the “schematism of the *Leib*”. We can find more detailed analyses in this sense in the second part of *Formalismus* [Scheler *GW* II, 396-420].

In the second phase, from *Erkenntnis und Arbeit* (1926) to *Idealismus-Realismus* (1928), Scheler shifted more decisively towards an “enactive” perspective, which in any case can already be found in *Formalismus*. At this stage, he took up again the question concerning the schematism of the *Leib*, which he viewed as no longer only selective but also “creative”. In doing so, he turned back to a more careful consideration of Kant’s problem posed by Uexküll through the notion of *Bauplan*.

What marks the transition between these two phases is the concept of «body schema» introduced in 1926.⁴ In developing this notion, Scheler was influenced by Paul Schilder’s analyses on *Körperschema*

⁴ Cf. Scheler [*GW* VIII, 316, 355; *GW* IX, 34, 218].

put forth a few years earlier [Scheler *GW IX*, 218].⁵ It is worth mentioning, however, that he did not use the term *Körperschema* but *Leibschema*, which is consistent with his distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*. In coining the term *Körperschema* Schilder, in his turn, was influenced by Scheler's reflections on the notion of *Leib* in *Formalismus* [Schilder 1950, 283].⁶ Schilder may be referring here to the circumstance that the idea of *Leibschema* is already implied in the theory of body schematism expounded in *Formalismus*, as the use of the expression «*Schema unseres Leibes*» [Scheler *GW II*, 409] eloquently shows.⁷

The notion of body schema profoundly changed Scheler's perspective since it practically took up the problems of Kant's schematism and applied them to the lived body. In the first phase, Scheler only conceived of the lived body as the «material apriori» that orients the selection of perception. After introducing the theory of body schema, however, he traced back to the lived body the enactive faculty to produce an image (*Bild*) as a schema that anticipates a sensorimotor activity or an action. Therefore, the body schema envisages an «embodied phantasy» or imagination referring not to the intellect but to the lived body itself [Cusinato 2008, 137-141; 2018, 227-230].

⁵ In 1926 Scheler also quoted Schilder's concept of *Körperschema* in the *Preface* to the third edition of *Formalismus* [*GW II*, 24]. Previously, he had mentioned Schilder referring to his studies on hypnosis [see, e.g., *GW VII*, 31-34].

⁶ «We are here in better accord with philosophers, especially with Scheler [...]. He uses for this inner body the German word '*Leib*'. In his opinion the '*Leib*' is independent of the sensation of the inner organs; it is different from single sensations and different from any other object. He emphasizes that our body (*Leib*) is always given to us as a unit with some more or less vague structure» [Schilder 1935/1950, 283].

⁷ A remarkable development of these themes can be found in Gallagher [1986]. On the notion of «body schema» in Schilder, Scheler, and Gallagher, cf. Cusinato [2018, 88-89].

5. Uexküll's and Scheler's biosemiotics: Bauplan and Leibschema

As a matter of fact, Uexküll is a Kantian striving to conceive the body in such a way that it can work with a Kantian *a priori*.⁸ According to Uexküll, an organic species “phenomenologically” does not experience a part of reality, since the “real world” remains an inaccessible *Ding an sich*. Instead, it creates its own environment in a Kantian sense, namely as an “internal” environment (*Innenwelt*). The organism of a species relates to an environment that is *produced* and not passively *received*, just as the Kantian subject *synthesizes* the phenomenon out of the chaos of sensory manifold. From this stems the problem at the center of Uexküll's thought: How is it possible that the environments of different living species can come into contact with each other?

At the core of Uexküll's theory is the idea that the organism is endowed with a creative construction plan (*Bauplan*) capable of producing “magical environments” and that, by means of the “intentionality” of these supra-individual natural plans, it produces the signification of its own surrounding environment understood as *Innenwelt*. The creativity and intentionality of the *Bauplan* replace instinct, which remains an ambiguous concept for Uexküll: The organism moves about in its environment oriented not by instinct, but by its own *Bauplan*. This idea has several similarities with Scheler's thesis. According to it, the organism is endowed with its own orientativeness that in the case of an animal organism is embedded in the drive structure (*Triebstruktur*) of the lived body [Cusinato 2008, 68-79].

Uexküll's concept of construction plan has a Kantian “legislative” meaning. For Uexküll, the organism, first of all, does not passively adapt to the environment. Nor does it merely select pieces of real givenness already constituted in themselves, as Scheler maintains. This comes because according to Uexküll rule and plan have nothing to do with *Ding an sich* and rather they are just the form in which we can know the effects of the natural factor in question. In Uexküll the natural factor in itself remains completely unknown.

⁸ Scheler's notion of *a priori* considerably differs from that of Kant. In the following pages, therefore, I use the term «*a priori*» in reference to Kant and «*apriori*» to Scheler.

In Uexküll's view, the world is conceived as a *Ding an sich* and in the beginning there is only a chaotic set of impressions that in the Kantian sense acquires a phenomenologically verifiable form only thanks to the intervention of the organism's *Bauplan*. The *Bauplan* does not select phenomena from the surrounding world that are already constituted in themselves as Scheler asserts in his *Formalismus*. Instead, it synthesizes images of semiotic markings (*Merkbilder*) in an inner world (*Innenwelt*). Likewise, the organism does not perceive representations of real objects (which for Uexküll remain *Dinge an sich*), but only the signals (*Merkmale*) of the relevance that certain aspects of the environment have for the *Bauplan* of the organism. In this manner, Uexküll eventually paves the way to a semiotic interpretation of Kant [Schönrich 1981] as well as to an interpretation of Peirce's semiotics in terms of a biosemiotics.

At this point, Uexküll faces the problem of the operative closure of the system, which also recurs in Maturana, Varela, and Luhmann. As we have seen, according to Uexküll, the organism does not reflect the reality of the surrounding world, but it re-elaborates the stimuli as signals of the environmental qualities that are relevant to the sensorimotor functioning of the organism. Each living species has its own way of perceiving the world. The tick, for instance, focuses on the olfactory and thermostatic variations caused by the passage of mammals under the branch of the tree from which it is hanging: This corresponds to a specific environment, to an ecological niche that coincides with that very small part of the *Merkmale* (semiotic markings) useful to its vital relevance. In this way, its perceptual world coincides with the biosemiotics of such markings. The set of these relevant *Merkmale* constitutes its *Merkwelt*. The verb *merken* originally means «to provide with a mark (*mit einem Zeichen versehen*)» or «to mark / to make recognizable (*kennlich machen*)». The term *Merkwelt*, thus, literally means «the world that is provided with a mark» or «the world that is made recognizable» by the organism. In the following pages, I translate the term as «world of semiotic markings» instead of «perceptual world», as it is generally rendered. In my opinion, this common translation weakens the sense of the German term: The *Merkwelt* is not simply the «perceptual world», but a perceptual world in which a «functional circle» (*Funktion-*

skreis) between the perception of semiotic markings that is of vital relevance for the organism, on the one hand, and the acting of the organism, on the other, is brought into being. By so doing, the organism does not actually perceive objects, but only the biosemiotics of this «functional circle». Perception and semiotics coincide. The organism only perceives what is functional to its own sensorimotor operativeness and acts in accordance with the biological markings it perceives. Everything a subject perceives becomes its world of semiotic markings (*Merkwelt*) and everything it does constitutes its operative world (*Wirkwelt*). Thus, the world of semiotic markings and the operational world form the closed totality of the «functional circle», namely the environment. Here I will limit myself to observing that in nature the way of acting, the way of perceiving semiotic markings and the biological form are intertwined: The way of acting not only is guided by what the semiotic markings signal, but also by the way in which the sense organs perceive them. For instance, the perceptual horizon of a shark is dominated by its auditory and olfactory organs. Thanks to its highly developed olfactory lobes, it is able to grasp very small olfactory variations between the right and the left nostril (which for this reason, e.g., in the hammerhead shark are set wide apart), so that in order to locate its prey it moves forward sniffing the water with a typical zigzag movement.

From this biosemiotic perspective, the environment is never given once and for all, but rather it is the result of the dynamic interaction between *Wirkwelt* and *Merkwelt*: The action starting from the organism returns retroactively to the organism itself (in the sense of the Schelerian *Rückmeldung*) and the action of the «marking sign» (*Merkzeichen*) finds its end in the action of the «operative sign» (*Wirkzeichen*) towards the environmental variables. Thereby, the «functional circle» determines an operative closure of the system itself with respect to the surrounding environment.

The most important aspect here is that for Uexküll each organic species develops itself by creating its own environment according to a precise *Bauplan*, that is to say, a non-mechanistic and non-instinctual program that restores that character of spontaneity of the body expunged by previous philosophical theories. While for Uexküll the environment referring to a single species is something *constructed* in the

Kantian sense, in the middle period of Scheler's work, which includes his *Formalismus*, it remains phenomenologically *given*, although in a different way for each species.

However, once Scheler pointed out the enactive perspective embedded in his notion of *Leibschema*, it became clear that the solution of "perspectivism" provided in *Formalismus* was no longer sufficient. Scheler realized then that Uexküll's approach to the Kantian mindset expressed in the concept of *Bauplan* brought to the surface the aporia underlying this position, of which Uexküll was never able to find a truly satisfactory way out: How can different species belonging to different *Umwelten* communicate with each other?

6. *Primordial affectivity and expressive dimension*

According to an opinion still widely held today, claiming that life is characterized by sensibility, affectivity, and the ability to interact with values and expressions does not mean thinking of life in terms of its own categories but rather projecting anthropocentric categories onto life. This therefore results in something similar to a "naturalistic fallacy". In this view, these categories belong properly and exclusively to the human being, so thinking that they are also valid for nature is nothing but the product of an anthropocentric projection. Surprisingly, the problematic nature of this reasoning is often overlooked: Following this logic, all the most important characteristics of life become the exclusive monopoly of the human being. Isn't this anthropocentrism at its purest?

This way of thinking has applied reductionism to the study of organisms and life, leaving out all those categories and notions that cannot be quantified or be traced back to physical laws, such as purpose, value, subjectivity, expression, feeling, and affectivity. The goal of this view is to not take into account the internal point of view of an organic system, but only its basic constituent elements.

The difference between the processes concerning living matter and those involving inanimate matter has been at the center of biological research from the beginning of modern science. It has also given rise to the controversy known to science historians as the dispute of *vitalism* against *mechanism*. Around the mid-20th century, the arrival of

molecular genetics and the discovery of the genetic code undermined the thesis that, unlike the non-living, living beings had some peculiar “vital force”. Vitalism thus seemed to lose its most important foundation, which allowed its supporters to defend the idea that the living are fundamentally irreducible to the physical laws of matter. The biological processes of genetic transmission, in fact, could now be interpreted in a highly unified manner through the discovery of the genetic code. Finally everything could be understood by referring only to the principles of physics and chemistry.

As usual, though, the devil is in the details. In fact, a series of notions extraneous to physics and chemistry entered into this framework and took part in describing fundamental life processes. These notions, such as *information*, *message*, *transmission*, or *translation*, also have a philosophical meaning. Nevertheless, they were considered – in a certain sense “tolerated” – as mere metaphors, only useful for popularizing phenomena that remained essentially chemical and physical in nature. However, even the keenest supporters of physicalism had to admit that these were “indispensable metaphors”.

The question of *information* was already present in cybernetics, according to which it was possible to interpret not only life but also the genetic code itself following the model of a “computer”. However, this approach has been gradually challenged. In particular, feeling and affectivity have been progressively regarded as irreducible to the “computer” model, at least as it was initially conceived. Moreover, since the Human Genome Project (HGP) was concluded in 2000, it has become increasingly evident that knowing the sequences of the elementary “building blocks” of life is not sufficient to explain life processes [Lewontin 2000]. Instead, it is necessary to also study and analyze the dimension which 20th-century genetics had gradually marginated, namely the dimension of biological individuality or, more precisely, the self-organization and complexity that makes an organism a biological individuality.

We can find a different approach to the question of *information* in biosemiotics. Since the 1960s and 1970s, this discipline has proposed to consider all biological processes as intrinsically semiotic, including those concerning the simplest life units, such as cells, and those relating to animal (and human) groups and societies. The main thesis of biose-

miotics is that “life is semiosis” at every level. As a result, there is a “semiosphere” corresponding to the biosphere, that is to say, a kind of semiotic dimension common to all living beings as such, not only those endowed with language, abstract thinking, or representative capacity. From this point of view, even Gregory Bateson can be considered a forerunner of biosemiotics [Hoffmeyer, 2008].

Scheler, who connected his reflection to Uexküll’s ecological theory very early on, also fully embraced this perspective. The novelty of Scheler’s position consisted in his attempt to reinterpret life through two strategic categories, namely «primordial affectivity» (*Gefühlsdrang*) and «grammar of expression» (*Grammatik des Ausdrucks*). Scheler extended a «primordial affectivity» (*Gefühlsdrang*)⁹ to all living organisms, including plants. According to this thesis, every living organism is endowed with an elementary germ of a «grammar of expression» that lets it interact with the surrounding environment and with the expressivity of other living forms [Scheler *GW* VII, 22; 92; 112; VIII, 274; XII, 86; 143].

Certainly, Scheler also drew an essential distinction between plants and animals. In the former, in fact, there is still no feedback (*Rückwendung*) to a center:

Therefore, in the case of plants, I speak of “ecstatic” primordial affectivity [*Gefühlsdrang*] in order to describe this total lack of feedback [*Rückmeldung*] of organ states to a center, which is peculiar to animal life – this total lack of a turning back [*Rückwendung*] of life into itself, even of the most primitive re-flexio, even of the most faintly “conscious” inner state [Scheler *GW* IX, 15].¹⁰

⁹ On the notion of «primordial affectivity» (*Gefühlsdrang*) in Scheler’s thought, cf. Scheler *GW* VIII, 337; IX, 13-16. This concept, which is at the core of Scheler’s philosophical anthropology, has been recently used also by Colombetti [2013].

¹⁰ «Daher spreche ich bei der Pflanze von “ekstatischem” Gefühlsdrang, um dieses totale Fehlen einer dem tierischen Leben eigenen *Rückmeldung* von Organzuständen an ein Zentrum, dieses völlige Fehlen einer *Rückwendung* des Lebens in sich selbst, einer noch so primitiven re-flexio, eines noch so schwach “bewußten” Innenzustandes zu bezeichnen» [Scheler *GW* IX, 15].

Thus, only in relation to the animal is it possible to speak of “sensation”. This difference, however, does not call into question a fundamental unity of all life in terms of the two categories of «expression» (*Ausdruck*) and «primordial affectivity». Expression (*Ausdruck*), for Scheler, is the «Urphänomen des Lebens» [Scheler *GW IX*, 15]. From this point of view, «already in plant existence [*im pflanzlichen Dasein*], one finds the *primordial phenomenon* [*Urphänomen*] of expression, a certain physiognomy of their inner states, [in other words,] of the conditions [*Zuständlichkeiten*] of primordial affectivity [understood] as the inner being of their life, such as weak, strong, luxuriant, or poor» [Scheler *GW IX*, 15].¹¹

The thesis I argued for in several works is that living beings relate to the expressive dimension by means of primordial affectivity. This implies that the essential characteristic of life is to be found in its interaction with the expressive dimension: All that is capable of interacting with the expressive dimension through primordial affectivity is life. Undoubtedly, non-living matter, such as a burning piece of paper, also can be highly expressive, and a computer can recognize facial expressions. Nevertheless, only life is able to interact with expression through primordial affectivity [Cusinato 2008, 98; 2018, 101-104].

7. The relevance of Scheler's theses for the current debate on enactivism

From the perspective of cognitivism, which was hegemonic until the end of the 20th century, sense-making is considered to be the result of an intellectual cognitive activity separate from the body. With Varela [*et al.* 1991] enactivism overturns this perspective and considers perception as an embodied activity of an organism in interaction with its environment. This is exactly the conclusion reached by Scheler in *Formalismus* under the influence of Uexküll's theory of *Umwelt*.

¹¹ «[...] bereits im pflanzlichen Dasein [findet sich] das *Urphänomen* des Ausdrucks, eine gewisse Physiognomik ihrer Innenzustände, der Zuständlichkeiten des Gefühlsdrangs als des Innenseins ihres Lebens, wie matt, kraftvoll, üppig, arm» [Scheler *GW IX*, 15].

However, it is only from *Erkenntnis und Arbeit* (1926) onward that Scheler's enactive perspective becomes explicit. Scheler gradually takes up the theme, which Uexküll put forth through the concept of *Bauplan*, and connects it to a "legislative" of the "lived body". In *Erkenntnis und Arbeit* Scheler realizes that the solution offered in *Formalismus* risks undermining the results achieved by the phenomenology of corporeality. He is also compelled to deal with the theme at the core of Uexküll's proposal, that of the legislative productivity of the organism. By posing the problem of a material legislation of the lived body, instead of obliterating Uexküll's Kantian problem, Scheler rethinks it from an "enactive" perspective, ascribing to the lived body that very legislative capacity that Kant formerly assigned to the intellect. In Scheler's last writings we can find the intuition of an enactive activity that lies at the basis of perception and has its driving force in the drive-phantasy (*Triebphantasie*), namely a fantasy which is conceived in relation not to the intellect but to the body schema [Cusinato 2018, 87-97; 230-236]. The *Umwelt* for Scheler is not an external container in which the living organisms grow and move. According to his *Erkenntnis und Arbeit*, the organism interacts with the *Umwelt* from its own specific "enactive" point of view, which is represented by the drive-phantasy (*Triebphantasie*). Hence, the *Umwelt* is not a neutral place, but always means something in relation to the organism.

In this respect, there are four aspects of Scheler's theory that are particularly significant for the current debate on enactivism: 1) perception does not attempt to represent the world to the intellect but aims at the survival of the organism, which, by means of its drive-phantasy (*Triebphantasie*), perceives only what is within the horizon of its vital relevance that defines the boundaries of an organism's *Umwelt*; 2) perception has an axiological character or, more precisely, the mapping of the *Umwelt* takes place thanks to a valueception (*Wertnehmung*) that precedes and founds perception (*Wahrnehmung*) on a pre-representative level; 3) perception is rooted in the affective sphere; 4) in the human being perception not only refers to the interaction between *Leib* and *Umwelt*, but also to that between *person* and *world*: thus, we must admit a form of "anthropogenetic enactivism" also for the personal center [Cusinato 2018, 242-244]. Only recently has a debate begun to emerge

over the axiological and affective dimension of an enactivism which distinguishes itself from the enactivism functional to the relationship between organism and environment and whose propulsive core instead lies in the activity of positioning the person in the world.¹²

Each of these themes at the center of Scheler's phenomenology can offer an important contribution to the current enactive perspective. An organism capable of "feeling" and endowed with a primordial grammar of expression radically transforms the traditional image of life and organisms. In this view, an organism perceives values (such as useful or harmful) on the pre-representative level (*Wertnehmung*) and can enactively orient itself in the environment. By developing this Schelerian approach, we can establish an enactive perspective of the organism without falling into Uexküll's aporias of Kantian subjectivism, which instead recur even in several forms of contemporary enactivism.

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¹² On this aspect, which for reasons of space cannot be expanded here, please refer to: Cusinato 2017, 209-214; 2018, 242-244. In a more recent time, along these lines de Haan proposed to distinguish between a *basic* and an *existential* sense-making [De Haan 2020, 8-9].

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Keywords

Scheler; Uexküll; material apriori; body schema; primordial affectivity (*Gefühlsdrang*); biosemiotics; enactivism; valueception; *Umwelt*; *Leib*

Abstract

This paper is aimed to discuss and reconsider life categories starting from German phenomenologist Max Scheler's analysis of the "lived body" (*Leib*), which he developed between 1909 and 1928 independently of Husserl. For the philosophy of biology, Scheler's phenomenology of corporeality is of outstanding importance, because the categories it applies to the *Leib* are not taken from the inorganic world, as is ultimately still the case with Husserl, but from Jacob von Uexküll's biology and Bergson's philosophy. It therefore represents one of the most significant attempts to rethink life in accordance with the categories proper to life itself.

Scheler's reception of Uexküll's works was not straightforward. At first, Scheler read Uexküll against Kant and interpreted the theory of *Bauplan* in the sense of a merely selective activity (1909-1916). Subsequently, he used the notion of *Bauplan* to develop his own concept of body schema (*Leibschema*) as the enactive center of perception. At this point, Scheler was compelled to tackle the fundamental aporia at the center of Uexküll's system: How do different species communicate with each other if they belong to different environments (*Umwelten*)? In order to find a way out of Uexküll's aporia, Scheler posited a basic unity of life on the unipathic level (*Einsföhlung*).

Scheler's solution was thus the following: Living beings in different environments (*Umwelten*) communicate with each other because every living organism is endowed with an elementary «grammar of expression», which on the level of primordial affectivity enables a pre-representative communication of all living forms, including plants. The most significant aspect of this solution is that Scheler could develop an enactive perspective of the organism without falling into Uexküll's aporias of Kantian subjectivism, which are still found in several forms of contemporary enactivism.

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