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MAX SCHELER'S DIONYSIAN REDUCTION AS THE DEPRESSIVE'S *MODUS VIVENDI*

TABLE OF CONTENTS: 1. *Introduction*; 2. *The Dionysian Reduction*; 2.1. *Scheler's remarks*; 3. *The Psychotic Depressive's Modus Vivendi*; 4. *Conclusion*.

1. Introduction

In Max Scheler's notes for a book on metaphysics that he never lived to write there is a short extract on what he calls the Dionysian reduction [Scheler 1924-1928/2008, 402]. This is a thought experiment in which he envisages what a human being would look like if its *geistig* faculties (spiritual and higher mental) were expunged. It is the complete antithesis of the more commonly known phenomenological reduction, first conceived of by Husserl [1913/1982, 66], but given a radical twist by Scheler [1924-1928/2008, 78-86, 99-113, 403]. The phenomenological reduction imagines a state of affairs in which *reality is struck out*, whilst mind and spirit are intact; the Dionysian reduction investigates the inverse scenario, in which *mind and spirit are abolished* but reality is preserved.

The purpose of this article is to analyse what Scheler said about the Dionysian reduction, and then argue that the core psychopathological features of a psychotic depressive illness (melancholia) closely match the changes in the human being which Scheler found in his Dionysian experiment. The depressive, my argument will run, is a Dionysian human *in vivo*.

2. *The Dionysian Reduction*

2.1. *Scheler's remarks*

To set the scene we can quote the translated extract in its entirety [Scheler 1924-1928/2008, 402]:

The Dionysian reduction, known to Schopenhauer and Bergson, involves the following.

1. There is a switching off of mind, intellect and the experienced sense of the primacy of perception.
2. There is a coming to the fore of sympathy, animal sexuality and the imaginal portrayal of the world drawn from the forces of nature and life's drives.
3. Our participation in all this is not objectified (i.e. none of this is experienced as things or qualities of things).
4. There is an enhanced awareness of the historical dimension of mankind and a heightened sense of being part of nature.
5. The artistic in the human is at the forefront.
6. The power of instinct is to the fore.

In respect of the integration of the reductions with the metaphysics of the absolute the following remarks are pertinent. The following, however, concern only the Dionysian.

- a. All images are expressive.
- b. Life is experienced physiognomically (i.e. as if everything were a face).
- c. The predominant mode of knowledge is through sympathy.
- d. Everything here stems from the sexual drive of the human.
- e. In place of the now switched off mental apparatus of the human there is an intuitive sense of participating in everything to do with the life-force: a «co-striving», a «co-feeling» and a «co-urgency».
- f. This participation is non-objectified (i.e. not in the form of perceived things or qualities).

- g. Animal instinct is already of this Dionysian realm.
- h. The discipline of characterology comes into its own in nature and history.

Some of this is repetitive, but, taking the extract as a whole, there are three generic ways in which the human being would be fundamentally different from the normal state of affairs: 1) in respect of its experienced objectivity; 2) with regard to what constitutes its subjectivity; and 3) by virtue of what it can know. Most of the comments, as I shall show, fit into these broad categories.

1) *Altered objectivity*

What is experienced is an objectivity of sorts, but not one populated by things. In Heidegger's [1927/1962, 106] terminology there is no sense of *Vorhandenheit* (a sense of «already-thereness» of things). Elsewhere [Scheler 1927/2009, 31] he writes that only a being possessed of *Geist*, i.e. a human being, can experience things as things, but because *Geist* is wiped out in the reduction so too is thingness.

What *does* the 'reduced' human being then experience by way of objectivity? Scheler makes clear that it takes the form of images (*Bilder*), expressions and physiognomonic representations, almost as if the 'world' were merely a face. This is reminiscent of descriptions of primitive world views [e.g. Lévy-Bruhl 1927/1928], where the living, the dead and the never-alive are scarcely distinguished, and all three have a human face. There is also an ontogenetic regression as well as an atavistic one, whereby the 'world' increasingly resembles what an infant first sees – its mother's face.

2) *Altered subjectivity*

Who is the Dionysian experiencer? From Scheler's remarks above it is obvious that he or she is closer to a non-human animal than is the everyday, unreduced human being. There is mention of «animal sexuality», «forces of nature», «life's drives», being «part of nature» and the «pow-

er of instinct». There is a heightened sense of participation in nature, and of there being a «co-striving», a «co-feeling» and a «co-urgency». In fact, as well as the atavistic and ontogenetic regressions just mentioned, there is a phylogenetic regression.

3) *Altered knowing*

How does the Dionysian human being know what it knows? Again, Scheler is quite clear: «the predominant mode of knowledge is through sympathy». Sympathy, for Scheler, was a central human faculty, the subject of a book-length treatment [Scheler 1913/2008]. His unique contribution to the subject was to see that this was a faculty which directly captured the state of mind of another person, not by means of analogy with some previous experience of the knower, but through a psychic facility which ‘perceived’ this, just as anyone perceived a thing, albeit through a different facility. At one stroke he had solved the age-old philosophical conundrum of how we know other minds. In the case of the Dionysian human, however, he or she is entirely reliant on this, and has no means of grasping the idea or essence of anything, as you or I can also do, because this is specific to a being with *Geist*.

3. *The Psychotic Depressive’s Modus Vivendi*

1) *Altered objectivity*

What does the depressive experience of their world that the normal person does not? He or she experiences a non-objectified world. The ‘thingliness’ of things starts to disappear, whether the object is in the external world, their own body or even their own biography:

no clothes; things void;
 other people didn’t exist;
 all her children have died;
 no heart;

parts of body and brain have gone, no blood pressure, hardly any lungs;
everything in history and in books is as if they never were, period when there was nobody about the streets;
father lost his job, parents have sold their house, sister not at university [Cutting 1997, 139, 259].

These are known as nihilistic delusions in conventional psychopathological terms, and account for a large tranche of a psychotic depressive's delusions. This is precisely what Scheler said of the Dionysian reduction, that it would result in the experience of 'no-thingness'.

What replaces this, or rather what was dormant but now looms large because of the non-availability of thingness as a mode of experience, is, according to the Dionysian reduction, a 'physiognomonic' picture, as if the world were a human face. Consider these accounts [Cutting 1997, 117]:

people all had pointed ears:
Isaac Newton (on bank note) stood out 3D from page;
people's faces had particular meaning;
eyes enormous and bulging;
faces caricatured – prominent nose.

These experiences illustrate the pre-eminence of the face in the depressive's world.

Several psychopathologists last century grasped the rudimentary nature of the depressive's objectivity [Tellenbach 1974; Maldiney 1976; Tatossian 1979/1997, 71, 82]. All saw that, in Heidegger's terminology, the depressive is stuck in a pre-objectivized world where *Zuhandenheit* (ready-to-handness) reigns, whereas *Vorhandenheit* (thingliness, already-thereness) cannot be achieved. Here is Tatossian [1979/1997, 82], commenting on Tellenbach:

It is because tools have not yet become things that *Zuhandenheit* has not yet become *Vorhandenheit*.

Here he is [Tatossian 1983/2016, 104], exploring nihilistic bodily delusions:

Everything is experienced as if the body-as-object is wiped out and the depressive identifies solely with the body-as-subject.

2) *Altered subjectivity*

Who is the melancholic subject? He or she is someone with a four-fold difference from the normal state of affairs. a) There is, first, an over-identification with the social situation of other people. b) Secondly, there is an over-attunement with nature itself. c) Thirdly, the melancholic is deprived of certain emotions and acts which *Geist* normally supplies. d) Fourthly, the melancholic has a heightened sense of its animality.

a) Minkowski [1933/1995, 305] gave numerous examples of a depressive's undue subservience to other people:

When you insist on something I must submit to your will. It annoys me intensely that I am only a sort of pet animal of someone I cannot resist. I don't dare do anything without your say-so. If you insist that I leave, then I must leave.

I am entirely wrapped up in whatever you say. It is awful not to be able to say anything for myself.

Tellenbach [1974] and Kraus [1982] also identified a pre-morbid tendency in their melancholic subjects to be overly wrapped up in their social situation, and when this was disrupted by some exit event – child leaving home, death of spouse – their ability to accommodate this was hugely compromised and they switched over into an actual depressive condition.

b) Not only is the melancholic unduly influenced by other people, but they are overly involved in the wider realm of nature and society. This shows itself in the frequent delusions of guilt that they entertain. Here are some examples [Cutting 1997, 313]:

cut up a worm and fed it to a sparrow:
 if she eats, other patients won't have enough food;
 people angry with him because he made a suggestion that he
 should give £5 a week to (striking) firemen.
 O'Connor *et al.* [2007] described this as «the moral system on
 overdrive».

c) Next, the depressive subject is deprived of certain mental acts and emotions. The first of these is vividly described by Ratcliffe [2013], in an article on loss of hope in depression. The depressive does not merely lose hope in some positive future, but loses hope *tout court*. Hope is a *geistig* (mental) act which is not available to him or her at all.

Furthermore, the depressive is not able to access the range of emotions available to a normal person, because some of these are subserved by *Geist*. Paradoxically, for example, the depressive cannot feel sad [Schulte 1961] and complains bitterly that he or she has lost the ability to love their family. Only Kurt Schneider [1920], who studied under Scheler, and understood Scheler's layered formulation of emotions [Scheler 1913-1916/1973, 105-110, 337-344], properly explained the paradox. He alone appreciated that if a person experienced feelings about lack of feeling then that must be because there are more than one class of feelings, which is what Scheler said, and the feelings experienced (about the lack of feeling) are those that are preserved in depression, and the lack of feeling (whose absence the subject recognises and does feel about with their intact set of feelings) is that which is wiped out. Love and sadness are *geistig* feelings; gloominess, which is preserved, is a *vital* feeling. Again the Dionysian reduction as a depressive's *modus vivendi* accommodates all this, as it predicts that *geistig* feelings are eliminated, vital feelings not.

d) Minkowski's [1933/1995, 305, 308] further extracts from his depressed patients include some extraordinary remarks about a sense of animality that they experienced:

I am nothing but a sort of animal functioning [...]. I have the feeling that I am only a life of 'tripes' [guts], only vegetative functions, nothing but a mass [...]. I eat and excrete and that's about

all; I am in anguish but it isn't moral fear, it's a bestial fear [*une crainte bestiale*] the fear of an animal who is barely existing. I am only the stupid animal plaything of someone [*la bête de quelqu'un*].

Again, this is quite consistent with Scheler's own remarks on the Dionysian man or woman. There is even a study [Mathew *et al.* 1979] which showed that an increase in libido, not a decrease, which is customarily assumed, characterises depression.

In short, the depressive, at least in the psychotic form, is someone whose subjectivity is a mix of: over-engagement with the vicissitudes of *another* person's life; over-attunement to living creatures in general; alienation from the mental acts and emotions which allow humans to transcend their animal nature; and, in some cases, an actual sense of being no more than an animal, restricted to a cycle of ingestion and excretion.

3) *Altered knowing*

The depressive is both a compromised knower and a wiser knower.

The former is evident in his or her lack of dreams [Herschmann & Schilder 1920; Mathew *et al.* 1979], virtual absence of experienced imagery [Hurlburt 1990], complaints of inability to think [Lewis 1934], and a dilapidated grasp of the essence of anything, as evidenced in their nihilistic delusions, as discussed above. What the depressive lacks is what Scheler [1924-1928/2008, 99] refers to as «meaning». Meaning is a coming together of the idea of something with the image it presents in reality. But if there is no idea, extinguished in the Dionysian reduction, there is no meaning. The depressive complains bitterly of the meaningless nature of their life, and their status as a living testament to the Dionysian reduction is the only extant explanation of why this might be so.

And yet the depressive, in an inspired experiment by Alloy and Abramson [1979], is more attuned to the reality of some situation – judging one's own performance on a task – than any normal person. A normal person tends to overestimate his or her performance on some task, whereas the depressive is spot on, a state of affairs known as «de-

pressive realism» [Beck 1967]. Again, Scheler's Dionysian reduction is the only philosophical formulation that can get a handle on this, because it portrays a human being who is *immersed* in reality to a greater extent than any normal. The *only* mode of knowledge available to the Dionysian man or woman is «sympathy» – an attunement to the real situation of self and others – and that explains the depressive's superior assessment relative to the normal's.

4. Conclusion

Scheler's thought experiment, the Dionysian reduction, envisaging what a human being would look like if its spiritual and higher mental faculties were wiped out, proves to be an accurate model of what it is like to experience melancholia.

It certainly betters the psychological attempts to tap into its essence – whether Freudian [Freud 1917/1957], behavioural [Seligman 1975] or cognitive [Beck 1967]. Freud likened melancholia to bereavement, Seligman to the consequence of consistently negative appraisals of a subject's achievements, and Beck to a faulty personal schema whereby potentially positive aspects of a person's life are given a negative stamp. All these may apply to someone with a depressive temperament, or even to someone with a neurotic depressive illness, but none goes anywhere near explaining nihilistic delusions or delusions of guilt.

The extant philosophical/phenomenological excursions fare much better. Their critical insight is to see that the melancholic is compromised with respect to his or her access to the objective mode of thingness and is thrown back on an exaggerated sense of commonality with other human beings and living things in general. Minkowski [1933/1995, 319], Tellenbach [1974], Maldiney [1976], Tatossian [1979/1997, 71] and Stanghellini [2004, 203] all appreciated this.

Scheler's Dionysian reduction model is a convenient way of accommodating all the particular insights of these psychopathologists *and* also provides the most plausible explanation yet of what is going on in the mind of the melancholic.

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Keywords

Melancholia; Depression; Max Scheler; Dionysian Reduction

Abstract

This article aims to illuminate the psychopathology of melancholia (depressive psychosis in Anglo-American parlance) by comparing it to a thought experiment conducted by the phenomenological philosopher Max Scheler (1874-1928), which he called the “Dionysian reduction”. The “Dionysian reduction” envisages a human being devoid of what in German is referred to as *Geist* – spirit and higher intellectual functions. Such a being would be tantamount to a non-human animal: reliant on instinct and with an overwhelming communal bond; devoid of a sense of objectivity and incapable of appreciating the essence of anything; and whose subjectivity is exquisitely that of the social milieu to which he or she belongs. The melancholic is he or she who has delusions of guilt – believing that they are responsible for anything that befalls their “tribe”; they are further prone to nihilistic delusions, the basis of which is a disappearance of the thingness of entities – e.g. “I have no bowels”; and a sense of subservience to other people – e.g. “I must submit to your will”.

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