

MAX SCHELER'S PRINCIPLE OF MORAL SOLIDARITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRO-LIFE MOVEMENT

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When he addressed us at the UFL conference two years ago, Richard John Neuhaus made the following statement: "The great question, it seems to me, in the abortion debate — I've argued this for years — is not "When does life begin?" When life begins is not a moral question. It is self-evident to all sane people on grounds of undeniable empirical scientific evidence. But the great question is who belongs to the community for which we accept common responsibility..."ⁱⁱ This caught my attention, for it was very challenging to me; I had always opened in abortion discussions with the personhood of the embryo, and here was Fr. Neuhaus saying that the real center of gravity in the debate lies elsewhere, it lies in a certain question of co-responsibility. In one point I disagreed with Fr. Neuhaus and still do disagree; in addition to the question when life begins in utero, which really is an empirical question, there is also the question when each human being as person begins to exist, which is not an empirical but a philosophical question. Nor is the answer to the question so obvious to all sane people as to render all discussion of it superfluous. Nor is it unimportant for our stance on abortion to be able to explain the personhood which the human embryo has from conception on. And yet I thought at the time, and I still think, that Fr. Neuhaus was right to object to a too exclusive preoccupation with the question of the status of the human embryo, and was right to warn against an

unbalanced individualism which can prevent many people from understanding our pro-life commitment to pre-born human beings.

In what follows I will take for granted the personhood of the human embryo, and will try to explain to my own satisfaction, and hopefully to yours as well, some of the truths at which Fr. Neuhaus was hinting. And I will try to do this with the help of the great German philosopher, Max Scheler (1874-1928). Some of you may know of Scheler as the philosopher who, in the earliest days of the phenomenological movement (at the beginning of this century), brought the methods of phenomenology for the first time into contact with Christian thought. Except for the tragic last years of his life, Scheler did all of his so seminal work in philosophy as a convinced Catholic Christian. Of particular interest to us is his extensive work in philosophical sociology, such as his great study, *On the Nature of Sympathy*, or the sections on community in his *Formalism in Ethics*. By the way, you may also know of Scheler as the phenomenologist who influenced so profoundly the young Karol Wojtyla, who says at the beginning of *The Acting Person* that he owes the ideas of his book not only to St. Thomas Aquinas, but also to phenomenology in the interpretation of Max Scheler.

In 1917 Scheler wrote a study entitled "The Cultural Reconstruction of Europe," in which we read, probably to our great surprise:

A cultural reconstruction is only possible if an increasingly large proportion of the European peoples learns to look upon this cataclysm [World War I] as resulting from *a common guilt* of European peoples mutually influencing each other.... First, therefore, must come the recognition that in the final analysis there is only *one* answer to the question, Who or what nation is responsible for this war? The answer is You, the asker of the question — by what you have done or left undone.ⁱⁱ

This way of extending the guilt and responsibility for a war strikes us at first as an exaggeration beyond all measure. But let us set aside for a moment the obvious objections which leap to mind, and let us let Scheler challenge a certain individualism that we all tend to hold. In the following we find him distinguishing between the guilt which concerns him in this essay and the guilt which will concern the politicians at the peace conference after the war: "I do not say that once and for all the politician or historian must refrain from asking where the *political*, historical guilt for the definite occurrence lies, guilt for the outbreak of August, 1914."ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, as we might say by way of rendering Scheler's thought more concrete, Serbia had a responsibility for the outbreak of the war that, for example, Belgium did not have; on this level of guilt, Serbia was guilty and Belgium was innocent. But on the deeper level of guilt of which Scheler speaks, we cannot localize the guilt so easily; the guilt is more diffused, and almost everyone has some share in it. Scheler proceeds to explain this deeper guilt as a guilt, not for starting the war, but for creating the moral milieu in which the war was possible at all:

What forms the object of common guilt is not that the War did take place, still less the how and when of its beginning, but that it *could* take place, that *such* an event was possible in this European quarter of the human globe, that it was an event of such a nature as we know it to be. The object of common guilt is its possibility, then, and its quality, not its actual occurrence and real beginning. As you must be aware, within the individual the object of any deeper guilt-feeling is likewise not 'that I did it' but that I *could* so behave, was *such* a person as could do it. Only this common act of insight into the *reciprocity* of the shared responsibilities of every belligerent nation and all its subdivisions down to the family and individual can produce the psychological atmosphere from which European culture can arise renewed.^{iv}

Scheler means that everyone who in the years before the war did any moral wrong, contributed to the formation of the interpersonal situation in Europe in which a world war was possible. The wrong that each committed did not stay with the wrongdoer but was able to spread throughout the European community, enhancing the possibility of a world war. Many of you will recognize this idea of Scheler as an idea that stands at the center of Dostoevsky's great work, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

In one place Scheler makes an attempt to understand more exactly that transmission of good and bad by which we become co-responsible for so many others.^v He tries to think through what is involved in me failing to show love to another to whom I should have shown love, and sees typified in this at least one mode of acquiring co-responsibility for others. He says that the other, whom I should have loved, would have been "called" to love me in return if I had loved him, since all love, by its inner logic as love, calls for some requital. My failure to love the other leaves him with one less reason for loving, for it deprives him of the call to requite my love. But in having one less reason for loving, the other grows that much less in the power to love, for the power to love grows by performing acts of love, as Aristotle recognized in his theory of moral virtue. When the other turns to all those who are his others, he turns to them with less power to love than he would have had if I had loved as I should have loved; in this way my failure takes its toll on all of his relations to others, thus making itself felt far beyond anything that I can track, just as the stone falling in the water sends its ripples across the lake and out of the sight of the one who dropped the stone. On the other hand, if I had loved as I should have loved, then I would have been co-

responsible for the growth in the power of another to love, and thus co-responsible for the greater love that he would have shown throughout his life in all of his relations with others.

It should be clear that Scheler's *Gemeinschaft* (common guilt) has nothing depersonalizing about it, and that it is in no way meant as a substitute for individual guilt and individual responsibility. Common guilt has its origin in individual persons who are co-responsible for their community, and it is nothing apart from such individual persons. We can say that Scheler, far from denying individual responsibility, extends the range of it, so that it includes not only responsibility for oneself but also co-responsibility for others. It is true that, according to the logic of Schelerian co-responsibility, I am not the only one who is responsible for myself but that others are co-responsible for me, and that, as a result, my responsibility for myself is somewhat modified. But for Scheler these others never prevent me from also being responsible for myself, nor from being in some way co-responsible for all of them.

It is remarkable how the thought of Scheler, which for him can be understood in a properly philosophical way, can be found in a recent papal teaching. In his 1984 Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, John Paul II says (para. 16):

To speak of *social sin* means in the first place to recognize that, by virtue of a human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual's sin in some way affects others. This is the other aspect of that solidarity which on the religious level is developed in the profound and magnificent mystery of the *Communion of Saints*, thanks to which it has been possible to say that "every soul that rises above itself, raises up the world." To this *law of ascent* there unfortunately corresponds the *law of descent*. Consequently, one can speak of a *communion of sin*, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the Church and, in some way, the whole world. In other words,

there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human body.

There are several consequences which follow from these ideas of Scheler for our pro-life commitment. The most important of them concerns our understanding of the wrongness of abortion. But before discussing that one, let us also consider this one. The responsibility for abortions is not limited to the women who have them or to the doctors who provide them or to the politicians and judges who legalize them. Scheler challenges even those actively committed to resisting abortion to consider that their own moral failings have contributed to the moral milieu in which easy abortion is taken for granted. If Scheler were still alive and we were to ask him about the guilt for the "culture of death" in which we live, we can be sure that he would answer, not only by accusing Justice Blackmun, or President Clinton, but also by saying, "You who ask the question — you are in a way guilty, too. You of the pro-life movement, beware of the idea that the crimes of abortion are taking place completely apart from you. It is not enough to establish the fact that you did not commit the crimes, and in fact did not even instigate them, and have even officially disapproved of them. If you lived more just lives, it would be that much less possible for such a 'culture of death' to have taken root. Even you are to some extent implicated in the immeasurable reciprocity of guilt for our culture of death."

I should add right away that Scheler would, I am certain, have been quick to reject the quietistic consequences that one sometimes tries to draw from his idea of co-responsibility. He would not say that it is hypocritical for us to condemn and to fight against the

providers of abortion. He would not try to level all moral differences between those who support and those who condemn abortion, just as he did not try to abolish, as we saw, the difference between the guilty and the innocent states involved in the First World War. He would not do this, because he never intended that his *Gemeinschaft* should substitute for the other levels of guilt where guilt is really more localisable. And yet it is true that those of us who fight abortion will be preserved from a certain pharisaism by remaining mindful that at the deepest level of guilt even we may have some co-responsibility for the culture of death.

But, as I say, this is not yet the most important implication of Scheler's social philosophy for our pro-life commitment. His thought on solidarity and co-responsibility also helps us to overcome a certain individualism that prevents many people from understanding the wrongness of abortion.

We have to realize that the reciprocity of moral influence which Scheler explores is for him not just a matter of empirical fact. Scheler does not think that we human beings could just as well have nothing to do with each other, exercising no influence on each other, and that it is only our factual social condition which occasions the vast mutual influence which we know from experience. No, he thinks that this mutual influence expresses something deeper in man, something metaphysical; the very essence of man as person is working itself out when persons influence each other beyond any possibility of keeping track of the influence. But to understand this we have to go to a more fundamental level of Scheler's thought and say a word about his understanding of the human person.

One finds in Scheler many deep insights into the individual person and the individual responsibility of individual persons; for all of his talk about *Gemein-*

schuld, he never dreams of letting the individual get lost in some all-encompassing collectivity. In another lecture from 1917, "Christian Love and the Twentieth Century," he says that the recognition of "the infinite worth of the *individual* soul" is "the *magna carta* of Europe." In the same place he "categorically denies that the individual person is a mere 'modus' of some generality — the State, say, or society, or 'world-reason' or an impersonal... historical process."^{vi}

Scheler affirms that each individual person has so strong a being-of-its-own that no possible whole could ever encompass him as a mere part of itself. The individual person is a whole of his own. This is why Scheler in this passage speaks of the individual person as a subject of rights. He says that

the separate individual... has an original sphere of action and natural right which is all his own, is independent of the State and its legislation; therein he enjoys the exercise of those 'natural rights' which are innate in the essence of personality....^{vii}

On the basis of his deep understanding for the individual person Scheler can make telling criticisms of certain forms of social life. Thus, for example, he objects as follows to the ideal of political community that we find in so many ancient Greek thinkers:

they were ignorant of the independent, Stateless, God-created, spiritual and immortal soul, superior in its inmost being to any possible State, possessing an inner world of religion and morality... Man they confined, to the very roots of his being, in the State, which meant in effect a restriction to things of this earth.^{viii}

With this personalism Scheler affirms something all-important for our pro-life philosophy; he affirms the basis of the "right to life" which we are always defending. But in this paper I want instead to draw your attention to something else in his understanding of the

human person. In the same essay he says that

it is inherent in the *eternal, ideal nature* of a rational person that all its existence and activity as a spirit is from the very beginning just as much a conscious co-responsible, communal reality as a self-conscious, self-responsible, individual reality. The being of a man is just as originally a matter of being, living and acting 'one with another' as it is a matter of existing for oneself.^{ix}

Just as the distinct selfhood of each person is essential to each person, and not a result of accidental circumstances of our present form of life, so also our existing towards others, our existing with them, our co-responsibility for them. This relation to the other also belongs to the very essence of our personhood; it serves to define our identity as persons.

In another place he expresses the same idea, stressing the co-responsibility which belongs to us as persons:

each individual is not responsible solely for his own character and conduct, responsible through his conscience before his Lord and creator, but each individual... is, in its capacity as "member" of communities, also responsible to God — as fundamentally as for self — for all that bears spiritually and morally upon the condition and the activity of its communities.^x

It is on this basis that Scheler rejects any and every social philosophy that sees the highpoint of social life in *Gesellschaft*, or society, which for Scheler means that form of living together in which all bonds with others, and all responsibilities for others, arise only through persons explicitly assuming responsibility for others. He rejects the idea that the individual person arbitrarily posits the social relations in which he lives, and that before he acts to posit them he simply stands next to other persons, lacking any bond with them. What he affirms, by contrast, is the idea that persons are bound

to each other, and are thus co-responsible for each other, as a result of their very being as persons and in advance of any conscious acting (of course, he does not deny that there is *also* such a thing as an obligation that is freely assumed). Perhaps we can even say that for Scheler individual persons are from the very beginning comprehended in a fundamental human community; they do not create it, but awaken to it; their social existence unfolds within this community, and finds in it a basic norm.

It is clear that Scheler's stress on the individual person, which we were just examining, has nothing to do with the individualism proper to *Gesellschaft*; on the contrary, his personalism is something altogether different as a result of being organically completed by his teaching on co-responsibility.

We are now in a position to understand better Scheler's thought on the so-called common guilt and common responsibility in which we all share. It is because we are by our very natures as persons established one with another in a fundamental human solidarity and so have to do with each other even before assuming any particular responsibility — it is because of this that we dwell in an interpersonal space in which "there is no moral gesture so trivial that does not radiate, like the splashing stone, an infinity of ripples — circles soon lost to the naked eye."^{xi} From the point of view of *Gesellschaft* the moral condition of each individual remains shut up in the individual until he turns to someone who consciously receives his act. But from the point of view of what Scheler calls "the principle of moral and religious reciprocity or *moral solidarity*,"^{xii} the moral substance of the individual person essentially tends to fill the already existing interpersonal space and so to affect for better or worse the spiritual atmosphere in which the others breath. In this way each individual

person becomes co-responsible for the moral state of more of his fellow human beings than he can possibly count. Thus it is the very essence of the human person, and not just changeable factual circumstances of our social life, which underlies the immeasurable co-responsibility in which we stand.

And now we are in a position to see what follows from Scheler's teaching for our understanding of the wrongness of abortion. As Fr. Neuhaus reminded us two years ago, it is not enough to appeal to the right to life of the unborn. Important as it is, indispensable as it is, to affirm that in every abortion a right is violated, this has to be completed by another affirmation. If our stance in this central moral question of our time is not to suffer a certain individualistic distortion, then we must also appeal to the moral solidarity of all men, to the fundamental responsibility for one another in which we are established. *Then it becomes evident that abortion is not only the violation of a right, but also the betrayal of a brother or a sister. It not only violates the rights of the aborted person, but also the fundamental solidarity in which we stand with him or her.*

Many of you know the article of Judith Thomson that appeared in a philosophy journal some years ago entitled, "A Defense of Abortion." It was very widely read and exercised no little influence. For the sake of her argument she assumed that the human embryo which is aborted is a person. She argued as follows. It is indeed very generous if a woman lets the child live which she has conceived, but the burdens of pregnancy are such that she usually has no obligation to keep it; in most cases the mother who keeps it is a Good Samaritan who goes beyond the call of duty. Abortion is justified from this point of view, not on the grounds that the embryo is not a *human* being, but rather on the grounds that it is not a *fellow* human being. Thomson

seems to think that such "fellowship" as we have with others exists only a result of our consciously creating it. Indeed, she writes, exactly in the spirit of Scheler's *Gesellschaft*, "Surely we do not have any such 'special responsibility' for a person unless we have assumed it, explicitly or implicitly."^{xiii} This point of view is challenged precisely by Scheler's principle of solidarity and of the co-responsibility for others in which we are established *even before we do anything in their regard*.

Perhaps we could even take a step beyond Scheler and say that there are also other levels of responsibility for others which lie beyond the level based on our common humanity. The child that the woman carries is not only a fellow human being to her, but is entrusted to her in a more particular way, being flesh of her flesh. If she aborts her child she betrays this maternal trust, in addition to violating a right. People like Judith Thomson will say that the relation of mother to child is at first a merely "biological" relation, and that only some "assumption" of responsibility by the mother lets an authentic interpersonal relation arise between them. This is exactly the point which we ought to contest. There are in reality all kinds of ways in which we are made responsible for one another "by nature," prior to all the responsibility that we freely contract. The mother-child relation is "by nature" a morally charged relation. It is a false body-soul dualism to declare the relation "merely biological"; from the beginning it involves body and soul, and is thus morally binds the mother to her child even before she assumes any responsibility towards the child. Once we have understood with Scheler the basic human solidarity in which we are established with all human beings, we can proceed to understand some of these more particular forms of solidarity in which we are established with certain others. In coming to understand better these

various levels of solidarity, we will overcome that individualism which is one main impediment to understanding the pro-life position.

CONCLUSION

We all know the magnificent final chorus of the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven. The text of Schiller and the music of Beethoven celebrate a fundamental solidarity of all men, which is a source of profound joy for them. Dostoevsky has explored this solidarity in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Now Max Scheler has explored it philosophically in his elaboration of "the principle of moral and religious solidarity," which has a central place in his philosophy of the human person. It has lost none of its timeliness since Scheler formulated it at the time of the First World War, and in fact it has much to say to us in the pro-life movement as we try to deepen and develop the philosophical basis of our commitment.

NOTES

i. Richard John Neuhaus, "The Divided Soul of Liberalism" in *Life and Learning: Proceedings of the Third University Faculty for Life Conference*, ed. Joseph W. Koterski, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: University Faculty for Life, 1993) 7.

ii. Max Scheler, "The Cultural Reconstruction of Europe" in *On the Eternal in Man*, tr. Noble (Hamden, Conn., 1972) 416-417. I do not think that the translator was well advised to translate *Gemeinschuld* as "collective guilt"; here and elsewhere I have amended his translation to read "common guilt."

iii. *Ibid.*

iv. Ibid.

v. See his *Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* (Bern, 1966) 523-26. He recapitulates this analysis in "Christian Love in the Twentieth Century," 377-78.

vi. Ibid. 384.

vii. Ibid.

viii. Ibid., 383. We need not concern ourselves with the question whether it is really possible to speak so generally of the "ancient Greek ideal of community," or whether one should restrict such characterizations to, say, the Aristotelian philosophy of the polis. What is important for us is that Scheler refuses to let the individual person be absorbed into the political community.

ix. Ibid., 373. I have amended the translation in several places.

x. Ibid., 376. The polarity which Scheler recognizes in the human person — existing in oneself and existing towards others — was also affirmed by Vatican II in *Gaudium et spes* 24: "...man, who is the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake, can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself."

xi. Ibid., 377.

xii. Ibid., 377 (lightly amended by me).

xiii. Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," originally in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1/1 (1971) 47-56; reprinted in *Ethics for Modern Life*, eds. Abelson and Friquegnon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987) 137.