Scheler and Charles Taylor on Self-Knowledge: Dispatches from "the Swarm"[1]

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Self-knowledge is not easy. That is the assumption behind the Ancient Hellenic injunction to "know thyself" and of Socrates' famous maxim that "the unexamined life is not worth living." That self-knowledge requires effort is thus one of the long-standing truths—even though not for that reason uncontested—in the Western philosophical tradition. However, what precisely are the obstacles to self-knowledge and how to get around them varies widely among philosophers and critics within such a tradition.

Here I would like to explore Max Scheler and Charles Taylor's respective considerations on this matter. As we will see, their respective diagnoses of *what* impairs self-knowledge, as well as their respective conceptions of the *self* that such knowledge is supposed to disclose, overlap significantly. Still, their prescriptions regarding *how* to deal with what threatens self-knowledge, so that we can successfully pursue and attain it, are noticeably different, and ultimately revolve around what is known as "personalist ethics" in the case of Scheler, and "ethics of authenticity," in Taylor's case.

As I will try to argue, such a difference in *how* to attain knowledge of the self rests largely on two things. First, it is related to the contrasting socio-political conditions that, for each thinker, surround the endangered self-knowledge in contemporary society—namely, herd-mentality in Scheler, and individualism in Taylor. Second, it is related as well to their divergent conception of the role that language can and should play in self-knowledge.

Once having explored their similarities and differences, regarding both what prevents self-knowledge and how to pursue it, I will ask which perspective can better inform self-knowledge today—more specifically, in view of what Byung-Chul Han has called "the swarm." As I will try to argue, in such a context, self-knowledge would very much benefit from virtues and strategies that are more akin to a Schelerian perspective.

The "idols of self-knowledge" and the "primacy of instrumental reason"

According to Scheler, one of the most important and widespread epistemological mistakes that we as human beings are prone to is a certain kind of reductionism that translates our inner life in terms of external perception, that is, according to the latter's three-dimensional form of time and space. Such a common mistake (think of how we say, at the end of a busy day, "I'm running

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out of battery") turns psychic facts (*psychischen Tatsachen*) into "mere symbols for physical objects and their spatiotemporal order." For Scheler, however, "the world of consciousness. . . is a completely different world than the world of external perception" (*SPE*, 69; *GW* III, 269) and therefore the "illusion" of conceiving the psychic in terms of the physical silently erases "the person," that is, the only category capable of maintaining the complexity, ineffability, and uniqueness of human beings.[2]

Such a reductionist stance is also afforded by the positive sciences and their exclusive focus on that which "can be moved directly or indirectly, and which is thus a manageable, controllable, and transformable thing in nature" (*CW*, 51; *GW* VIII, 241). For the positive sciences, Scheler says, cognition is possible only when we can "declare a plan according to which the event can be *mastered* or can be *thought* to be mastered" in a certain place and time (*CW*, 51; *GW* VIII, 241). Today, we see such reductionism alive, for instance, in many versions of neuroscience. To be sure, neuroscience has many valuable uses, but the problem, following Scheler, is that it tends to "reduce all knowledge to practical knowledge." It does that, for instance, by translating all our psychic contents in terms of our most elementary drives toward the useful and the harmful, or by overlooking all the qualitative differences between those emotions that have the same kind of effect on the body or that result in the same actions (*SPE*, 76, 79; *GW* III, 274-77).

For Scheler, this positivistic approach to our mental life is a form of idolatry: it transforms human beings into objects—"idols," he says—that can be clearly investigated, delineated, and manipulated. Our fascination with these "idols of self-knowledge" easily displaces other kinds of knowledge—knowledge of the divine and redemptive knowledge, or even just "culturally edifying" knowledge (*Bildungswissens*) (*CW*, 21; *GW* VIII, 211)—and has the "remarkable consequence," Scheler says, "that, the richer our experience becomes, the less does perception agree with the existent facts and the more it comes to stand on the same footing as the illusions of a sick person" (*SPE*, 48; *GW* III, 251).

These ideas were articulated by Scheler in the first two decades of the 20th century. Half a century afterward, Charles Taylor expressed similar worries, showing that in the 1970s (and, of course, up to the present day), the concerns around the "imperialistic" reach of positivistic science—the latter's tendency to colonize all other areas of knowledge and cognition—are alive and well. One of the major contentions in Taylor's work is that the "human sciences" are at root different from "natural sciences."[3] The latter, he says, are built from the perspective of an "empiricist epistemology" and its corresponding criteria of verification, according to which things can be measured and predicted, proved true or false. That is perfectly fine, he thinks, as such a stance corresponds to the nature of the empirical, non-human, world. However, those criteria should not be applied to the understanding of human affairs.

For Taylor, while the natural sciences aim at *explanation*, the human sciences aim at *interpretation*. This means that their object of knowledge is not merely "facts," viewed from the outside, but practices *with* meaning *for* someone.[4] Thus, knowledge in the human sciences is

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[2] For more on Scheler's "ethical personalism," see Peter H. Spader, *Scheler's Ethical Personalism: It's Logic, Development, and Promise* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

[3] Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", *The Review of Metaphysics* 25, no. 1 (1971): 3-51.

[4] Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", 13-14.

always situated knowledge, prone to clarification instead of verification and prediction. Just like Scheler argues that the distinction between "true" and "false" does not exhaust all possible assessment regarding cognition (*CW*, 12; *GW* VIII, 201), Taylor argues that we should refrain from artificially importing those criteria for the human world and, instead, see that "the object of a science of interpretation must be describable in terms of sense and nonsense, coherence and its absence."[5]

Why is empiricist epistemology so powerful, in the face of the richness of human affairs (and of the repeated criticism of thinkers such as Scheler and Taylor)? According to Taylor, the force of empiricist epistemology has to do in part, with the "great credibility" that the progress of natural science and technology has lent to it.[6] The undeniable success of natural sciences and technology has created epistemological biases that make it very tempting to model the human sciences according to "instrumental reason": the "prestige and aura" that surround natural sciences and technology make us "believe that we should seek technological solutions" in every domain of human life.[7]

A preeminent example of this, according to Taylor, happens in the realm of social and political science. Empiricist social and political science, he says, focuses not on human action but on human *behavior*: opinions and beliefs are placed "in quotes," translated into scientific discourse by being "redefined as the respondent's [. . .] answer to the questionnaire."[8] That turns agency into "brute data," which, instead of meaning, is identified either by their concrete results (i.e., conduct or behavior) or by their causes (understood as "interests" or "preferences").

Notice the similarity to Scheler's objections regarding how positivism flattens or narrows the human world because it fails to capture the psychic and spiritual dimensions of experience. The alternative to such a perspective, Scheler says, is to understand knowledge in its "fullest sense," as an "ontological relation," in which we, as knowers, undergo a transformation; as he puts it, "knowledge serves a *becoming*." It is a "relation of participation," where "the 'known' becomes 'part' of who 'knows'" (*CW*, 14-15; *GW* VIII, 204-05).[9]

Now, according to Taylor, the problem with such a reductionist view is not only that it distorts human reality but also that it goes hand in hand with certain social and political positions, certain "fundamental options in life."[10] As he says, "the practical and the theoretical are inextricably linked."[11] Here, I think, we begin to appreciate an important difference between Taylor and Scheler. Not, to be sure, because Scheler, unlike Taylor, thought that the practical was cut apart from the theoretical—far from that. Rather, because, as I will try to argue, the social and political dangers that each of them associated with the positivistic approach to the "human sciences" and the "inner life" are diametrically opposed.

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[5] Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", 4.
[6] Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 9.
[7] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 6.
[8] Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 21.
[9] See also Annika Hand, *Ethik der Liebe und Authentizität* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2016), who studies the notion of love and its role in the constitution of ourselves as persons (Scheler) and in the articulation of our identity (Taylor). Insofar as, for Scheler, knowledge (and, thus, self-knowledge)—as a form of participation and movement—is a form of love, Hand's project has some relation to what I try to do here.
[10] Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 47.
[11] Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 47.

For Taylor, the "primacy of instrumental reason," and the positivistic approach to human affairs that goes with it, is mainly associated with the malaise of contemporary individualism and its emphasis in freedom understood solely as freedom of choice. Both—instrumental reason and individualism—reinforce each other as they are parallel roads through which the imperative goal of increasing personal utility can be achieved.[12]

The egoistic individualism that, according to Taylor, prevails among younger generations in the last decades of the 20th century is extremely troubling. Philosophically, such narcissism is characterized by a subjectivist stance that, in the name of individual freedom of choice, destroys all horizons of significance—even those that are necessary for it to make sense as a normative position—and thus it is theoretically untenable.[13] Sociologically, it dissolves communal values and social solidarity because, in its egoism, individualism refuses to acknowledge the demands of others, translates into careerism, entails the loss of shared meanings, and unleashes socially corrosive tendencies.[14]

On the contrary, about six decades earlier, For Scheler, the socio-political phenomena mainly associated with the positivism that he condemned were mass behavior, emotional contagion, and emotional identification. The "emotional blindness" that worries him the most does not regard being selfish, by either attributing my interests and preferences to others or disregarding the interests of others completely. Rather, it is the opposite phenomenon that concerns him, namely, "taking the others' [feelings and interests] for one's own. We live 'first and foremost' in the modes of feeling typical of our environment, our parents, family, and teachers, before we gain awareness of our own modes of feeling which perhaps diverge from theirs" (*SPE*, 65; *GW* III, 265).[15]

We find his fullest treatment of these phenomena in his book *The Nature of Sympathy*. There he explains that, unlike "true sympathy"—which allows people either to share some feeling that they independently have or to perceive the feelings of others without necessarily partaking on them—emotional infection (*Einfühlung*) and emotional identification (*Einsfühlung*) entail an involuntary and unconscious transference of emotional states, such that we witness in "a state of complete and total infection of the very roots of individuality" (*NS*, 19; *GW* VII, 30). As can be appreciated, then, in Scheler, the social bond is far more seriously threatened by mass society with its falsifying identification with others than by any narcissistic or egoistic tendencies. Such phenomena are worrying because they hinder not only a truer relation with others, but also our capacity for self-knowledge.

Given these two contrasting diagnoses regarding the threats that true self-knowledge faces in their respective contexts, it is only natural for the redemptive strategies they respectively envisaged to be different as well. In the next section, we will see how Taylor's "authenticity" and Scheler's "personalism" mark two different, but in many ways comparable, approaches both to the moral world that surrounds us as human beings, as well as to the proper relation with this world that we are supposed to cultivate in self-knowledge.

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[12] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 2-4.
[13] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 36-39.
[14] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 8-12.
[15] Italics in the original.