



A Phenomenological Encounter with World Sufferings



Dr. Sunny Joseph

Assistant Professor of English

St George's College Aruvithura

Abstract

Suffering has been driven so deep into the human soul that modern humanity seems everywhere on verge screaming or into violence in ways that are now common place. While boasting on success of science and technology, we must spare enough time for “suffering management” with an ample urgent, for hardly anyone seemed surprised when a California high school student gunned several small children because she was “bored” by Mondays. If we continue one-sided pursuit of the technique, it will prove disastrous to the world. Lord Buddha, after long-long days of pondering and meditation, centuries ago, exclaimed that suffering is an inseparable part of this human life. Desire is the cause of suffering and annihilation of desire is the only way to get rid of this human suffering. It is my purpose here to organize the scattered suggestions of Max Scheler’s thinking on phenomenology, which can be found only in a few passages throughout his writings, into a coherent outline of phenomenology as psychic technique of non-resistance to nullify or to minimize the world sufferings, which is quite a lot contrasting with the more familiar one presented by Husserl and Heidegger.

Keywords : desire, world, suffering, violence, human life

Research Paper

Phenomenology, for Scheler, was an “attitude” based in a “psychic technique of non-resistance”, a special act of spirit that blocks the normal flow of life to reveal its growing, striving, becoming tendencies, on the one side, and the givenness of the world as resistance, on the other — a technique which Scheler saw already in Eastern Buddhism, a major source for his thinking. Phenomenology for Scheler was not a method, as it was for Husserl, but an “attitude of spiritual seeing”, because “A method is a goal-directed procedure of *thinking about* facts, for example, induction or deduction. In phenomenology, however, it is a matter, first, of new laws themselves, before they have been fixed by logic, and second, of a procedure of *seeing*.” (Scheler, *schriften aus dem nachlassvol.1*). Phenomenology then is not a simple series of steps one follows, in the tradition of Descartes, to arrive at a state of apodictic certainty, but a special manner of viewing the world, and “attitude” thus designates this non-goal-directed manner of viewing.

According to Max Scheler, where there is no tension, no strife, between drives and world no world resistance to the becoming of life-urge and no vital resistance to the impingements of the world — there is no reality given to life, neither of the world nor of itself. We might imagine a world like the one envisioned in the German fairy tale “The Land of Cockaigne”, portrayed by the sixteenth century Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder, where every human desire - be it appetitive, sexual, or power based - is immediately fulfilled : such a world must be an imaginary world, an unreal world, precisely because it is a world where there is no strife, no resistance of vital drives. The world itself, as a thing in-itself, might, of course, continue to exist without such strife, but neither we nor any other vital-spiritual act center, including God, would ever have any way of knowing. Hence, Scheler is in full agreement with Heraclitus’s contention that “Strife fathers all things”.

Scheler holds the view that resistance against the single drive— and life-center, produces the unity of real sphere before all individual realities, in so far as they are indebted to such being functions and qualities of sensation in a secondary way ... A “world hood” as phenomenon (not as “idea”) is, I am sorry to say, absolutely unknown to me. The “referential totality of significance” (Heidegger 210) seems to me a very vague and ill-defined concept. There simply is no proof that the drive impulse is a “modification” of a non-cognitional mode of compartment, which Heidegger calls “care”, and that resistance presupposes Being as that about which we care (or the being of our fellow-man as the one for whom we have solicitude) (Scheler, *spate schriften* 263). Indeed, Heidegger is not able to account for the very

“thrownness”, the very Da-ness, of Dasein without a unitary vital act-center, which both *resists* and is *resisted* by the world.

Except for rare moments, vital-urge, in its striving toward increasing actualization of spirit against the resistance of the world, suffers from a lack of fulfillment. That is, suffering is co-given with reality in vital-urge's encounter with world-resistance: suffering is the subjective correlate of reality in experiences of resistance (Scheler, *schriften* 14). Thus the task of all thinking - religious, philosophical, scientific, etc. - is, Scheler contends, the elimination of this suffering and this means to make the world less real. (Scheler, *schriften* 36). There are basically two techniques for the elimination of suffering, two major traditions in world history, which Scheler summarizes in this way : “the Western idea of heroism places the means of eliminating suffering in the *external*, technical activity directed toward material nature and toward the organization of the community- the Indian-Buddhist idea of heroism places it in an *internal* activity, or better: it places the means of eliminating suffering in an activity within the soul and the organism, directed towards the drives”(Scheler, *schriften* 57). Suffering is an inseparable part of this human life. It can be faced either by resistance or by non-resistance. Facing the world sufferings by psychic technique of resistance may be described as the first technique which is found in the Western heroic attitude; it is a combative stance towards the world. One seeks to eliminate suffering by *overcoming* world-resistance and bolstering one's resistance to the world. The world is seen as something to conquer. This can be done in two ways, either through physical force or mentally through rationality. Examples of the physical overcoming of the suffering of resistance include: the Western (Greek) hero who seeks to overcome his enemies; modern notions of “success”and “accomplishment”; the advocacy legal system, which seeks justice through retribution and punishment rather than forgiveness; medical science's use of drugs and surgical procedures to cure disease and illness; the spread of modern technology generally; the attempt to solve social ills through legislative and institutional reforms; and the tendency in modern universities to use ideas as weapons, to construct “knock down”arguments, in order to defeat one's opponents and thereby promote one's own professional success and enhance one's own ego. Mentally the technique of overcoming resistance is expressed in rationalism, that is, the attempt to predetermine intellectually the kinds of realities that there can possibly be. For example, empiricism, which is the primary method of modern science, far from being the opposite of rationalism, as it is commonly supposed, is a prime instance of it, for it predetermines intellectually and arbitrarily that only sense impressions count as “real”. The rationalism of modern science seeks to conquer world resistance, reality, by ensnaring it in its

conceptual net and bringing it under the rule of its abstractions and logic, principles and laws, often to prepare the way for the conquering of the world physically, viz., to technologize it. The overcoming of resistance has been the primary technique in the West for eliminating the suffering of the world and thereby making it less real.

The second technique for eliminating suffering, is found mainly in Eastern mysticism, for example Buddhism and Taoism, but also in the West, e.g., in Christianity, is the psychic technique of non-resistance. Through such a technique, one seeks to “block”, or render inoperative, vital-urge and thereby cancel, or dissolve, the point of resistance with the world. Reality is thereby “suspended”. The world is “de-actualized”, “de-realized”, “ideated”, and its essences are thereby allowed to come forth and show themselves purely and simply: psychic technique of non-resistance puts aside the ontic claims about the world, but lets the world ontologically and essentially be. In whatever form psychic technique of non-resistance takes, “it always is a matter of one thing”. Scheler claims : ... to bring about *pure “contemplation”* of genuine ideas and primordial phenomena and to produce, in their congruence, “essence” free of existence through remembrance, is given only as “resistance” against dynamic drive-like attentiveness... the moment of reality in the experience of resistance is the condition for the *hic-et-nunc act of blocking out* those acts and drive-impulses that yield the objects; moments of reality ... For reality, in all modes of perception and *rhatness* of objects. To the extent that this moment of resistance has been deactivated the “*essence*”, which is identical in objects and independent of their *hie et nunc*, must remain for the subject. (Scheler, *wissenformen and die gesellschaft* 86). In another place he explains that “Ideation”, therefore, means to grasp the essential modes and formal structures of the world through a single case only, independent of the number of observations and inductive references which belong to intelligence. Psychic technique, which seeks control over the external environment, is a-rational in nature. It is not tied to any permanent structure of reason, such as Kant described, nor does it seek to capture the world in a mesh of rational categories. Rather, “The capacity to distinguish between essence and existence”, exercised in this technique, “is a basic characteristic of the human spirit; and that upon which all reason and prior knowledge depends (Scheler, *spate schriften* 41).

Through psychic technique of non-resistance one eliminates suffering *internally* by allowing oneself to be *overcome by* it, by *not* resisting the impingements of the “external” world. Through the suspension of world reality, one at the same time suspends suffering. Thus in it, “the goals of health, salvation, and philosophic cognition strangely intersect”(Scheler, *wissensforman and die Gesellschaft* 137) : it is necessarily a manner of essential viewing *and*

of eliminating suffering simultaneously. Scheler describes the singularity of this process in this way:..what it means is to suspend, at least tentatively, the *moment of reality itself*, or to annihilate the entire, indivisible, powerful impression of reality together with its affective correlates. What it means is to remove the “anguish of earthly existence” which Schiller wrote, is overcome only “in those regions where the pure forms dwell”. For all reality, because it is reality, and regardless of what it is, is a kind of inhibiting, constraining, pressure for every living being, and its correlate is “pure” anxiety (anxiety without any object). If existence means “resistance”, the cancelling of reality can only be the kind of “ascetic” act by which we suspend the operation of the vital-urge in relation to which the world appears as resistance, and which is the precondition for all sensory experience and its accidental qualities. (Scheler, *spate Schriften*, 44)

Psychic technique of non-resistance is thus not merely one technique among many but can encompass a whole style of living, an entire ethical stance toward the world, a whole manner of dealing with the world and its suffering, as exhibited in the extension of its principles into politics - political passivism and “passive resistance”- and its embodiment in a person like Buddha or, more recently, Mahatma Gandhi. (Scheler, *Wissensformen and die Gesellschaft* 141)

Max Scheler offered three primary examples of psychic technique of non-resistance: Buddhism, Socrates’ original understanding of philosophy, and phenomenology. All three are rooted, to varying degrees, in essentially the same technique and may bring about the same result, viz. simultaneous essential insight and the elimination of suffering.

According to Scheler, Buddhism represents the highest form of psychic technique of non-resistance. It, like virtually every mystical tradition, is an attitude toward suffering, an ethics of suffering, which teaches that one can only eliminate suffering by first accepting it, by cancelling all resistance to it. The Buddhist scholar Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki confirms this when he writes that

“The value of human life lies in the fact of suffering, for where there is no suffering, no consciousness of karmic bondage, there will be no power of attaining spiritual experience and thereby reaching the field of non-distinction. Unless we agree to suffer we cannot be free from suffering”. (Metron 94)

Indeed, Buddha’s conversion experience occurred when he encountered one poor man, one sick man, and one dead man and from this occasion he saw and accepted suffering as an essential condition of the reality of the world, despite having been protected from such experiences in his father’s palace. This cancelling of all resistance to suffering is often

described as an “emptying of the self” and an extinguishing of all desires. This emptying of the self is not, however, an absolute nothingness but an absolute fullness: the self is emptied of all pre-occupation with *things, entities*, existence, including itself, and thereby receives the fullness of Being and becomes a non-differentiated part of a mystical One. (Suzuki 133-34) Christianity, too, teaches us “Do not resist suffering”, and this ethic of non-resistance, is exemplified by such doctrines as “turning the other cheek” and “loving one’s enemy” (doctrines which a thoroughly Greek Nietzsche found to be resentful and contemptible) (Scheler, *Wissensformen and die Gesellschaft* 141) and in Jesus’s refusal to defend himself before the Romans. Thus the dogma that “Christ died for our sins” and that acceptance of him means *being released and protected from* suffering is highly inadequate because it would mean, based upon what has been said above, that Jesus would thereby become a means for *avoiding* suffering and that acceptance of him would thereby *deprive us* of our only means to genuine salvation. Rather, the word of the Cross means, as Thomas Merton writes, “to be nailed to the Cross with Christ”, to suffer *with* him, to *increase* our own suffering by accepting his suffering *as our own*, and only in this act of open acceptance of suffering does the ego-self, the individualized self as an entity, dissolve itself. Merton writes: “To receive the word of the Cross means the acceptance of a complete self-emptying of Christ. Such emptiness is often described in Christianity as “poverty”- “Blessed are those who are poor in spirit”. (Merton 56) Meister Eckart explains, “he is a poor man who *wants* nothing, *knows* nothing, and *has* nothing”. Such a state is possible only when one is “empty of self and all things”. (Merton 109) In Christianity, as in Buddhism, only through the acceptance of suffering and emptying of the ego-self can one attain salvation from suffering and receive the “riches” of God’s heaven.” (Scheler, *Spate Schriften* 55-56) While eliminating suffering Buddhism also offers essential insight, enlightenment, through its non-resistance to the world. That enlightenment occurs only with extinguishing of desires, as illustrated by the earliest Zen poem:

The perfect Way (Tao) is without difficulty,
Save that it avoids picking and choosing,
Only when you stop liking and disliking
Will all be clearly understood.
A split hear’s difference,
And the heaven and earth are set apart!
If you want to get the plain truth,
Be not concerned with right and wrong

Is the conflict between right and wrong

Is the sickness of the mind.

(Alan W. Watts 116)

One attains enlightenment when one ceases to see the world as a collection of things and oneself as an ego-self entity within that world - as one *thing* among many - when one ceases to impose upon the world's preconceived categories of thinking, preconceived categories of what there is possible to be, but allows the world to come forward, to show itself in its fullness, and to be experienced in its simple, singular, concrete wholeness, or pure presence – *Nirvana*.

The suspension of rational thinking entails the suspension of our linguistic symbols for interpreting the world. Alan Watts writes, “Our problem is that the power of thought enables us to construct symbols of things apart from the things themselves. This includes the ability to make a symbol, an idea of ourselves (viz., the “self”) apart from ourselves... For this reason the masters talk about Zen as little as possible, and throw its concrete reality straight at us”.²⁰ (Watts,120,127) Moreover, rational categories and language fragment, distort, and finally lose the fundamental unity of pure presence (*Nirvana*). So Suzuki writes, “because the human tongue is not an adequate organ for expressing the deepest of truths of Zen, the latter cannot be made the subject of logical exposition ; they are to be experienced in the inmost soul when they become for the first time intelligible” (Suzuki 33).

Although there are certainly some major differences between the mysticisms of Buddhism and Christianity, Socrates's original understanding of philosophy as “love of wisdom” contains a kernel of psychic technique of non-resistance. To begin with, Socrates does indeed describe in several places the ascent to wisdom as a process of suffering. (Plato 515) Also, Socrates, to the astonishment of his students, offers no resistance to death after being sentenced by the city of Athens, but like Buddha, he dies in the midst of quiet conversation with his students.(Scheler, *Spate Schriften* 66) Granted, Buddha, unlike Socrates, probably would not have offered any type of public defense of himself had similar charges been brought against him, nor would he have tried to argue his students out of their fears of death. Insofar as he does so, Socrates remains in that Greek heroic tradition which resists suffering by seeking change in the external world. But, more important, Socrates describes the attaining of wisdom as a process of “dying”, of release from the body, its senses and desires: wisdom requires the blocking of vital desires through a special technique of the soul, which de-realizes the world and the self. Socrates “knew this”, Scheler claims, “when he envisaged the intuition of forms as a turning away of the soul from the sensory world, and the return of

the soul to itself (i.e., the “re-collection” of the soul) in order to go back to the original nature and source of things”.(Scheler, *Spate Schriften* 42,44)

Socrates fully realizes that the Good, which is the One, can never be captured by the categories of reason nor by language: it remains the unknowable and the undefinable, which, like the sun, can only be glimpsed briefly and momentarily. Hence the “Socratic irony”: Socrates’s wisdom lies in his knowing that he does not know. Knowledge is a necessary step toward the unknowable. The processes of reason and discourse, within the dialogue, reveal their own limits, our own ignorance, and, like the Buddhist *Koan*, turn language upon itself. Wisdom lies where the dialogue ends: in silence. The successful dialogue dissolves our predisposition, our intellectual resistance, to the world, empties us of our opinions about things and ourselves - the world as we think it to be (Sachs 210) - and into the emptiness allows the fullness of Being, an experience which Theaetetus describes as one of “dizziness”. The genuine “philosophical technique of cognition”- “*sophia*”, as Socrates understood it – Scheler contends, “is not only different from, but wholly *antithetical* to, the positive-scientific attitude of cognition of laws pertaining to apparent spatio-temporal coincidence (of the “*hic-nunc*” of what is)”, laws which may be used for the technological control of nature. Although the dialogue does not bring us “knowledge” of the positive type, its value, Socrates tells Theaetetus, is that “you will be soberer and humbler and gentler to other men, and will be too modest to fancy that you know what you do not know”²⁶ (Theaetetus 210) qualities which describe those for whom non-resistance is a style of life.

Certainly, the observation that phenomenology has certain things in common with mysticism is not new. But comparative studies along these lines virtually all restrict themselves to the superficial description of certain common characteristics and aims. What Scheler provides us with in his later thought is a position from which we can observe the *essential* similarity among all psychic techniques of non-resistance, whether they be Buddhistic, Christian, philosophical, or phenomenological. Scheler saw psychic technique of non-resistance as lying at the very heart of Husserl’s “phenomenological reduction”: “Husserl meant the same thing” as Buddha and Socrates, Scheler claims, “when he based the intuition of essences upon a phenomenological reduction, a “cancelling” or “bracketing” of the accidental coefficients of things in the world in order to bring out their essences. While I do not agree with Husserl’s theory of reduction in its details, I do believe that it refers to the essential act by which the human spirit must be defined” (Scheler, *Spate Schriften*42). Scheler, then, does not so much oppose Husserl’s notion of phenomenology as he wishes to extend it and make it even more radical by rooting it not merely in consciousness, but in the very becoming of life-urge itself,

which makes anything like consciousness possible. Phenomenology should be more than a “logical inelliodology” or “bracketing” procedure that suspends “the existential *Judgment* which is inherent in every natural act of perception”. Rather, to be truly radical, phenomenology must aim “to suspend, at least tentatively”, the very experience, “the very moment of reality itself, or to annihilate the entire, Indivisible, powerful impression of reality together with its affective correlates”. (Scheler, *Spate Schriften* 43-44) Such a radical de-realization of world experience requires a vital psychic technique that cancels the very point of world resistance, and this means extending phenomenology into a whole ethic of suffering, a whole vital-psychic disposition toward the world.

The Western technique for overcoming the resistance of the world has demonstrated remarkable successes in eliminating suffering, but it is uninterested in gaining essential insight into that world and incapable of understanding the *meaning* of the suffering it overcomes. Thus, modern medicine, for example, may prolong human life, but it has nothing to say about the meaning of that life: it may miraculously revive the victim of an unsuccessful suicide attempt, but it has nothing to offer that person that may help him want to go on living - only drugs and surgery to obliterate physically what is essentially a pain of the soul. The Western technique may occasionally be successful in eliminating suffering temporarily, but “this heroic attitude has narrow *limits* to its effectiveness. It breaks down before the more profound suffering of the soul, i.e., the suffering that escapes the control of the aggressive will. It too often buries the fame of its victory over the external suffering of life in the deeper suffering of a hardened heart and cold bitterness. It only *drives* suffering into the *depths* of the soul - out of pride to acknowledge that there is a point where the controlling will is forced to break down”(Scheler, *Schriften zur soziologie* 66) On the other hand, though, the Eastern technique of non-resistance has been increasingly unable to cope with such problems as over-population, and so the East has turned increasingly to Western techniques of economy and technology to overcome suffering in the external world. The task before us, then, in the “world-age of adjustment”, Scheler suggested, is to bring together the two major techniques for eliminating suffering: “In all areas where ills may be encountered and in all areas where goods of positive vital values are produced -whether it be for war and peace, disease and health, growth of population and its inhibition for the sake of higher quality, for economy and industry - we must learn systematically to posit *both basic principles of all possible techniques* and their correlate forms of knowledge *simultaneously* and *alternately* in order to restore a meaningful balance of humanity”. And he optimistically added, “in Europe and North America a *vigorous epoch of metaphysics and psychic techniques* is likely to follow the

positive and technological epoch of so-called 'modern times', while in Asia an epoch of *positive science* and *technology* will replace the strongly one-sided metaphysical epochs of those cultures".³⁰ (Scheler, *wissensformen and die Gesellschaft* 140).

Thus, Scheler's notion of phenomenology as psychic technique of non-resistance must be understood not only, like Husserl's phenomenology, as a response to the "crisis" of Western civilization, but more broadly as a manifestation of the current "world-age of adjustment", wherein new modes of human self-understanding are emerging. As such, it must be grasped in its essential relationship to all other modes of psychic technique of non-resistance. In emphasizing phenomenology's connection with various types of mysticism and Socratic philosophy, we intend in no way to minimize major differences, but only to identify a fundamental point of similarity and departure. By so doing, we can better appreciate the enormous, rich possibilities which Scheler envisioned for phenomenology, possibilities which extend far beyond the egological "method" articulated by Husserl. Phenomenology as psychic technique of non-resistance is not only a manner of essential viewing but much more broadly a comprehensive "attitude" toward the world which also allows us as persons to deal with the world and its sufferings - practically and meaningfully.

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