

Scheler's Criticisms of Schopenhauer's Theory of "Mitleid"

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In *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*¹ Max Scheler devotes a short section to Schopenhauer's theory of *Mitleid*. While Scheler notes some of Schopenhauer's insights into the phenomenon of *Mitleid*, his account is overwhelmingly critical. Indeed, Scheler maintains that within Schopenhauer's theory "... stehen Irrungen und Verwechslungen von einer Größe ... die jene [Fortschritte gegenüber herkömmlichen Lehren] nur als geringfügig erscheinen lassen."² I shall argue that this assessment of Schopenhauer's theory of *Mitleid* is reached by an almost complete misunderstanding of Schopenhauer's description of *Mitleid*.

Perhaps the most profound misunderstanding of this theory involves what Scheler perceives as the function of suffering within Schopenhauer's theory. Scheler states that "Für Schopenhauer hat am Mitleiden nicht an erster Stelle positiv sittlichen Wert die in ihm enthaltene Funktion des Mitfühlens, sondern das Leiden, das es in sich trägt, dessen Funktions- und Zustandskomponente er außerdem nicht unterscheidet."³ This has led Schopenhauer, he claims, to appreciate *Mitleid* only as a mode of apprehending suffering which eventually represents "den eigentlichen Heilsweg."⁴ Thus he argues that Schopenhauer's theory is opposed to both our common sense judgments and our properly philosophical appreciation of the "Schätzung des sittlichen Wertes des Mitleidens,"⁵ both of which view *Mitleid* as a form of reaching out beyond the individual self, as a relieving of suffering, and as a source of satisfaction for both the subject and object of *Mitleid*. He also holds that Schopenhauer's account of *Mitleid* is not without a touch of eudaemonism, since the subject of *Mitleid* discovers a solace for his or her own suffering by experiencing the universal scope of suffering, i. e., all living beings. He or she, then, realizes the world of nature is destined to suffer, and this leads to resignation from one's own personal desires. As Scheler notes, however, seeing others suffer lays a "gedoppelte Schwere auf das Herz"⁶ of a morally sensitive individual, rather than providing a comfort or solace.

I think that it is safe to assume that the theory which Scheler describes cannot be a viable description of *Mitleid*. Moreover, Scheler's account is neither a sympathetic nor accurate description of Schopenhauer's theory. While there may be some flaws in Schopenhauer's theory, the above does not illustrate them. One could go so far as to claim that any student of Schopenhauer's *Über die Grundlage der Moral* (which contains his most

sophisticated and complete analysis of *Mitleid*) would, at the least, be puzzled, and, at the most, be indignant that this theory is attributed to Schopenhauer.

In the *Grundlage* Schopenhauer constantly emphasizes that *Mitleid* is a motive that overrides an individual's natural egotistical drives. Schopenhauer views egoism, the solely self-centered pursuit of one's own well-being at any cost to other individuals, as being the first and principle drive that any morally motivated behavior must transcend. So he claims, "Die Abwesenheit aller egoistischen Motivation ist also das *Kriterium einer Handlung von moralischem Wert*."⁷ The moral significance of an action is said to be "nur in ihrer Beziehung auf andere."⁸ He then singles out *Mitleid* as the sole motive of actions having moral worth: "Nur sofern eine Handlung aus ihm [*Mitleid*] entsprungen ist, hat sie moralischen Wert: und jede aus irgendwelchen andern Motiven hervorgehende hat keinen."⁹

Mitleid, however, is described not merely as a non-egotistical motive, but positively as a motive "welches das fremde Wohl will."¹⁰ To properly assess Schopenhauer's theory one must see how *Mitleid* is a response to the suffering of others. He claims that it leads to not only the desire for the well-being of the sufferer, but also to actions performed for the well-being of others. For Schopenhauer views the moral significance of *Mitleid* not as a "mode of apprehending suffering," but as a response to the apprehension of suffering.

Schopenhauer describes the phenomenon of *Mitleid* as "... die ganz unmittelbare, von allen anderweitigen Rücksichten unabhängige Teilnahme zunächst am Leiden eines andern und dadurch an der Verhinderung oder Aufhebung dieses Leidens, als worin zuletzt alle Befriedigung und alles Wohlsein und Glück besteht."¹¹ There is a participation in the life of another in two senses. Through *Mitleid* the subject of the emotion becomes aware of the condition of another, and by acting to bring about the other's well-being there is a participation with that individual's aims in life. The suffering of the other, or the possible suffering of the other, becomes the cause or the occasion for the expression of *Mitleid*. Schopenhauer claims that by experiencing the suffering of another, one desires that individual's well-being just as one desires one's own when one suffers: "daß ich bei seinem Wehe als solchem geradezu mit leide, sein Wehe fühle wie sonst nur meines und deshalb sein Wohl unmittelbar will wie sonst nur meines."¹² Since Schopenhauer believes that desiring some end is manifested in actions, one acts out of *Mitleid* to obtain the well-being of the sufferer. Its moral significance, then, is viewed as this seeking the well-being of others which stems from the apprehension of their suffering.

Thus *Mitleid* is viewed by Schopenhauer as something more than an apprehension of suffering. More specifically, it is apprehension of suffering that takes one out of the narrow scope of egoism into a participation in the life of other individuals. This is certainly very much in line with our common sense view of *Mitleid* as a "mitgefühltes Hinausgreifen über das eigene Ich."¹³ Schopenhauer also does not hold that it "vermehrte Leiden"; rather it aims at relieving or eliminating it. Further, Schopenhauer

does view the function of "feeling with" another as the source of actions having moral worth. It should be clear that Scheler is wrong if he claims that Schopenhauer's theory denies these features of *Mitleid*.¹⁴

While Schopenhauer does view *Mitleid* as a "Heilsweg" insofar as it can lead to resignation, he does not hold that it is the only way.¹⁵ Further, the connection between resignation and *Mitleid* is not even made within the *Grundlage*, which contains his most mature description of *Mitleid* and its relationship to ethics. (Even when he does draw a connection between *Mitleid* and resignation, the connection is described in vastly different terms than the position attributed to him by Scheler.) He even contrasts *Mitleid* as a response to the suffering of others with what Scheler claims he views as the "Trost" arising from the knowledge of this suffering.¹⁶

This is not, however, the end of Scheler's criticisms. Perhaps one of his greatest misperceptions of Schopenhauer's theory is evidenced in the following: "Ginge Schopenhauer logisch konsequent von den Gründen weiter, um derentwillen er das *Mitleid* schätzt, so wäre sogar die Folge, daß man Leiden zu bereiten befehlen müßte, nur damit hierdurch die Möglichkeit für jenes fundamental wertvolle Erleben des *Mitleids* immer neu geschaffen werde."¹⁷ Besides involving a misunderstanding of Schopenhauer's account of *Mitleid*, Scheler also demonstrates a misunderstanding of Schopenhauer's *Weltanschauung*. For if we assume this *Weltanschauung*, we are more than guaranteed a continuous supply of misery and suffering. Nothing is more certain in his view. Scheler is surely correct in noting that misfortune is necessary for *Mitleid*, since *Mitleid* is a reaction to misfortune and misery. If there were no misfortune, there would be no *Mitleid*. Yet this may be too strong a claim. If we lived in a world blessed by the lack of suffering, misery, and misfortune, following Schopenhauer's theory, there still could be *Mitleid*. For *Mitleid*, as he notes, can be a response to future or possible suffering. One still acts *mitleidend*, Schopenhauer claims, if one refrains from performing an action because he/she realizes it would cause someone to suffer. So to exercise the capacity for *Mitleid* it is not necessary that there ever actually be suffering; it is sufficient to realize that there could be suffering.¹⁸ The minimum criterion, then, for the exercise of *Mitleid* would be to have the concept of suffering and the ability to apply it to possible cases.

The above reply to Scheler, however, must pale in comparison to the contradictory position he ascribes to Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer emphasizes that *Mitleid* aims at relieving, eliminating, and not causing suffering. Nowhere does he suggest that one should cause suffering so as to create the opportunity to be *mitleidend*. This is directly contradictory to what he views as the moral significance of *Mitleid*. It is always directed at the well-being of others. Schopenhauer recognizes the desire to cause suffering to be a distinct, and incompatible, motive to *Mitleid*, i. e., "Bosheit."

Scheler also notes that Schopenhauer's theory of *Mitleid* reflects a blindness to "die positiven Werte . . . für Freude und Glück."¹⁹ He attributes this, once again, to Schopenhauer's "positive" evaluation of suffer-

ing in *Mitleid* over its function as a "fellow-feeling." He states further: "Anstelle des faktisch . . . bloß utilitaristischen Grundes, welcher im geltenden sozialen Urteil das Mitleid vor der Mitfreude an sittlichem Wert bevorzugen läßt, meinte er dem Mitleiden eine metaphysische Funktion zubilligen zu dürfen, die er der Mitfreude versagte."²⁰ Scheler suggests that Schopenhauer downplays the fellow-feeling function of *Mitleid* because this function of "feeling-with" someone else is also displayed in *Mitfreude*. This, he claims, is evidenced by his giving *Mitleid*, which is just a reaction to misfortune and suffering, a metaphysical function that is denied to *Mitfreude*. This, once again, is alleged to show that Schopenhauer is only interested in the revelation of suffering in *Mitleid*.

I agree with Scheler that Schopenhauer is blind to the positive value of *Freude* and *Glück*. It is also true that he denies a metaphysical function (penetration of the "veil of Maya," knowledge of the unity of beings) to *Mitfreude*. But once again Scheler does not understand the philosophical reasons for these positions. It is not that Schopenhauer does not appreciate the value of "feeling-with," or that he has a faulty theory of *Mitleid*. Schopenhauer maintains this position regarding *Mitfreude* because he has a negative theory of pleasure, joy, and happiness. For Schopenhauer, pleasure, joy, and happiness are defined as not being in pain, not having sorrow, and not being sad. Pain and suffering are positive, he holds; they are something the agent actually feels. It is the absence of these feelings that constitutes pleasure or joy: "daß der Schmerz, das Leiden, wozu aller Mangel, Entbehrung, Bedürfnis, ja jeder Wunsch gehört, das Positive, das unmittelbar Empfangene ist. Hingegen besteht die Natur der Befriedigung, des Genusses, des Glücks nur darin, daß eine Entbehrung aufgehoben, ein Schmerz gestillt ist. Diese wirken also *negativ* . . . Also das *Positive*, das sich durch sich selbst Kundgebende ist der Schmerz; Befriedigung und Genüsse sind das *Negative*, die bloße Aufhebung jenes ersten."²¹

While I think that Scheler would be perfectly justified in being unhappy with Schopenhauer's negative doctrine of pleasure, this doctrine explains his blindness to the value of *Mitfreude* and *Freude*. Schopenhauer simply holds that *Freude* or *Genüsse* are not feelings that we can have with our fellows, i. e., there is no *Freude* that we can share *mit* others. Thus there cannot be a "metaphysical function" of *Freude*. This, naturally, does not mean that Schopenhauer depreciates the function of "fellow-feeling" in *Mitleid*. For it would seem that *Mitfreude* could, on his theory, also be a source of knowledge of the unity of being. Unfortunately, it cannot, Schopenhauer believes, because there is no *Freude* in the sense that there is *Schmerz*.

It is probably doubtful that Scheler would embrace Schopenhauer's theory of *Mitleid* even if he did attribute the same metaphysical function to *Mitfreude*. This is because he views Schopenhauer's metaphysical monism to be incompatible with "genuine" *Mitleid*: ". . . das Mitleiden wird zum 'Schein', wenn die Geschiedenheit der Individuen 'Schein' ist, die es voraussetzt. Das Aufgehen des Ich in einen allgemeinen Leidenbrei schließt echtes Mitleid vollständig aus."²² Scheler's point is that *Mitleid* presup-

poses individuals, and since individuality is an "illusion" so is *Mitleid*, i. e., there are not individuals to stand in a *mitleidend* relationship.

Scheler, however, misunderstands the sense in which individuality is referred to as an illusion. Schopenhauer makes a distinction between two ontological levels, the world as will and the world as representation. The latter is "Schein" in the sense that it is an objectification of the metaphysical will in space and time. It is at the level of representation that it makes sense to speak of individuality and *Mitleid*. The status of the world as representation is referred to as an "appearance" or "illusion" in the sense that it is an expression or manifestation of a more basic or primary ontological level — the will. To borrow a phrase from Kant, Schopenhauer maintains the "transcendental ideality" of individuality.²³ But this does not mean that individuality is not "empirically real". The world as *Vorstellung* contains individuals — individuals who suffer, and individuals who respond with *Mitleid* to this suffering. It is only at this level that *Mitleid* is applicable. For only at this level does it make sense to speak of individuals. Neither, Schopenhauer would hold, obtains in the world as will.

Lastly, I would like to comment on Scheler's charge that Schopenhauer's theory of *Mitleid* is a case of "Gefühlsansteckung" and "Identifikation" rather than a case of a fellow-feeling. Although Scheler has developed some insightful and sophisticated models of these phenomena, they fail to describe Schopenhauer's theory. In cases of "Gefühlsansteckung," Scheler states, one individual becomes "infected" with a qualitatively similar emotion or feeling of another individual. There is, he claims, neither²⁴

... eine Gefühls-Intention auf die Freude und das Leid des Anderen, noch irgendeine Teilnahme an seinem Erleben. Vielmehr ist es charakteristisch für die Ansteckung, daß sie lediglich zwischen Gefühlszustände stattfindet; und daß sie ein Wissen um die fremde Freude überhaupt nicht voraussetzt."

Scheler views "Identifikation" as a limiting case of "Gefühlsansteckung," whereby one unconsciously identifies oneself with another: "Sie ist ein Grenzfall, insofern hier nicht nur ein fremder, abgegrenzter Gefühlsprozeß für einen eigenen unbewußt gehalten, sondern das fremde Ich geradezu (in allen seinen Grundhaltungen) identifiziert wird."²⁵ Since Scheler holds that *Mitleid* presupposes an awareness of distance between two individuals, such that the subject of *Mitleid* realizes that he or she is having a fellow-feeling with another individual, he tries to argue that Schopenhauer's theory of *Mitleid* lacks this "distance." He, then, claims that it is a description of "Gefühlsansteckung" and/or "Identifikation."

Scheler is correct in maintaining that *Mitleid* is something more than "Gefühlsansteckung" and "Identifikation," and that a theory which reduces to either cannot be a theory of *Mitleid*. Yet Scheler is wrong about Schopenhauer's theory: it is not so reducible. We have already seen that at a metaphysical level Schopenhauer identifies all individuals, but at this level he holds that it would not make sense to speak of *Mitleid*. Within his description of *Mitleid*, however, Schopenhauer is very careful to note

the “distance” between individuals. This can be seen in his criticism of Cassina’s account of *Mitleid*:²⁶

... welcher meint, daß Mitleid entstehe durch eine augenblickliche Täuschung der Phantasie, indem wir selbst uns an die Stelle des Leidenden versetzten und nun in der Einbildung *seine* Schmerzen an *unserer* Person zu leiden wähnten. So ist es keineswegs; sondern es bleibt uns gerade jeden Augenblick klar und gegenwärtig, daß er der Leidende ist, nicht wir: und geradezu, *in seiner* Person, nicht in unserer, fühlen wir das Leiden, zu unserer Betrübniß. Wir leiden mit ihm, also in ihm: wir fühlen seinen Schmerz als den seinen und haben nicht die Einbildung, daß es der unsrige sei . . .

Schopenhauer, as the above quote illustrates, is careful to point out that in *Mitleid* we are aware that it is the other individual who is suffering. We suffer with him, which is expressed by our sadness that he suffers. Thus he is careful to preserve the “distance” between *der Mitleidende* and the sufferer in his description of *Mitleid*. There is no confusion between “selves” and who suffers what. Even when Schopenhauer does speak of identification within the experience of *Mitleid*, it is not what Scheler classifies as emotional “Identifikation”: “Da ich nun aber doch nicht *in der Haut* des andern stecke, so kann allein vermittelt der *Erkenntnis*, die ich von ihm habe, d. h. der Vorstellung von ihm in meinem Kopf, ich mich so weit mit ihm identifizieren, daß meine Tat jenen Unterschied als aufgehoben ankündigt.”²⁷ One identifies with the sufferer, then, in the sense that his/her misfortune becomes one’s motive for pursuing the sufferer’s well-being. The sufferer’s well-being becomes an object of concern such that it is pursued as one normally pursues only one’s own. The difference between individuals is abolished because both individuals pursue the same goal for the same reason.²⁸

What has been said to rebut Scheler’s identification charge is also sufficient to defend Schopenhauer’s theory against the charge of “Gefühlsansteckung.” Unlike cases of emotional infection, Schopenhauer’s description of *Mitleid* includes the knowledge that another individual suffers; there is a participation in the experience of the sufferer, and, as he notes, there is a directing of feeling towards the sufferer, e. g., sadness. Lastly, in “Gefühlsansteckung” there is the transfer of a qualitatively similar emotion between individuals. But according to Schopenhauer’s theory the emotional response of *der Mitleidende* can be a vastly different kind of emotion or feeling — sadness as the response to suffering. Thus Schopenhauer’s theory of *Mitleid* is not a case of emotional infection.

Consequently, it should be obvious that Scheler’s criticisms of Schopenhauer’s theory of *Mitleid* fail. Scheler argued that Schopenhauer’s theory contained errors and confusions which made its positive achievements seem slight. However, it is Scheler’s criticisms of this theory which are erroneous and confused.²⁹ If there are shortcomings in Schopenhauer’s theory of *Mitleid*, Scheler has failed to bring them to light.

Notes

¹ Max Scheler: *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (Friedrich Cohen, Bonn 1926), pp. 57—63.

² Scheler: *Wesen*, p. 58.

³ Scheler: *Wesen*, p. 58.

⁴ Scheler: *Wesen*, p. 58.

⁵ Scheler: *Wesen*, p. 59.

⁶ Scheler: *Wesen*, p. 60.

⁷ Schopenhauer: *Über die Grundlage der Moral. Sämtliche Werke*, vol. IV, ed. by Arthur Hübscher (Brockhaus, Wiesbaden 1972), p. 204.

⁸ Schopenhauer, *Grundlage*, p. 206.

⁹ Schopenhauer, *Grundlage*, p. 208 sq.

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, *Grundlage*, p. 210.

¹¹ Schopenhauer, *Grundlage*, p. 208.

¹² Schopenhauer, *Grundlage*, p. 208.

¹³ Scheler, *Wesen*, p. 59.

¹⁴ Schopenhauer also notes what Scheler has called a „doppelte Befriedigung“ (*Wesen*, p. 59) in *Mitleid* relationships. There is what he calls a „Zufriedenheit mit uns selbst“ (*Grundlage*, p. 204), which is the approbation of conscience. This follows the performance of actions having moral worth, i. e., actions performed out of *Mitleid*. There is, of course, the obvious “pay-off” for the sufferer. His or her suffering becomes the object of concern for another, such that the *Mitleidende* attempts to relieve or eliminate this suffering. Thus the sufferer receives assistance from another individual. Also see Schopenhauer’s description of the attitudes and disposition of the good and bad characters (*Grundlage*, pp. (272—274). Part of the “good cheer” of the former involves their belief that others will help them (out of *Mitleid*) if they need help. The latter sort of individuals, he claims, lack this assurance and view the world as fundamentally hostile and/or indifferent.

¹⁵ Extreme personal suffering can also be a „Heilsweg“. Cf. *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, 1, *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. II, p. 464.

¹⁶ Schopenhauer draws the connection between *Mitleid* and *Resignation* in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* 68. His description of the transition from *Mitleid* to *Resignation* is radically different than the one Scheler ascribes to him. *Resignation* can result from the realization of the “universality of suffering” that is revealed by *Mitleid*. But this form of *Resignation* is not the mere stilling of “selfish desires” arising from the knowledge that the world of nature is destined to suffer. Although one may “resign” because of this knowledge, *Resignation* out of *Mitleid* maintains its altruistic cast. One realizes that the most effective way of eliminating suffering *per se*, both one’s own and others’, is the stilling of all desires. Also see *Die Welt*, Vol. 1, pp. 382—383, where he contrasts *Mitleid* and *Teilnahme* as responses to the suffering of others with any type of “solace” one would take concerning personal suffering from this knowledge. Schopenhauer views these as two different types of responses, with the latter being not moral and egotistical.

¹⁷ Scheler, *Wesen*, p. 60.

¹⁸ Cf. *Grundlage* § 17, „Die Tugend der Gerechtigkeit,“ where Schopenhauer argues that one degree of *Mitleid* is the prohibition of actions that could cause others to suffer. In such cases it is the possible suffering of others that inhibits actions.

¹⁹ Scheler, *Wesen*, pp. 60—61.

²⁰ Scheler, *Wesen*, p. 62.

²¹ Schopenhauer, *Grundlage*, pp. 210—211.

²² Scheler, *Wesen*, p. 63.

²³ Cf. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* B54/A28.

²⁴ Scheler, *Wesen*, p. 12.

²⁵ Scheler, *Wesen*, p. 16.

²⁶ Schopenhauer, *Grundlage*, pp. 211—212.

²⁷ Schopenhauer, *Grundlage*, p. 208.

²⁸ Another way of viewing what Schopenhauer meant by "identification" would be that it is the acceptance of others as having a reality equal to one's own. This view is suggested by contrasting his description of the egotist with that of an *mitleidend* individual. The egotist acts completely selfishly. He/she only pursues his/her own interest without any regard for the effects of their actions on other people's lives. To ignore the effects of one's action, he thinks, is to treat others as if they were less real than one's self. *Mitleidend* individuals, however, have the knowledge (through the experience of the other's suffering) that other sentient beings exist. He/she either refrains from behaving in ways that would cause others to suffer or he or she helps others. Both of these ways of behaving imply that, unlike the egotist, the *mitleidend* individual pursues not only his or her own interests, but also those of others. By making the interests of others count in this way, they are treated just as one's own. Thus by this identification of interests (one's own and others') either as a motive for the restraint from certain actions or as the motive to perform certain actions, other individuals are granted a reality equal to one's own. (This view also completely insulates Schopenhauer from Scheler's constant complaints about his metaphysical monism. For it elucidates a sense of "identity" that is located solely within the scope of his theory of *Mitleid*, and which is independent from his metaphysical identification of all individuals.) Cf. *Grundlage* § 14, § 16, and § 22 where elements of this view are suggested.

²⁹ I have not attempted to answer all of Scheler's criticisms especially since some of them are contingent on his misdescription of Schopenhauer's theory. I have also avoided those criticisms that seem to be based on psychological ground. Thus I have not defended Schopenhauer against such charges as the following: „... seine Lehre gewinnt außerdem in der Darstellung noch einen Charakter, der sogar einen, wenn auch verhüllten Zug grausamer Lust an Leiden Anderer verrät“ (*Wesen*, p. 60). Scheler substantiates this claim by recounting how Schopenhauer could hardly contain his elation at hearing of the toils and troubles of his friends, and that instead of offering them help or consolation, he noted how their experiences helped confirm his teaching. It should be clear, however, that such *ad hominem* arguments do not refute his theory of *Mitleid*: its soundness or lack of it has nothing to do with Schopenhauer's *Mitleid* or lack of it.

Zusammenfassung

Max Scheler hat Schopenhauers Mitleidslehre unter den verschiedensten Aspekten kritisiert. Er spricht davon, daß Schopenhauer die ethische Bedeutung des Mitleids nicht richtig eingeschätzt habe, da er es nur als eine Quelle des Wissens um die Universalität des Leidens betrachte. Dieses Wissen, so Scheler, nimmt Schopenhauer entweder als Anreiz zur Resignation oder als Trost für jeweils eigenes Leiden. Diese Auffassungen zeigen, wie sehr Scheler die Mitleidslehre Schopenhauers mißverstanden hat. Jeder, der sich ernsthaft mit Schopenhauers Ethik beschäftigt, weiß daß Schopenhauer ständig die ethische Bedeutung des Mitleids als eines Ansporns zum altruistischen Handeln unterstreicht, als eines Ansporns, der unsere natürlichen

egoistischen Neigungen besiegen kann. Schelers Behauptungen, Schopenhauers Auffassung des Mitleids sei unvereinbar mit seinem metaphysischen Monismus, und seine Mitleidstheorie sei eine Schilderung von „Gefühlsansteckung“ und Identifikation [mit dem anderen], krankten ebenfalls an solchen Interpretationsproblemen. Schelers Mißverstehen der Mitleidslehre Schopenhauers läßt seine Kritik leer erscheinen. Wenn diese Lehre Probleme bietet, so hat jedenfalls Scheler nicht vermocht, sie nachzuweisen.