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HUSSERL AND NON-FORMAL ETHICS

abstract

From its very beginnings, Husserl's philosophical life was characterised by the interweaving between ethical reflection and logical-argumentative rigour. It is not just a matter of the constant efforts that were put into a theoretical formulation that was always aimed at constant formal coherence, but also and above all, of the progressive association of a rigorous ethics with the value of the individual-personal dimension. The phenomenological analysis of the values – intertwined with those of perceptive-intellective experiences, feeling and volition – gradually find a common denominator that progressively takes shape in the ethical-non-formal theme of personal motivation.

keywords

Ethics, Non-Formal, Perception, Value, Motivation.

1. Ethics and logic From the very start, Husserl's *philosophical life* was influenced considerably by the interweaving of ethical reflection and logical-argumentative rigour. In autobiographical notes dated September 1906 Husserl emphatically declares that his task is that of a critique of assessing reason, in the sense of a combination of practical rationality and logic, adding that he could not really live "without being able to reach a clear understanding, including its general characteristics, of the meaning, essence, methods and key points of view of a critique of reason" (Husserl, 1984, p. 445)¹. This is therefore a *critique of reason* that must also be able to demonstrate the *essential* tie with one's own personal being in its deepest roots. In an extract from a series of lessons on the ethics and philosophy of law held in 1897, Husserl claimed that the doubts regarding the scepticism and ethical relativism regarded not so much any questions that were related to academic diatribe but rather to the much more personal (*allerpersönchliste*) in "each spiritually noble soul" (Husserl, 1988, p. 383). As is generally known, in a cycle of lessons held between 1908 and 1914, Husserl drew on the subjects he had already discussed regarding the ethical sphere and the one connected to values but more extensively.² Here the ethical discussion was mainly based on the attempt to describe a *formal rigour* that was analogue to that of logic. Drawing explicitly on one of the issues that had already been discussed in *Prolegomena to pure logic* (Husserl, 1913a), one of the underlying questions dealt with in the lessons on ethics concerned none other than the relationship between logic and practical reason, in which the former had to "as it were also take a look at the terrain of the practical, lending it the intellectual eye" (Husserl, 1988, p. 64). This is not only a case of continuously highlighting the need of ethics for a formal rigour as its first level, but also of highlighting a material aspect of content as its superior layer, linked to the essential dimension of subjective practice (cf. Husserl, 1988, pp. 139-141). In a retrospective look around *Logical Investigations*, Husserl underlined the crucial importance that reflection on the interweaving between the cognitive life and the practical-evaluating life had had in that period, emphasising the need to gain from the interior (*in innerer Erfahrung*) "a clear understanding of how 'truth' arises as a product of 'rational' knowledge, how authentic value

1 From now on the translations of the quotations of the original German texts are by the author.

2 Husserl had already been dealing with ethics since the course he had held in Halle as *Privatdozent* in the summer semesters in 1891, 1893, 1984, 1985 and 1987 and in the summer semester of 1902 (cf. SCHUMANN, 1977, pp. 30, 35, 41, 45, 51).

arises as a product of 'rational' assessment, how ethical goods arise in wanting the ethically correct as a subjective product" (Husserl, 1968, p. 30).

As in the case of cognitive judgement, the practical sphere must also include the essential component of conviction: understanding means being convinced. The judgemental proposition that expresses the intention of this content "this C is P" has its parallel in the conviction expressed by the practical intention in the proposition "this C must be P". What is true for an analogy with logic for the content of will and desire must also be true for assessment "in the same way as the content of judgement are due truth and falseness, and correlatively to the act of judgement logical rationality and irrationality, in the same way in the axiological field of contents of value the predicates of being a value or an un-value are due" (Husserl, 1988, p. 50).

According to Husserl there are three fundamental types of reason: the logical-cognitive, the axiological and the practical. The fundamental question, one that was to gain increasing importance in Husserl's ethical reflections, was not only that of distinguishing any differences and formal analogies between logic and axiology, but also of understanding the tie with the practical dimension. As we shall see when looking more closely at the ethical-personal element, in this context the logical-cognitive aspect is to play a role together with the close relationship between the axiological field and the practical volitive-decisional sphere, in which contents and characteristics such as values, assets, behaviour and objectives will emerge more and more clearly as the correlated objectives of the acts of feeling and wishing.

As can also be seen from fragments of the summer semester lessons in 1902 on *Fundamental Questions of Ethics* (Husserl, 1988, pp. 384-419), from the very start in his critical contraposition to Kant and Hume, Husserl's approach basically followed that of Brentano (Husserl, 1987, p. 304, pp. 308-309).³ In other words, whether it was possible to create a foundation of ethics by analysing feeling, without being entangled in the fields of relativism and scepticism. Brentano credited Hume with having entrusted feeling with an essential role in the foundation of ethics, unlike Kant without, however, having understood that feelings are basically "the pre-condition of ethical principles" (Brentano, 1952, pp. 55-56). In a lesson held in 1902 Husserl embraced this acceptance fully when he claimed that "it is clear that one cannot talk of good and evil at all if it is detached from feeling (*Gefühl*)" (Husserl, 1988, p. 394).

It is therefore impossible that a principle or norm of ethic action is devoted to the essential role carried out by feeling and desire without any reference. Imagining the absence of such a relationship would be like imagining "a being that is incapable of perceiving colours at the same time. In the same way that we might know beings who are colour blind, in the case of a being without feeling (*gefühlblind*), we would be dealing with the loss of any moral content. Moral concepts would become senseless" (Husserl, 1988, p. 404). The emotional dimension is therefore of extreme importance when clarifying the sphere of *ethic rigour*, together with questions regarding values, their understanding, rational choice and the concrete determination of will. In his lessons in 1908/1909 on *Fundamental Problems of Ethics* Husserl was already trying to discuss the role of feeling as a necessary way to access values on the one hand, and on the other, the question of their objectivity in the problematic relationship between intellect and feeling (cf. pp. 249 ff.). "How can one become conscious in the feeling (*Gemütsakt*) of a value in itself, Husserl asks, and how can one expect and not just expect it but also found it on its truth?" (p. 250). If it is therefore recognised that feeling has the privilege

2. Ethical feeling

³ In the winter semester of 1884/1885 and 1885/1886, Husserl had followed Brentano's lessons on Practical Philosophy (Schumann, 1977, pp. 13-15).

of being able to access values, one must, however, not only ask the question of knowledge in itself of a value through feeling, but also of how value can effectively be *felt* and *judged* as such and therefore be able to be known permanently as true or not, as a something that is inevitably destined to disperse itself and dissolve. “This is where the most difficult questions arise. What is the function of feeling (*Gemüt*) regarding the objectification of values that is ultimately carried out by intellect, and what is the latter’s authentic role?” (p. 253)⁴. In his famous § 15 of *Fifth Logical Investigations* (Husserl, 1913b, pp. 397-399), together with the question of the objectivity of feeling, Husserl also raised that of its relationship with the structure of the act, of the intentional experience (*Erlebnis*). Here the relationship with values, which is decisive in clarifying the intentionality of feeling, as is to be the case in the period immediately afterwards, is not yet completely clear, even if the need to reveal the rational-intentional aspect for the emotional sphere is already expressed. As is generally known, when discussing Brentano’s attitude Husserl introduces two fundamental classifications for experiences of conscience based on the distinction between content and quality of the act (*Materie und Qualität des Aktes*): the quality of the objectifying act and that of the non-objectifying one. According to Husserl, Brentano’s position, which is based exclusively on the intentional reference of feeling to a represented object, is insufficient because it does not take this distinction into account, whereas it is indispensable not only to understand the sense of intentionality, but also its specific relationship with the emotional sphere. Brentano does not fully grasp the character of the act of feeling precisely because he does not distinguish, as regards the intentional object, content from its quality; in other words, in intentional understanding he does not distinguish what is understood from the way it is understood (cf. pp. 386-387). According to Husserl, objectifying acts are those kinds of intentional experiences (*Erlebnisse*) that result in the intuitive manifestation of any objectivity and in which each object corresponds to a representation of the object, whether real or imaginary. Objectifying acts are then distinguished in positional and non-positional acts, depending on whether they attribute the existence of “the value of being” (p. 465) to the object or not. The non-objectifying acts, the class of which feeling also belongs to, are not directly involved, only indirectly, in the representation of the objects, even if they *require* them and are, in their regard, “debtors of their intentional reference” (p. 390). It is known that Husserl’s first solution to this qualitative difference lay in connecting the objective sense of the latter to the need to rest on the objectifying ones and their representative capacity (cf. pp. 493-494). However, clarifying the intentional relationship of feeling with one’s own object also consists in the fact that it is impossible to separate this interweaving between the intention and what it refers to. For example, being able to imagine “a pleasure (*ein Gefallen*) without something pleasant (*Gefälliges*)” would be unthinkable. On the other hand, an associative reference such as the one between the city of Naples and the Vesuvius does not exclude in the slightest that both can be thought of alone. Paradoxically, all of this results in the fact that feelings, precisely because they are constitutively in *intentional debt* towards the own object not only prove to be like certain kind of acts, experiences of conscience, but also like real “intentions”, *unavoidable requests*, “authentic acts in our acceptance”. In other words, feelings reveal the necessity that indissolubly binds the intentional reference to the own object like, for example, “*the specific essence of pleasure requires the reference to something that pleases*” (pp. 389-390). In fact, there is nothing causal about this relationship instead, as we shall see, it is of a *motivational* nature and according to Husserl, in turn, makes it possible to clarify further the actual meaning of the intentional experience (*Erlebnis*): “certainly, we say that the object arouses our

4 For more about these questions in the period 1908-1911 (cf. Husserl, 1988, pp. 322-325; 2020, pp. 1-190).

pleasure (...) but the possible result of this apparent causality (...) contains without a doubt the intentional reference. This is no extrinsic causal relationship” (pp. 390-391). It is therefore not an empirical relationship between us and the effect that something exterior causes in us, but an intentional relationship. For example, the being pleasant, the pleasantness *motivated* by the view of a real landscape, is not a mechanical consequence caused by the physical reality of the landscape, but instead belongs to its specific mode of intentional experience (*Erlebnis*), that of enjoyment, that must necessarily be distinguished by other possible modes of action, such as that of being perceived, remembered, or simply imagined. Furthermore, as in the case of enjoyment, feeling merges with and becomes one with sensation (*Empfindung*). In his reflections in *Logical Investigations*, the sensation is nothing other than the base, the support of the act, but it possesses neither directional strength nor that *aiming at* that is typical of intention. Instead, it is a simple *hyle*, a sensitive material that is animated, *takes shape*, thanks to intentional experience (*Erlebnis*).

Joy in the face of a happy event is certainly an act. But this act, one that is not, however, merely intentional in character but a concrete experience (*Erlebnis*) and complex *eo ipso*, includes in its unity not only the representation of a joyful event and the character of the act of pleasure it refers to; its representation is connected to a sensation of feeling that on the one hand is perceived and localised, as a stimulus that arouses the affectivity of the psycho-physical subject and, on the other, as objective property (p. 394).

The sensation is therefore presented on the one hand as a sort of stimulus for the feeling to fulfil itself and, on the other, as a sort of property that is separate in itself. However, from these two aspects the question of the objectivity of *feeling* remains unanswered: that, for example, of the pleasantness that is neither wholly the result of a presumed non-intentional sensation, nor even of the representation it must refer to. The thematic introduction of value as an intentional correlate of feeling then alleviates this difficulty and once again questions that actual character of feeling solely from the perspective of a characteristic of a non-objectifying act.

Already in his lessons on *Fundamental Questions of Ethics* in 1902 and therefore immediately after *Logical Investigations*, Husserl claimed that “feeling (*Gefühl*) is established with manifestation and its object appears as a value” (1988, p. 410). For example, being able to understand, recognise and establish a pleasant object as a *value* means it is also possible to indicate that there is also the possibility of a clear intentional object for emotional experiences as well. This was a decisive moment for Husserl’s ethical phenomenology because it enabled him to make a concrete link between feeling (*Fühlen*) and judgement of value. In fact, being connected to the display of a value, feeling (*Gefühl*), appears as a way to access it and an indispensable premise if it is to be understood and recognised. In this manner the actual sense of the subject’s passivity is radically transformed and the isolation between feeling, and sensation loses meaning, with the latter being completely encompassed inside the intentional structure. Once removed from the isolation into which the non-intentional, in itself *blind* aspect of sensation (*Empfindung*) forces it, the feeling gradually becomes not only the necessary precognition for cognition of the value, but also the *subjective* part that is correlated to the value as its own *object*, as will become clear in the lessons on ethics in 1920/1924 (Husserl, 2004).

The actual possibility of ethical material connected to axiological and practical rationality can therefore also be unfolded and expanded in this recognition of the particular character of affective intentionality, in its being able to relate *objectively* to values. This expansion is finally recognised in volume I of *Ideen* in 1913, when Husserl explicitly states that “the acts

of pleasure ('fulfilled' or not), including the acts of feeling and will of all kinds are 'acts', 'intentional experiences' and that in any case '*Intentio*' and 'taking a position belong to them' (Husserl, 1976, p. 241). There is therefore a sphere of objectivity not only in the way in which we *understand* something pleasant, but also in which we understand something desirable, or want or evaluate; in other words, *someone* "takes a position" to *something* depending not only on common characteristics, but also on the specific characteristics of every kind of intentional experience (*Erlebnis*). Therefore, the different kinds of act, the different experiences of conscience with their corresponding subjects, can always be interconnected even if it may often be the case that one of them, within this *taking a position*, maintains control over the others. "It belongs to the essence of every intentional experience (*Erlebnis*), no matter what can be found in its concrete structure, of having at least one, but usually more than one 'positional characters' (...) connected to how it is founded; in this plurality a character is of necessity a character that is *archontic* as it were, one that unifies in itself and dominates all the others" (p. 242). The pleasantness of the colour of a rose, for example, must be distinguished from the value of beauty I attribute to it, from the *belief* as regards its existence, and from the fact that I desire it or decide to possess it. All these positional characters can converge together and reach a synthesis, depending on the *archontic* role of dominance that one of them then assumes over the others, for example, as in the case of the practical-volitive *position* in which one decides they want to choose that specific rose because of the beauty of its colour. What is actually lacking here is a rigid border between the objectifying and non-objectifying acts of *Logical Investigations*, through the recognition of their more complex *positional interweaving*. However, above all what emerges is the possibility of a better understanding of the relationship between logic and ethics that involves the role and understanding of values: Husserl states,

with the essential intercommunity of all positional characters, that of their noematic positional correlates is *eo ipso*. [...] It is here as a last resort that the analogies converge that are perceived at every moment between general logic, the general doctrine of values and ethics that, if followed to their final depths, lead to the constitution of parallel *formal* disciplines: formal logic, axiology and formal practice" (Husserl, 1976, p. 242).

The complexity of the rational-intentional structure is therefore enriched thanks to the objectual sphere of ethics in relation to values. Being endowed with value opens up a new *ontological* dimension for phenomenological reflection: "the new meaning introduces a completely *new dimension of meaning*; with it instead of new partial determinations of simple 'things' *values of things* are constituted, qualities of value, or concrete *obiecta* of value: beauty and ugliness, good and evil; the *obiectum* of use, the work of art, the machine, book, action, fact, etc." (pp. 239-240). Through *feeling* the value is therefore formed into a "new objective layer" that can blend or superimpose itself on other kinds of experience (*Erlebnis*) such as perception, fantasising, judging, etc., so, for example, "the perception as such belongs, as a sense, specifically to perceiving, but it also includes the sense of concrete evaluation, the sense of *which* it establishes" (p. 198).

3. Non-formal ethics

The *intentional* distinction between values and feeling values thus also becomes essential to understand an order and possible hierarchy between diverse spheres of values: for example, the *reality* of a burning cigar represents a fleeting value that dies out together with the end of its enjoyment. On the other hand, the *ideal* value of a symphony remains after it has been performed and its temporary fruition. According to Husserl, value is therefore "*not a subjective*

undertaking (das Ich-Erleben), feeling (das Gefühl), but rather it is felt in the object (im Objekt erfüllte)" (2004, p. 74). Furthermore, this essential distinction between value and feeling involves once again the sphere of personal motivation in its centrality.

If I take a position as regards a specific value, either desiring it or wanting to carry it out, both the optative and volitive dimension require the presence of motivation. In the question regarding what drives desire or wanting to act, once again it proves to be the essence of the value, one that is indissolubly tied to motivation: "inherent [...] *a priori* to the reason of *desiring and wanting*, of taking a position in general, is that each act is in some way motivated. *I cannot desire or want anything without being determined by something, or rather determined by a previous evaluation*" (p. 81). However, in turn, this previous evaluation must necessarily refer to an intentional value that in the end proves to be the true reason behind my action, and therefore "in the pregnant sense, a reason is called such when it motivates more closely the will, therefore always the value" (p. 83). According to Husserl, will and value are therefore fundamentally interwoven, becoming one with the representation of the desired object and its evaluation, "the act of will is motivated by the *intentional value in evaluating*" (p. 215). The non-formal ethical meaning of this convergence will become clearer in our concluding remarks.

However, the characteristic that bound together the interweaving between logic and ethics from the very beginning, its true *analogon*, which was never to disappear during Husserl's reflections, was the radical and rigorous contraposition to scepticism. From the very start, the fundamental principle of Husserl's phenomenology also applies for ethics: it must correspond to the systematic nature required by scientific nature that "is anything but a personal invention and instead lies in the *things themselves* and it is simply a case of discovering it and revealing it in its essential traits" (Husserl, 1913a, p. 15). If ethics wants to be able to direct practical action, it must adopt the argumentative rigour of logic, not only translating its *propositions* in theoretical enunciations but also, and above all, in rigorously founded practical requests (cf. Husserl 1988, p. 25). The discipline of ethics therefore requires a *form* and a *subject*; it also requires the enunciation of a rigorous logical structure for the latter as well as, as we shall see, highlighting the essential correlation between them that only reflection on the dimension of personal motivation is able to show.

Naturally a distinction must be made between ethics and logic: ethics refers to action while logic refers to thought, but they exist together, *they live together* in *rational practice*, which they are subordinate to in a *having to act* in which each of us is intimately summoned in accordance with our own abilities and personal disposition. Against scepticism, in the same way logic aims at rational correctness, ethic also aims at correct and rational actions:

Moral action, no matter how it is defined further, is a sphere that is circumscribed by action in general. Hence, if we want to outline the concept more extensively, ethics must be led back to reason in practice in general. Extreme ethical scepticism must therefore mean the negation of practical reason, the negation of any unconditioned objective validity in the entire field of practice. Here there is an analogy: sceptical *assertions* have the characteristic of denying in their content what they reasonably presume since they are assertions (Husserl, 1988, p. 33).

The sceptic who denies the validity of rational practice therefore embodies the extreme contradiction: not only because they are forced to deny in *actu exercito* what they presume in *actu signato*; in other words, they are forced to the evident contradiction of repudiating their own rational abilities despite exercising them, but also because by doing so they inexorably renounce their own authentic personal chance, and by auto-contradicting themselves are also

denying themselves the rational request that conceals the *practical value* of being able to give life to one's own individual fulfilment.

But what belongs by right to the practical sphere and distinguishes it from logic is its normative need that is dictated by the field of concrete, actual experience. According to Husserl, the history of ethical principles and laws had always focused on what is pursued rationally and appropriately in the attempt to establish what the greater good and goods are, in other words, what the "highest rational objective of human action" is (p. 40). Logic, however, taken on its own –must limit itself to analytical correctness; in other words, it must not go beyond the validity of its own formal inferences, even though it can obviously manifest itself *materially*, as, for example, in the "arithmetic proposition $3 + 3 = 6$, applied to apples becomes 3 apples and 3 apples equals 6 apples" (p. 41). In itself, the logical sphere therefore remains *closed* in its analytical-formal aspect and this, although important, is its only *validity*, regardless of its need to be translated into any actual reality. Conversely, the ethical-practical sphere clearly requires a comparison with experience in order to be able to establish its own truths and criteria so as to make it possible on the one hand "to understand the ethical goodness or evil of the individual cases as they occur and, on the other, to come to a positive decision in the face of a practical decision as to whether it is ethically correct or not" (p. 42). According to Husserl, critical reflection on the general principles of traditional ethical doctrines must therefore focus not only on the fundamental problem of the relationship between logical validity and principles of ethical practice, but also on the relationship between their formal aspect and in terms of content. What needs to be discussed and resolved is the problem that one inevitably finds oneself faced with having to choose one of the two aspects, to the detriment of the other or, as in the case of Kantian critique, having to seek an unconditioned formal principle that can be used for the universal deduction of ethically correct behaviour. According to Husserl, the limit of Kant's categorical imperative lies in reaching a dualistic result in which the cognitive sphere appears to be radically separated from the practical one owing to the fact that practical behaviour has to be deduced from a formal principle. In Husserl's opinion, limiting oneself to the formal rigour as dictated by the analytical need of moral law is insufficient, and this can only be known and understood in its essential material-content through experience. Thus, Kant's formal ethics poses the actual risk of keeping one's own *material* empty and undifferentiated.⁵

Husserl therefore believes that the understanding of the choice requested by the practical-actual context remains completely unaffected, which is in itself non-deductible from a purely formal principle and law, since "in no way does the correctness of formal logic determine non-formal correctness" (1988, p. 43). Both in the practical sphere of will and in that of values, the ethical discipline must therefore be able to clarify and distinguish its own formal principles and its own content; in other words, it has to be able to indicate the correlation between the purely formal aspect and the content circumstances in their fundamental characteristics, the characteristics by means of which one can constitute practical action as rational action.

⁵ In a debate with Kant, in his lessons in 1920-1924, Husserl claimed that "only the consideration of the material of will, of the non-formal contents that have to be desired as it were, can teach how I have to want in a concrete case, and these same non-formal materials have to provide me with the premises of will, the reasons of will, providing both me and every other rational being in the same way. *The claim of having to prescind from the non-formal content is absurd in both the sphere of will and in that of thought*" (2004, p. 235). Cf. Heffernan, 2022, pp. 94-95 and pp. 102-105.

As regards the question of Kantian formalism, however, Heidegger's criticism of Max Scheler could also be addressed in part to Husserl. Heidegger rightly emphasized in Kant the non-formal importance of the *content* of the phenomenon of respect (*Achtung*) as an authentic mode in which the dignity of being personal is revealed. Cf. Heidegger, 1975, pp. 195-195. Cf. Kant, 1968, pp. 71-89.

Formal axiology and practice, which are made possible by the analysis of experience in its *essential configuration* and created in analogy with the rigour of logic, are therefore necessary but insufficient:

with all its laws formal logic cannot put us in a position of having to deduce the tiniest factual truth. [...] The same can also be said of axiology and formal practice. Within the boundaries of what is practically achievable, the best is the enemy of the good: deferring the best is totally wrong, in the same way that choosing the best is unconditionally required as the only right thing and, therefore absolutely correct. With this formal principle before one's eyes, it can be useful to enunciate it explicitly in the same way that it can be useful to formulate logical-formal laws, allowing oneself to be warned by them. And nevertheless, this does not provide us with a definite reply to the question about what is good, better and the best (Husserl, 1988, p. 140).

A link between the analytical-formal and content principles must therefore be indicated for practical and axiological reasons. Furthermore, the essential link with the own content also *conditions* the *quality* of practical action: there cannot be a norm, an ethical principle without it arising from a contextual reference to one's own action, in the same way that the practical-essential content of action also determines the ethical-rational *sense* of the action. In addition to a judgement whose content is a valid or invalid proposition, which *qualifies* itself as logically rational or irrational, there will therefore have to be a content of value or disvalue as regards axiological rationality and a good or bad decision to be taken in conformance with practical rationality. Husserl underlines that

also here formal laws should be given a priori. [...] Not norms of rational judgement but norms of evaluation, desire and rational will. Furthermore, this analogy would require that accordingly between judgement and content of judgement (between the thinking and contents of meaning of the thinking), one can and must be able to distinguish in the practical sphere between *wanting as an act* and, as it were, the *content of wanting* as a meaning of wanting as it is a practical proposition (Husserl, 1988, p. 49).

Owing to their essential nature, while formal laws can therefore not be confused with anything that is involved in the choice of goods and materially determined values, their *legality* in concrete experience does, however, need to be recognised in their eyes; in other words, using Husserl's terminology, they require a *material a priori*, that is, the possibility to trace and recognise the *essential* truth of those principles in the concrete everyday reality:

if there were no *material a priori*, if the genres and kinds of objects that they were bringing with them a priori could not be distinguished, on the basis of their essence of genre, predicates of value, then the very concept of objective value and, as a result, the very idea of an objectively previously delineated preferability and of a the better good would find itself without a support (Husserl, 1988, p. 139).

In this sense motivation plays a key role with its tie to values since it supports rational practice not in a mechanical sense, but as a *material and non-formal condition* of the creation of meaning: understanding the meaning of a rational action means understanding its *motivational connection*, it means reconstructing its origins and being able to make it completely understandable. In *Ideen II*, Husserl defines personal motivation as the norm the *subject of*

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intentionality is subjected to, as the “law of spiritual life” (1942, p. 220)⁶. Without any personal motivation in all its radicality as its foundation, there can therefore be no true ethical action. Furthermore, this is the only way in which the absolute command of the categorical imperative can be expressed with need. Accordingly, *the a priori of motivation* is not simply revealed as a formal condition of the ethical value, but as a condition that should actually be understood as what *essentially* determines it, as its true *material and non-formal* content.

As seen earlier, based on the central role that the motivation sphere plays in ethical action, these considerations also transform the sense and reasons of the phenomenology of Husserl’s values completely. Starting in the twenties, the idea progressively established itself that the values, their recognition, and their *normative ness* are mainly involved in – and are closely related to – the subject of the implementation of a practical will in its essentially personal characterisation. In other words, Husserl was becoming more and more convinced that the practical-rational meaning of the existence of an unconditional duty must necessarily comply with one’s own essential order of values and with the pursuable purposes and aims that such an order refers to. Furthermore, thanks to the central role played by motivation, the question of the *static* consideration of the objectivity of values as an *intentional fact* that conditioned the first phase of Husserl’s ethics so significantly, at least until 1914, was gradually replaced by the analysis of the *dynamic* aspect of the formation of values and their intentional *genesis*.

During the course *Fundamental Questions of Ethics* in 1908/09, in response to Brentano’s formal categorical imperative, “to do the best you can of what is achievable in everything that is subject to your sphere of rational action,” Husserl claimed that although he thought that principle seemed “to be a slightly strained formulation,” it basically needed “no improvement.” (Husserl, 1988, pp. 350-351). Founded on the popular saying that the best is the enemy of the good, this formal-practical principle states that we do not act at all well, indeed, we act worse, in a manner that is evidently completely irrational, when in preferring just any object, we make a better one subordinate (*Hinsetzen*).⁷ In reference to an objection from Moritz Geiger that not all values can be compared with one another – such as, for example, that of a mother who finds herself having to decide whether to save her child or not – in a note in 1909 Husserl declared that in his lessons he was convinced when he claimed “that the highest value is a positional value” and that he had come across it “in the concept of a having to be positional as something to be achieved unconditionally” (Husserl, 1988, p. 419). These considerations on the categorical imperative were to be resumed integrally in his course on ethics in 1914, in which he once again confirmed the formal validity of Brentano’s principle. However, in this context Husserl also looked at the insufficiency of this principle for the concrete normative determination of the good, of the optimal and of the best.

As has already emerged from our previous observations, this lack was seen first and foremost in relation to the need for an improved *clarification* of the formal principles, in relation to the *non-formal* ones that are necessarily and concretely required by an individual and social ethic⁸. In the same year Husserl also went back to the example in Geiger’s objection. In fact, in that case the problem of the best choice does not arise because the unconditional duty of a mother, *her* categorical imperative, is that of saving her child’s life even if, as Husserl added, renunciation would be admissible, for example from the perspective of a supreme sacrifice

6 For more in-depth reference to these issues cf. Ubiali, 2012 and the essays contained in the first part of Ubiali & Wherle, 2015, pp. 3–140.

7 For more about the revival of the Brentano principle of the absorption of good in the best in the 1914 university course cf. Husserl, 1988, p. 140; Husserl, 2012, p. 129.

8 Cf. Husserl, 1988, pp. 139–141.

such as that towards one's homeland in the sense of the superior common good.⁹ Finally, a self-critical reconsideration of Geiger's objection to Brentano's categorical formal imperative is to be found in a note belonging to the 1919/20 winter semester course *Introduction to Philosophy*: Husserl says,

it is clear that an ethic carried out in accordance with the purely categorical imperative is not in the least ethical, as I postulated in reference to Brentano. Once again, I reverted to my old way of thinking, but as early as 1907 Geiger had already objected, and rightly so, that it would be ridiculous to ask a mother to have to think about whether supporting her child could be the best of her choices in a practical field (Husserl, 2012, p. 146, footnote 1).

A further fundamental trait for the intentional analysis of the will and of *feeling* values then proves to be making a distinction between will and desire. Having to study closer not only the existence of the motivational nexus therefore remains fundamental, for example that between aesthetic pleasure and the value of beauty; equally fundamental are the ways in which values can actually be translated into reality, as in the case of the different intentional modes of desire, choice and will. As Husserl stated in his lessons of 1914, "no matter how alive I am, mere desire (*das bloße Wünschen*) is still not a will" (1988, p. 104). Unlike desire, will requires the affirmation of a value, its *es fiat*, its *imperative* having to be. Will is the next step, immediately after motivation but, unlike desire, it is not *placed* indeterminately as regards the creation of value, but instead requires its concrete implementation: "desire implies a 'one wishes it is', will [implies] an 'it must be'" (p. 105). It is precisely in its intrinsic bond with the *imperative* force of true motivation that rational will basically differs from desire: I want and ardently desire victory, but longing (*Begehren*) in itself is not indispensable for will to establish itself; certainly, will can transform desire into reality but in the case of a much yearned for victory that is finally achieved, it does not depend on desire (cf. Husserl, 1988, p. 156)¹⁰. Will on the other hand, is completely *self-sufficient* as its reasons lie in the strength and validity of the motivation. Furthermore, only the strength and *reasonable* validity of motivation can transform desire into actual reality: acting to implement what is considered to be a good cause, finds its own real reason for existing in the *motivated value* of the latter and not, as is clear in many cases of fanaticism, in the possible passion with which one fights for their implementation.

The relationship between will and subjectivity is therefore never mechanical since the origins of rational action always lie in *the reason behind motivation*. Since spiritual motivation is not a mechanical cause, the actual subject of ethical choice must always carry out a critical task; in other words, above all it has to question the meaning of its own action and the reasons behind its own motivation. It is in this form of awareness that the sense lies of a normative will that does not also simply reflect a personal coherence that would apply for example, also in the case in which "a criminal pursues an objective that has been prepared over time according to a plan" (Husserl, 2004, p. 250). A will aimed at one's best, at "my best possible life [...] that cannot have its truth in isolation" (p. 252) is instead essentially bound to the will of other and the recognition of their personal motivations since, "the recognition of others, their feelings

⁹ Cf. Husserl, 1988, pp. 421-422.

¹⁰ Around 1910-1911 Husserl was still wondering about problematic nature of the founding bond between desire and will, (cf. Husserl, 2020, pp. 40-47).

of love (*Liebesgesinnung*) spur me on to recognise myself as the one who struggles and fights against evil and, at the same time, strengthens the reciprocal faith between myself and the others” (Husserl, 2014, p. 287).

According to Husserl, through empathy (*Einfühlung*), understanding oneself and one’s own motivations therefore also allow a better understanding of the motivations of others: “I understand why the other person made such a decision, I understand why they formulated this judgement” (1952, p. 230)¹¹. The question of deciding to implement one’s most authentic values, in the continuous orientation of one’s own personal and social life thus constitutes the real *material content* and *non-formal* sense of ethical rigour. In his introductory remarks of the lesson on *Fundamental questions of ethics and values* in 1914, Husserl formulated the necessity for this ethical need as follows: “the pressing question arises for anyone aiming at higher goals: how can I escape the distressing disagreement with myself, and the legitimate reproachfulness of my fellow creatures? How can I arrange my entire life around the good and beautiful and how can I, in line with traditional expression, acquire pure *eudaimonia*, true happiness?” (1988, p. 11)¹².

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11 The transcendental aspect of empathy, which for Husserl means the necessary and essential modality of the others’ experience (*Fremderfahrung*), and more generally his fundamental importance as a mode of intentional modification, is not discussed here. For an in-depth analysis of these issues cf. Venier, 2011.

12 For more about the strong assonance between Husserl’s words and Max Scheler’s introductory comments in *Ordo amoris*, cf. Scheler 1986, p. 347, and Venier, 2013 p. 99. For a theoretical comparison between Scheler and Husserl cf. Melle 1997, pp. 203-219 and Venier, 2015, pp. 249-270.

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