

## The Existence of Free Will in Humans and Other Animals Through Their Obtaining of 'Spirit'

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### Introduction

The question of whether humans are free willed has been on our minds for many years, not solely approached by academic philosophers, but considered by every reflective and inquisitive human who wants to know more about the truth of the world. Max Scheler put forth the notion that humans have obtained 'Spirit' at some point in their evolution, an idea that ties incredibly well into William James' views on experience, truth and reality. I will argue that 'Spirit' is one of the most significant differences between humans and other animals, and is the main source of our apparent free will. The ideas put forth by Scheler and James that I will evaluate in this essay have a similar point of origin in the works of Charles Darwin, through the notion of flexibility, which shall be expanded on at a later point. As well as attempting to present a unique interpretation on human free will through the above philosophers, I will address the differences between humans and other animals according to what we can learn from Scheler and James, as well as asking how other animals differ from us in terms of free will. With the information obtained from the above discussions, I will assess our treatment of other animals and present a perspective on whether our current methods are justified or if we should change our ways.

### Scheler's Notion of 'Spirit'

Due to its pivotal role in this essay I will begin by explaining what 'spirit' is and how it originated as an idea. Max Scheler was a German philosopher whose focus was predominantly on phenomenological questions. To put it simply, phenomenology is the study of the structures of experience, or consciousness, and is concerned with a variety of types of experience, including perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, bodily awareness, social activity, and linguistics. Many phenomenological discussions have led to the question of how humans differ from other animals, and what makes us special. There is one theory of Scheler's in particular which is relevant to the question of free will, which Scheler entitled 'world-openness'. In this theory he states that humans are free from the organic world and the environment. Where other animals are born with a specific set of instincts to survive immediately in an environment, humans are given no such gift. Our instincts are less specialised, forcing us to learn how to survive in particular environments.<sup>1</sup> Scheler is not denying humans any notion of instinct, but instead saying that we must work harder to survive as we are no longer tied down to one environment, as many other animals are. It appears that our freedom in the world has come at a price: we must learn how to survive, and expand on our reduced instincts.

Before this essay proceeds, it is important to gain a clear idea of what Scheler means by

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<sup>1</sup> Scheler, Max (2002) *Man's Place in Nature*. In Dennis M. Weiss (Ed.) *Interpreting Man*. The Davies Group, p.52.

both 'environment' and 'world'. An environment to Scheler is everything that one particular species perceives and exists in. Each species is born into an environment, and has no choice but to live in it. As they are confined to their environment, they are born with a specific set of instincts. For example, fish instinctively know to form a school to stay more hidden from predators. Dependant on its role in an environment (e.g. predator or prey), a species will have a certain set of instincts which will help it to survive its environment. As humans, according to Scheler, are free from a specific environment, what we as a species perceive and exist in is referred to as a 'world'.

Our 'world' is essentially made up of many overlapping environments which we must be able to adapt to at a moment's notice. To survive in our 'world' we still need instincts, but environmentally specific instincts would be of no use to us, as they would reduce our adaptability, and tie us down to certain environments. Our instincts need to apply to whatever situation or setting we are currently in. For example, we instinctively move ourselves away from intense heat. This reaction can occur in any context, and improve our survivability. We are born with many of these generalised instincts, but must learn, through experience, the best way to survive specific environments. We differ from other animals here because they are born with all of the instincts that they need to survive their environment, whereas we must experience our 'world' to better understand how to survive it. We share some of the instincts that other animals have, such as the maternal protection a mother shows of her child. However, our instincts do not extend to helping us survive in specific environments; instead this kind of knowledge is obtained through experience.

In this essay it is also necessary to clearly define 'experience', as it plays an important role in the work of both Scheler and James. As we will later see with James, experience for humans is a continuous stream, meaning that we are constantly bombarded by experienceable sensations. The most reliable way to gain knowledge about the reality we live in is through experiencing to test for what is true and what is not. For Scheler, this process can be used to help us survive particular environments, as we must use experience to expand upon our instincts. Scheler explains that our lack of specific instincts and freedom from an environment is due to the fact that humans are 'spiritual beings'. Somewhere in our development as a species we have gained 'spirit' which "includes the concept of reason...the intuition of essences and a class of voluntary and emotional acts such as kindness, love, remorse, reverence, wonder, bliss, despair and free decision."<sup>2</sup> Scheler is not using 'spirit' in a transcendent manner, similar to what some may call a 'soul', but as a term encompassing many biological changes which happened over our entire development as a species. Through gaining 'spirit' we have lost any specific environmental instincts, but are "no longer subject to [our] drives and [our] environment."<sup>3</sup> We are open to the world.

I find Scheler's perspective on the human 'world' very intriguing, but I am not quite convinced. One criticism of his theory of 'world-openness' is that humans do not seem free to experience everything in the world, and actually appear to be incredibly filtered to our surroundings. Our lack of specialisation means that we are able to experience less, as we are limited to the senses we are born with. Just as with other animals, we live in an environment composed of all that our senses allow us to experience, and we cannot

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<sup>2</sup> Scheler, Max (2002) *Man's Place in Nature*. In Dennis M. Weiss (Ed.) *Interpreting Man*. The Davies Group, p. 52

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

escape it. To a degree this is true, but does not completely shut down Scheler's theory. I believe a slight revision to his definition of 'spirit' is required, to include the human imagination as well as our ability to create technology. Our creativity as a species is unprecedented and, in my opinion, plays a pivotal role in our ability to survive our 'world'. As we have lost many environmentally specific instincts, we have gained the ability to imagine and create technologies which can bring us closer to certain environments. For example, due to our openness to the world we are not born with the sonar hearing a bat uses to hunt. However, we have created sonar radars for our own purposes through replicating a skill bats were born with. This ability to create allows us to detach ourselves from any particular environment and experience many more senses than we are biologically able to, through technology. Our ability to create, therefore, can be included in our 'spirit', and counters the claim that we are confined to an environment comprised of what our senses allow us to experience. The theory of being open to the world still stands strong, as our obtaining of 'spirit' (now including imagination and the ability to create technology) differentiates us from other animals.

### James' Views on Truth, Reality and Experience

To turn this essay in the direction of pragmatism, William James was one of its original advocates, along with Charles Peirce and John Dewey. James' unique views on truth, reality and experience are the most applicable when thinking of whether humans have free will and, as we will find, they engage fantastically with what Scheler has to say about 'world-openness' and 'spirit'. In keeping with the pragmatist maxim, James believes that truth is obtained through experiencing a moment which was worthwhile for us to experience, and may lead us to other equally worthwhile moments.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, James claims that "true ideas are those that we can validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those we cannot."<sup>5</sup> This puts a subjective twist on the notion of truth. At this point, according to James, truth is dependent on each person's past experiences, as well as the individual way in which they evaluate the idea through validation, corroboration and verification. This is further reinforced through introducing individual belief to the definition of a true idea. James states that "the central condition of a belief's being true is that it function satisfactorily in the life of the believer."<sup>6</sup> From what we have seen so far from James' views on true ideas, he puts forward that any idea can be true as long as the believer in the idea experiences and evaluates it, and through this process has a better idea of their world. This shows that each individual human is flexible in their notion of what is true, and are able to constantly change their idea of reality based on their personal experiences. However, James develops his definition of truth to say that "both [reality] and the truths men gain about it are everlastingly in the process of mutation — mutation towards a specific goal, it may be — but still mutation."<sup>7</sup> James is claiming that truth is not purely subjective; there is an 'absolute truth' out there and our personal beliefs and truths are constantly changing and converging towards this truth. Eventually, he claims, our idea of the truth will reach a point where nothing we can experience will

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<sup>4</sup> William James (1907) Pragmatism's Conception of Truth. In Robert B. Talisse and Scott F. Aikin (Eds.) (2011) *The Pragmatism Reader*. Princeton University Press, p. 81

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 80

<sup>6</sup> Ellen K. Suckiel (2005) William James. In John R. Shook and Joseph Margolis (Eds.) *A Companion to Pragmatism*. Blackwell Publishing, p. 37

<sup>7</sup> William James (1907) Pragmatism's Conception of Truth. In Robert B. Talisse and Scott F. Aikin (Eds.) (2011) *The Pragmatism Reader*. Princeton University Press, p. 87

change it. It is interesting that James has put forward this notion, as it now appears that he has said that truth is both subjective, dependant on the individual who possesses the idea, as well as absolute and objective, in that there is only one truth out there that can accurately reflect our reality. Where some would see this as a major problem in his argument, I would argue the opposite. James can uphold the pragmatist maxim of considering how the unique experiences of each individual affect what they see as true, while at the same time include the idea that our reality can be empirically explained and observed, and that there is an obtainable truth that can reflect it. James achieves this by starting with what truth means for an individual, and expands it to what truth means for all individuals. There is no clash between his theories. I will have a different sense of what is true than you, but we will both continuously alter our beliefs, as will the rest of humanity, until they converge into the 'absolute truth' James speaks of. The final theory of James' that holds a great deal of relevance to this essay, and that I have briefly mentioned before, is that he puts forward that "experience is a continuous stream, the elements of which have no distinct boundaries."<sup>8</sup> James believes that we experience life as a constant bombardment of sensations, experiencing everything that we are biologically capable of experiencing all at once, gaining an idea of what is true, and altering it over and over again. This idea is partially reminiscent of Scheler's theory of 'world-openness' as it claims that we are not confined to an environment where we can only experience certain sensations, but are subjected to experience everything in our 'world' all at once. The idea that we experience our 'world' as a bombardment of sensations does not explicitly mean that we are unfiltered compared to other animals, as Scheler advocates, but does show that humans gain experience in a more open manner, perhaps due to the different instincts we are born with.

Interestingly enough, in their reading of James' *The Principles of Psychology*, Leda Cosmides and John Tooby explain that, according to James, "the mind is a collection of "faculties" or "instincts" that direct learning, reasoning and action... In James' view, human behaviour is so much more flexibly intelligent than that of other animals because we have *more* instincts than they do – not fewer."<sup>9</sup> This interpretation of James seems to contradict the idea that we have of what Scheler is theorising about humans gaining 'spirit' but losing all environmentally specific instincts. Where Scheler believes that we have fewer instincts than other animals, James is saying that we actually have more instincts than other animals, which explains our greater intelligence. This interpretation of James' psychological theories is brutally shut down by Jean Suplizio who explains that "James conducted laboratory studies and analyses to refute the notion that the mind contains separate faculties. So James did not reify the instincts. He emphasised instead the entire brain process and urged that: "*the entire brain process' is not a physical fact at all*" [James' italics]."<sup>10</sup> Suplizio is arguing that James does not explain the difference between humans and other animals in terms of the number of instincts which the brain consists of, because James thinks of the brain as an entire, inseparable structure. Cosmides' and Tooby's apparent misinterpretation of James, therefore, does not hinder the possible compatibility between James as Scheler, as both still agree that we have

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<sup>8</sup> Ellen K. Suckiel (2005) William James. In John R. Shook and Joseph Margolis (Eds.) *A Companion to Pragmatism*. Blackwell Publishing, p. 33

<sup>9</sup> Lena Cosmides and John Tooby (1994) Beyond Intuition and Instinct Blindness: Towards an Evolutionarily Rigorous Cognitive Science. *Cognition Vol. 50*, p. 65

<sup>10</sup> Jean Suplizio (2007) On the Significance of William James to a Contemporary Doctrine of Evolutionary Psychology. *Human Studies Vol. 30*, p. 360

instincts, but they are not what makes us more intelligent than other animals.

### **The Notion of 'Flexibility' in Darwin as a Point of Engagement**

The above mentioned theories put forth by Scheler and James both have their roots in Darwinism, mainly as they show that mankind possesses an air of flexibility, an idea which comes through strongly in Darwin's work. By 'flexibility' I mean our ability to immediately adapt to any situation in our world. Our development as a species has led us to the point where we can react and deal with whatever life throws at us and make the most of it. This closely relates to our use of technology. For example, a large predator, say a grizzly bear, is suited to survive its environment. It is born with the instincts to eat, sleep, and reproduce in a manner specific to its environment. It is not used to threats from larger predators in its environment, so when a bigger Kodiak bear escapes from a nearby zoo and encroaches on the territory of our first bear, all the grizzly bear can do is use his instincts and fight the larger bear off. He is limited to the specific skills he was born with. Due to the flexibility of humankind, if a Kodiak bear were to encroach on whatever territory a human was currently situated in, the human can attempt to create a weapon, shelter, traps, etc. The question of whether he is successful is not relevant; the human has shown that he is flexible and can adapt to any situation. Not all humans would react in this way, but all humans have the capacity to act in this way due to our flexibility. No grizzly bear, or any other animal, would be able to create contraptions to ward off the invader, because they are born with all the instincts they need to survive their environment.

For Scheler, humans are flexible as they are not confined to an environment, but can learn how to survive anywhere in their 'world' through experience. We have developed to become less instinctual and less suited to survive a particular environment, but through gaining 'spirit' we are detached from any environment and can live and experience our 'world' as a whole. We can even expand upon the senses we were born with through our ability to create and utilise technology. For James, the teleological conception of the mind is reflected in Darwin's notion that all beings struggle for existence. "The function of human cognition must be understood in terms of the human struggle for success,"<sup>11</sup> explains Suckiel. Where James talks of an 'absolute truth' which humans are converging towards, he is saying that there is a purpose and goal in human cognition. This purpose and goal cannot be discussed without referencing the Darwinian notion that humans, along with all other beings, struggle to survive. Furthermore, as James states that truth and reality are ever-changing, the believer in those truths and realities must be as flexible and changeable as the reality he confronts.

### **Free Will in Humans and Other Animals**

The above discussions on the work of both Scheler and James have led us to the focal point of this essay, where we consider whether humans and other animals have free will. As we have seen from Scheler's theories, he claims that humans are free in their 'world' and detached from a single environment. We are therefore forced to learn how to survive depending on where we live. Through this forced learning we have the capacity to adapt and create things which may allow us to experience a much wider set of sensation than those we are biologically able to sense. Scheler explains that once 'world-openness' appears, the behaviour that comprises it is "capable of unlimited expansion – as far as

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<sup>11</sup> Ellen K. Suckiel (2005) William James. In John R. Shook and Joseph Margolis (Eds.) *A Companion to Pragmatism*. Blackwell Publishing, p. 32

the 'world' of existing things extends."<sup>12</sup> Humankind has become able to experience all sensations present in their 'world' through the tools we gained through our 'spirit' such as reason, kindness, love, and technological creativity. In this sense, we are free.

James' belief that experience is a continuous and boundless stream reflects this notion of our freedom. Similarly to Scheler, James advocates the idea that we are capable of experiencing all of the possible sensations present in our 'world'. We are bombarded by countless different sensations all at once, and although we may not biologically be able to understand or differentiate them, we can learn of ways in which to do so. Furthermore, James' definition of 'truth' is that it is subjective. Truth is what is beneficial for the believer, as long as they can suitably verify and validate it. Therefore, we are individually free to believe and experience anything that suits us within our 'world'. However, James' thoughts on truth and reality eventually point to an 'absolute truth' as we saw earlier in this essay. Our truths are mutating towards a definite goal which no experience will ever alter. Humans, therefore, are free to experience and believe what we want, but are determined to find that 'absolute truth'.

Let us extend this discussion of free will to other animals as well as humans. When looking at each species, humans appear less determined to follow a certain developmental path. Scheler would argue that due to our 'spirit' we are free to develop in any direction we wish. We can expand our experiences anywhere within our 'world,' unlike some animals which have only adapted to the changes humans have made to their environment, but have not changed in other ways for millennia, such as sharks. The developmental path of sharks is not certain but somewhat predictable, in that they have eaten, slept and reproduced in the same way for millions of years, and will continue to do so similarly, only adapting to the changes to their environment caused by human intervention. Due to our freedom in the world and heightened adaptability to random events it is impossible to predict the next step mankind will take. What will we invent or achieve next? Regardless of what next step we do make, it will in turn help us develop further. So far, our creation of technologies has led us to better technologies, creating a positive cycle of development for our species. Of course, it is not out of the question to believe that one day we will invent something that sets us back in terms of development, such as a device that wipes all life off of the face of the Earth, but this only reinforces my point that the developmental path for humanity is completely unpredictable. While many animals are like sharks in that their developmental path is relatively predictable, there are also organisms which are as adaptable, or perhaps more adaptable, than humans, such as many viruses. A single strain of an RNA virus can reproduce itself hundreds or sometimes thousands of times, often causing many mutations to occur. "It has been estimated that a typical RNA virus may experience alterations of between 0.3 and 2 percent of its entire genome each year."<sup>13</sup> When the immune system creates antibodies to counter it, the virus adapts and slightly alters itself to continue its effective attack. In this sense, they are more adaptable than humans, and the course of their development is equally as unpredictable. But does that mean that they are free? They are still confined to an environment, and although they can rapidly change their development within that environment, they are unable to detach themselves from it, unlike humans. Therefore they are not free in the same sense that humans are.

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<sup>12</sup> Scheler, Max (2002) *Man's Place in Nature*. In Dennis M. Weiss (Ed.) *Interpreting Man*. The Davies Group, p.54

<sup>13</sup> Hepatitis C: An Epidemic for Everyone, "RNA Viruses," <http://www.epidemic.org/thefacts/viruses/rnaViruses/> [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> December 2012]



## How We Currently Treat Other Animals

Although there are countless ways in which we use them, for the purpose of simplicity and clarity, I have split our treatment of other animals into four main categories. First of all, we rear animals for the sustenance they can provide for us through both their meat and what they naturally produce such as dairy and eggs. In the past 200 years the human population has risen from around 200 million to around 7 billion,<sup>14</sup> causing us to rear animals for sustenance on an incredibly grand scale. Animals are bred specifically for us to use as food, and hunting is solely performed for sport. This is an example of how humans adapt to their 'world'. Previously we would go to great difficulties to obtain our food and drink through stalking an animal, killing it, and storing the meat it provides for as long as possible. Due to the ever-increasing demand for food due to our rising population we have adapted and created technologies which make the process of finding, killing, and storing more efficient. The second way in which humans use animals is for experimentation, which can again be split into several categories. We test newly developed medication and experimental procedures on animals to see if the effects are reflective of the desired results. We also test new cosmetics on animals to see their dermatological effects. If an eye shadow, for example, causes a rash on several animals then it may have the same effects on humans, and its formula should be reviewed. When it is believed that the medication, procedure or cosmetic will work as positively on a human subject as an animal subject, it is applied to human testing. We are essentially using animals because we don't want any major negative repercussions to happen to humans, as it is widely believed that a human life is more important than an animal life. The third way in which humans use animals is for clothing. Some people believe that wearing the skin of an animal as a coat or scarf makes them look more fashionable, and carries with it a sense of social status. Humans have, long ago, created the technology to make synthetic warm coats, so there is no practical reason for killing animals just to obtain their fur. The final way in which we use animals is as pets. People can choose to own a pet in the attempt to form a symbiotic relationship in which both parties benefit through giving and receiving love and affection.

## How should we treat other animals?

Many of the differences between animals and humans have been highlighted in this essay, the main difference being that we obtained 'spirit' in the course of our evolution, causing us to be instinctual on a more general level, in that we do not have any instincts to help us survive a specific environment. As with all animals we have biological limits of experience. We have our five senses and can only experience our 'world' in terms of these senses. However, through our 'spirit' we are able to create technology to expand the realm of what we can experience. While still being detached from any environment in particular, we can create technologies to allow us to sense and experience more than what we are biologically able to. As a species we appear more free to develop in any direction of development, and our next developmental step is highly unpredictable. We are also more flexible than other animals as we must adapt to survive environmental situations which we are not born to survive in and, as James explains, the believer must reflect the flexibility of the truth and reality which he confronts.

As we have seen earlier in this essay, the theories put forth by Scheler and James can be

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<sup>14</sup> Worldometers, "Real Time Statistics," <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> December 2012]

interpreted to show that humans are the more free and flexible species, and that a combination of our 'spirit' and freedom to believe in our own truths have caused us to be detached from any particular environment. These key differences allow us to direct the developmental path other species can go down. We can make decisions which affect specific environments, causing the animals of that environment to adapt in a certain way. It is our responsibility as the more free and creative species to not abuse this fact. If it is in our power to propel a species down one path which is preferable for them (and possibly preferable for us as well) then we should do it. For example, using animals as pets is beneficial for both humans and the species, as long as both the owner and the pet gain something from the relationship. For this reason, using animals as pets is justified as it develops both species and hinders neither. On the other hand, killing and skinning animals for their fur, tusks or teeth solely for material purposes does not benefit either the animal or humankind. We have the technology to create foolproof replicas of fur, tusks or teeth so killing them is not beneficial for humanity. And it is certainly not beneficial for the animals. As humans, we can choose not to use animal fur, tusks or teeth, pushing animals such as tigers and elephants towards a different path of development. The examples of using animals for sustenance and experimentation are more controversial as it is beneficial for humans, but does not allow the other animals to develop in an equally positive manner. We are forcing them down a certain developmental path in order to help ourselves. I would argue that through gaining 'spirit,' being detached from the environment, and being flexible and highly adaptable beings, we are responsible for how we use animals to benefit our species as a whole in a significant way.

## Conclusion

In this essay I aimed to find out the extent to which humans and other animals have free will, through looking at the ideas of Scheler and James. It became clear that our flexibility and openness to the world, as by-products of our 'spirit', can be used to explain how we appear to be free beings compared to other animals. I found that humans are detached from a specific environment due to our 'spirit', which also allows us to reason, feel and express emotions, and create and use technology. Through gaining 'spirit' we are less instinctual to specific environments, but are flexible and adaptable within our 'world'. This flexibility was a Darwinian notion, reflected in James' thoughts on truth and reality, as he believed that we can each experience and validate our own truths about reality, but we are mutating our ideas of truth towards an 'absolute truth'. Furthermore, James held that the believer in an idea must be as flexible as the reality he confronts. While Scheler's beliefs seem to advocate a sense of human freedom, James' ideas of truth develop towards a more determined point of view, in that we will one day gain an 'absolute truth' which no experience will ever change. These findings on free will for humans and other animals provided us with certain implications for animal rights, showing that humans have the power to change the developmental path of many other animals, and that, when possible, we should act by doing what benefits both our species and theirs. Actions which significantly benefit neither humans nor the other species should be avoided. And finally, actions which benefit humanity but not the other species of animal can be justified, as our 'spirit', adaptability, and apparent freedom give us the responsibility to use them for the greater good of our own species.

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