That, of course, is perfectly within Peperzak’s rights, and at times one wishes he had exerted such independence more often. But most of the time one is simply grateful for such a graceful exposition of the Levinasian Said in which the Saying of that distinctive voice can be heard too distinctly.

Fordham University

Merold Westphal


Blosser opens Scheler’s Critique of Kant’s Ethics by describing Scheler’s historical background in a manner that displays Blosser’s impressive acquaintance with the history of philosophy and both its contemporary continental and analytic currents. Chapter two contrasts Scheler with Kant on the meaning of the a priori.

In chapter three, Blosser discusses how Scheler’s a priori ranking of material values constitutes a critique of Kantian formalism, although Blosser suggests, following Hans Reiner, that Kant may have espoused one “value”: the objective end of rational agency (61, 63, 70–71). Reiner’s point is on target since one can detect strong resemblances when Scheler insists upon the independence of values irreducible to our feelings of them or conations toward them and when Kant, in his treatment of the good will and the second formulation of the categorical imperative, gives phenomenological descriptions of persons. Persons, according to Kant, impose limits on any arbitrary usage and possess a worth not conferred on them because we desire them with our subjective inclinations, as would be the case with things.

In the same chapter, Blosser considers Heidegger’s objections about the unclarified ontological status of Scheler’s values and develops a series of defenses. One powerful defense Blosser never offers, though, is that Scheler’s value-theory functions as a kind of first philosophy prior to ontology in much the way that ethics takes precedence over ontology for Emmanuel Levinas. Schelerian values, like Levinasian alterity, precede and elicit the activity of theorizing, whether of fundamental ontology or value-theory.

In chapter four, Blosser contrasts Kant’s theory of moral feeling with Scheler’s more diversified understanding that grants affectivity a more expansive role as a source of moral insight and action. Thus, Kant, in Blosser’s view, “puts no moral stock in affective nature as the source of moral action” (118) and according to Scheler, “denies the affective faculties their proper role in the discernment of the moral good” (99). The historical reasons for
Kant’s underestimation of affectivity can be traced both to his acquiescence in a metaphysical tradition based on “bifurcations of reason/sensibility, will/inclination, form/matter, and noumenon/phenomenon” (171) and to his effort to fence off a preserve protected against the prevailing mechanistic explanations of his day (including the empiricist account of will that Kant never fully escaped). However, in sympathy with Kant, Blosser grants that these polarizations contradict some of Kant’s own phenomenological insights, that is, that “Kant’s metaphysics subverts his phenomenology” (74, 113). Moreover, Blosser admits that some of Scheler’s statements, for example, that “good willing occurs against all ‘inclination,’ ” are not based on the “objective sense” of Kant’s propositions, but on the “pathos” of his description (169).

But Blosser himself sometimes errs in this same direction when, for instance, he wonders “Do we have no means at all of distinguishing morally good inclinations, for example, from morally bad ones?” – as if for Kant all inclinations were morally bad (173). Similarly, Blosser reads Kant’s quite duallyistically when he claims that for Kant morality “can be determined thus only by bracketing and setting aside, and in that sense disregarding, the question of any specific material ends (or objects) of the faculty of desire” (72). Kant would be better understood to be adopting as the crucial focus of his consideration the action aimed at fulfilling specific material ends and desires, which thus are in no way to be excluded or disregarded. Rather, agents momentarily distance themselves reflectively from the immediacy of pressing ends and desires to inquire whether the actions directed to such ends and desires are justifiable, or, in Kant’s terms, universalizable. In Kant’s practical examples, he usually does not assume from the start that the pursuit of such ends and desires is not universalizable. Furthermore, Thomas McCarthy, in defending Jürgen Habermas’s Kantian-inspired discourse ethics, captures something of Kant’s own meaning when he observes that if an interest is found to be unsuitable for universalizability, this “unsuitability does not attach to it qua interest, from the outset, but only qua non-generalizable.”

On this interpretation of Kant, which entails no antipathetic relationship between reason and affect, it is quite possible that, as Blosser contends, “our primordial comportment toward the world is affective” (28–29) and that affectivity, far from being nothing more than an emotional chaos waiting for reason to impose an order, can serve as an alternative ordering principle in moral experience (107). Moreover, affect can instruct reason, leading the way, reversing previously rationally based convictions, or inspiring actions that reason subsequently comes to recognize as morally praiseworthy.

However, Scheler’s rediscovery of the importance, force, and orderliness of affectivity, often neglected by rationalist philosophies, appears so novel