The Spiritualization of Power: Scheler and Foucault

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Abstract

Max Scheler, in Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Value, and Michel Foucault, in Volumes 2 and 3 of his History of Sexuality, The Use of Pleasure and Care of the Self,[1] offer seemingly very different ethical projects, but ones that are nonetheless complementary in several significant ways. Both thinkers, inspired by Nietzsche, attempt to rethink the genesis of the moral "ought" without appeal to any rule of reason--whether it be in the form of an utilitarian calculus, a Kantian categorical imperative, or a social contract--conceived as external to and constraining of desire. Both Scheler and Foucault challenge Western philosophy's deep, long-standing distrust of eros (often cast in the feminine) and belief that it stands in need of control by logos (often cast in the masculine). Their methods are radically different, though: Scheler derives an emotive a priori from a phenomenological analysis of concrete acts of preferencing, while Foucault is explicitly anti-phenomenological, as he carries out specific historical, genealogical studies of ethical norms governing the sexuality of aristocratic males in Greek and Roman antiquity. In this paper, I will examine this theme in detail. My aim here is not to offer a Schelerian critique of Foucault, although one might be suggested. Rather, my thesis is that, although Foucault does not explicitly articulate what I am terming the "spititualization of power," his genealogical studies of ethical practices in antiquity, especially those governing the relationships between husbands and wives, nonetheless provide striking illustrations of its central features, as Scheler described. Foucault used his studies to demonstrate the moral problemization of pleasures in antiquity, which led to so many of the prohibitions in Western culture against pleasures with which we are so familiar. What I find interesting in his studies here, however, is how well they exemplify the qualitative transformation in power that Scheler described.

I. Introduction

Both Scheler, in his later *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge*, and

Foucault, in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, invite us, although Foucault more explicitly, to think the relationship between subjects and power differently than the manner in which we are accustomed to doing. Power is not to be thought as something that subjects, assumed as already constituted entities, possess or lack. Rather, they invite us to consider how we, as subjects, are constituted by historical relationships of power. For Scheler power is one of several drives *(Trieb)* beneath the "real factors" of personal and social life, which, in conjunction with various "ideal (or spiritual) factors," constitute individual and social subjects. In a similar vein, subjects, for Foucault, are proximities within ever-shifting matrices of power, or, alternatively, conduits of power.

The notion of "power" is more central to the work of no other thinker of the late twentieth century than perhaps to Foucault's, but a Schelerian perspective would find, I believe, several problems with Foucault's "analytics of power." First and most serious perhaps is the seemingly dichotomous way in which Foucault describes the relationship of power to desire. In the strategy Foucault terms "the deployment of alliance," power exercises itself by the placement of external limits upon desiring bodies, and in "the deployment of sexuality" power seeks to penetrate bodies, gain access to them, so as to acquire direct control of their desires. In either case, power manifests itself in Foucault's analytics always as alien to eros: power dictates to eros, either externally or from within.

"Power," Foucault proclaims, "is essentially what dictates its law to sex [desire, *eros*], which means first of all that [desire] is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden. Secondly, *power prescribes an 'order' for [desire] that operates at the same time as a form of intelligibility* ..." (emphasis added). Power lays down "a rule of law" to desire, always in the form of prohibitions: "Where sex and pleasure are concerned, power can 'do' nothing but say no to them."

Power thus displays decidedly ideal or spiritual qualities, dictating to desire its order and intelligibility. For Scheler, by contrast, power is but one of at least three primary drives within the impulse of life

(Lebensdrang), underlying the various real factors of cultural history, and its relationship to eros is no dualism: *eros* is the spiritualizing order already functioning within *Lebensdrang* generally and within the specific drives particularly. Eros contains its own ordering principle, viz., the "order of love" *(ordo amoris)*, the "reason of the heart" (Pasacal), and hence requires the imposition of no external order from mind's reason, or logos, as all rationalisms assume, or from power, as Foucault describes.

Second, Foucault suggests qualitative distinctions and rans formations in types of power as he moves from Volume 1 of his *History of Sexuality* to Volumes 2 and 3, but he does not thematize or delineate the features of this shift as does Scheler. In Volume 1 Foucault describes power as constituting subjects. In Volumes 2 and 3, however, Foucault turns his attention to how subjects, initially products of power matrices, come into possession of, lay claim to, and *care* for themselves: power becomes the capacity for self-creation, although Foucault offers no theory to explain how such a transition--i.e., how freedom--is possible. By investing power already with the spiritualizing power of love, Scheler, by contrast, makes such qualitative distinctions in types of power more explicit than does Foucault. I have suggested elsewhere1 that, following Scheler, we might think the drives he delineates--viz., the procreative, nutritive, and power drives--in relation to the order of values that Scheler describes and their corresponding ethos: power thus manifests itself qualitatively differently relative to values of pleasure and utility from the way it does relative to values of spirit and the Holy, as do the procreative and nutritive drives. These qualitative changes that power undergoes as it manifest itself relative to higher orders of value, in accord with what Scheler terms the *ordo amoris*, is what I term the "spiritualization of power.". Similarly, one might also speak of the "spiritualization" of the procreative and nutritive drives, although such is not our interest here.

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of power," his genealogical studies of ethical practices in antiquity, especially those governing the relationships between husbands and wives, nonetheless provide striking illustrations of its central features, as Scheler described. Foucault used his studies to demonstrate the moral problemization of pleasures in antiquity, which led to so many of the prohibitions in Western culture against pleasures with which we are so familiar. What I find interesting in his studies here, however, is how well they exemplify the qualitative transformation in power that Scheler described.

II. Features of the Spiritualization of Power

Let me offer three primary features of the spiritualization of power, stemming from Scheler's analyses. First, as power manifests increasing amplitudes of spirit, that is, as it expresses itself relative to higher spheres of value, it becomes decreasingly identified with force, so that within what Scheler describes as the value-sphere of the Holy, the realm of Absolute Spirit, power appears as the radical absence of force. The power necessary to rule over a mob, or what Scheler terms the "herd," is that of sheer brute force: moral suasion is impotent. By contrast the power of Jesus and Buddha, for example, is marked by its radical absence of force, and the power binding together what Scheler terms a "community of love" *(Liebesgemeinschaft)* is radically non-coercive. (Let us note here that in his early analyses of power, Foucault often identified power with force.) Second, in its spiritualization power manifests itself decreasingly as power over the other, diminishing the other's autonomy, and increasingly as empowerment and valorization of the other, i.e., the power of agape, and hence the value of the other is decreasingly that of pleasure and utility and increasingly of inherent, irreducible personal worth. Third, power is decreasingly tied to an atomistic and controlling "ego" and becomes increasingly ego-less. Such qualitative differences in power are illustrated by Scheler's distinction between leaders and exemplars: leaders egoistically seek followers, whose obedience they can control; exemplars call attention not to themselves but to those values to which others might aspire, thereby empowering others to achieve

their own excellences as autonomous persons.

In *The Use of Pleasure* Foucault concerns himself with how marital relations among aristocratic Greeks became ethically problematic: "How, in what form, and why," he asks, Were sexual relations between husband and wife "problematical" in Greek thought? What reason was there to be worried about them? And above all, what reason was there to question the husband's behavior, to reflect on the moderation it necessitated, and--in a society so strongly marked by the rule of "free men"--to make it a theme of moral preoccupation? It looks as if [traditionally] there were none, or in any case very little. At the end of the legal argument *Against Neaera*, attributed to Demosthenes, the author delivers a sort of aphorism that has remained famous: "Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our household."

Why should such a formula become problematic to the privileged, free Greek males of antiquity who benefited from it? Why would the uncontested authority of the husband over the wife come to question itself? Why should the power manifest in him exercise its own moderation and constraint? It is difficult to see why the problematization of sexual relations between spouses would take forms or become attached to other questions, given the status of married couples in Athens and the obligation to which both husband and wife were held. The definition of what was allowed, forbidden, and prescribed for spouses by the institution of marriage in matters of sexual practice was simple enough, so that additional moral regulation did not appear necessary. As far as women were concerned, in fact they were bound by their juridical and social status as wives; all their sexual activity had to be within the conjugal relationship and their husband had to be their exclusive partner. They were under his power; it was to him that they had to give their children, who would be citizens and heirs.

In short, the morality governing the sexual behavior of wives was found in "the rules that were laid down for them" by men. In

traditional Greek marriage, there was no such thing as "mutual fidelity": "while the wife belonged to the husband, the husband," by contrast, "belonged only to himself." True, he was bound to respect another free man's wife or a girl under parental control, but only "because she was under some else's [viz., another man's] authority." Thus, the seduction of another man's wife was punished more severely than her rape: "The rapist violated only the woman's body, while the seducer violated the husband's authority" and, in the words of Lysias, seducers "corrupted their victims' souls."

All things considered, the married man was prohibited only from contracting another marriage; no sexual relation was forbidden him as a consequence of the marriage obligation he had entered into; he could have an intimate affair, he could frequent prostitutes, he could be the lover of a boy--to say nothing of the men or women slaves he had in his household at his disposal. A man's marriage did not restrict him sexually. So, then, "why did moral reflection [on the part of aristocratic Greek males] concern itself with the sexual behavior of married men?" Why would such traditionally unrestrained power limit itself?

Two reasons can be delineated from Foucault's genealogy, illustrating the "spiritualization of power" described above. First, central to the ideal governing aristocratic Greek virtue was the art of rulership, or governance of the *polis*. A man's ability to lead in the *polis*, though, required that he not be distracted by private affairs: his *oikos*, or household, must be in order, and for this purpose his wife was essential: "the wife, as mistress of the house, is a key figure in the management of the *oikos* [*oikonomia*], and she is essential for its good government." Xenophon's Socrates asks Critobulus, "Is there anyone to whom you entrust more serious matters than to your wife? .... I hold that a woman who is a good partner in the household is a proper counterweight to the man in attaining good." Indeed, the chief quality that made a woman desirable as a wife was aptitude for *oikonomia*, or household management. Foucault quotes Ischomachus: "Tell me, woman, have you thought yet why it was that I took you and your parents gave you to me? .... I considered

for myself, and your parents for you, whom we might take as the best partner for [the sake of] the household and children." The wife's ability to manage the *oikos* effectively, however, was dependent upon her moral authority. What was the basis for that authority? What set her apart from the servants, who could be called, commanded, and dismissed at the whim of the husband? It was the wife's autonomy, in matters sexual and otherwise. The wife's privileged status, which provided her the moral authority to rule the *oikos* effectively, resided largely in her capacity to give herself freely to her husband: the wife, according to Xenophon, "will always enjoy an advantage over the [servants] from the fact that she seeks willingly to please instead of being obliged to submit under compulsion like a slave girl." In making this point Xenophon invoked a general principle that he applied elsewhere: "the pleasure that one takes by force is much less agreeable than that which is freely offered."

A second factor contributing to the problematization of the sexual behavior of aristocratic Greek males stemmed from a long-standing dictum, expressed in *The Republic*, that the effective moral authority to rule others was rooted in one's capacity to rule one's own desires. The tyrant's soul is tyrannized by desires, and he, in turn, rules ineffectively by brute force alone. The effective ruler, by contrast, commanded the obedience of others, not by force but by virtue of his ability to rule his own desires: "the exercise of political power required, as its own principle of internal regulation," Foucault notes, "power over oneself.... The most kingly man was a king of himself." Thus, the husband's self-imposed moderation in matters sexual served to enhance his power to rule in at least a two-fold way. First, it served generally to authorize him to rule others, especially his wife, by demonstrating his capacity for self-governance, but, second, it solidified the wife's authority to rule the household, and hence the husband's effectiveness in the *polis*, by further securing the wife's privileged place in the *oikos* by identifying her as the one for whom the husband exercises such sexual restraint.

Thus, marriage that began in "original dissymmetry" moved increasingly toward a "necessary [but never complete] equalization."

Power, as it was manifest in the husband, underwent, according to its own inner logic--and not in conformity to some externally imposed morality--qualitative transformations. An essential "link between moderation and power" was thus established, and such self-imposed moderation transformed the very nature and meaning of power: power became decreasingly a matter of tyrannical force but increasingly flowed from the exemplarity of the husband's self-rule, and it was manifest decreasingly as the husband's *power over* his wife to his *empowerment of* her to rule in her own right over the *oikos*, moving the marital relationship to one of increasing equality, symmetry, and reciprocity. Furthermore, through this process, the husband's power became decreasingly concerned with establishing his own egoistic rulership but increasingly became subordinated to a common purpose, namely, the well-being of the household.

Foucault observes a similar transformation in the power dynamics between husband and wife in the later phases of imperial Rome, but occurring by a different manner. As in Greece, notions of aristocratic virtue generally and ideals of marriage in particular were steered by a notion of rulership and expectations regarding one's public duties, corresponding to one's social status. As central hierarchical authority weakened in the Empire, however, there emerged spaces wherein power-centers multiplied and citizens rethought their social status, who they were, and their moral responsibilities in terms of a "care of the self." Contrary to conventional histories of this era, Foucault maintains that this intensified concern for the care of oneself did not mark a withdrawal from public life and civic responsibility but rather their rethinking and recasting. The Roman (Stoic) "care of the self," moreover, far from weakening social relations, paradoxically intensified them, but they were rethought, not in terms of assumed duties and inherited responsibilities, but in terms of the kinds of relations one might freely form in a genuine, thoughtful effort to care for oneself: not what sorts of relations is one obligated by social status to maintain, but what sorts of relations generally and what sort of marriage relations in particular does one desire to cultivate if one truly cares for oneself?

As a result of this shift, moderation, or self-mastery, was seen not so much as authorizing one to rule, as in the ancient Greek ethic described above, but as necessary to teach one how to rule, and, more significantly, the traditional thinking of relations in terms of a model of rulership weakened. Traditional hierarchical relations of power generally were problematized, and marriage in particular came to be thought less in terms of its subordination to civic and familial duties and responsibilities and more in terms of its aesthetics as an interpersonal relationship demanding increasing reciprocity, symmetry, and equality: restraint in matters sexual is what one comes to want in a marital relationship as one thinks ever-more deeply about what it means to care for oneself and to construct one's life as an aesthetic achievement. The virtue of moderation was thereby tied less to an ideal of rulership and increasingly seen as necessary for the sorts of reciprocal relationships one desired. The ethic then that came to restrict sexual relations to one's spouse in the later Roman period, prior to the triumph of Christianity, and which continues to govern much of married life in the West today, thus emerged out of one's own desire to intensify the relationship with one's spouse and thereby to care for oneself.

III. Conclusions

I have suggested that, while Foucault offered his genealogies of ethics pertaining to spousal relations in Greek and Roman antiquity for the purpose of showing how pleasure became problematical in that era. These studies also and more interestingly, I believe, illustrate what I have called the spiritualization of power: following its own inner logic, the logic of the heart, or *ordo amoris*, power qualitatively transforms itself. First, power decreasingly identifies itself with force and increasingly with the absence of force. Second, power is decreasingly manifest as power over the other, inhibiting the other's autonomy, and increasingly as empowerment and valorization of the other and enhancement of his/her own sense of autonomy. And third, power decreasingly centers itself in the controlling ego but increasingly manifests itself in reciprocal bonds of solidarity. So it was that in antiquity, power, as manifest

in free Greek and Roman aristocratic husbands, transformed itself with respect to marriage relations. Power became decreasingly interested in maintaining hierarchical structures of domination over the wife but moved, for varying reasons, to manifest itself in relationships of increasing symmetry, reciprocity, and equality, wherein the autonomy and personal value of Greek and Roman wives grew. Despite significant differences between Scheler and Foucault regarding the nature of power, I find the latter's detailed genealogical accounts in this regard, whatever their historical accuracy, illustrative of what Scheler describes as a qualitative transformation of power in accord with a non-formal *(material) a priori* within it. Within the settings of these genealogies husbands were led by a logic within power itself, and not by any externally imposed rule of some presumably autonomous reason, to view their wives decreasingly in their instrumental functions and increasingly in terms of their own dignity and worth as persons. Foucault thus illustrates how, as Scheler contended, power is not blind, and hence in need of some externally imposed order of reason to constrain it, but contains within itself its own inner logic and transformative principle, what Scheler termed, following Pascal, the *ordo amoris*.

Endnotes

1. All quotations in this paper are from these two books:
   a. Foucault M.(1988) *History of Sexuality*, Vintage, 3 Vols.
   b. Scheler M. (1973) *Formalism in Ethics and the Non- Formal Ethics of Values*.Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
2. Ethos. "Its Relationship to Real and Ideal Sociological Factors in Max Scheler's Philosophy of Culture," *Listening* 21 (Fall 1986): 243-53.