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THE AXIOLOGY OF DIETRICH VON HILDEBRAND. FROM PHENOMENOLOGY TO METAPHYSICS

abstract

In what follows, I would like to trace Dietrich von Hildebrand's thinking on the nature of axiological properties. Hildebrand begins his analysis from the phenomenology of what we experience as important and distinguishes three categories of importance: the subjectively satisfying, the value and the objective good of the person. He then moves on to metaphysical analysis to clarify whether the categories describe properties of objects and concludes that the foundation of all importance is value, the intrinsic preciousness. He also examines the families of values and the relations between being and value. This analysis has an important completion in the investigation of the types of oughtness, which allow us to understand the foundation of norms. Hildebrand's value theory makes it possible to address some crucial metaphysical problems, in particular the question of whether good ultimately triumphs. The epistemological premise of Hildebrand's perspective, however, is the thesis that man experiences not only facts, but also values.

keywords

Hildebrand, values, ought, norms, metaphysics, experience

1. Introduction In what follows, I would like to trace Dietrich von Hildebrand's thinking on the nature of axiological properties and, from this perspective, to show how Hildebrand moves from phenomenology to metaphysics to investigate the relationship between being, importance and ought-to-be.

Let us begin by noting that, in his works, Hildebrand usually does not use the term "axiological properties", but rather speaks of "categories of importance" and above all of values. This depends, as far as I can understand, on the fact that Hildebrand first examines the motivation relationship, i.e. the possible ways in which an object can motivate the human will or affectivity, and only then addresses the question of the objective foundation of motivation. It seems to me that the expression "axiological properties" can nevertheless be useful to focus on the crucial dilemma of any philosophy of values: are we motivated only by that which we value for us, in relation to our subjective preferences, or are there also things that motivate us because they have value in themselves, so values express a property of beings? However, to apply the expression "axiological properties" to Hildebrand, I think it is necessary to distinguish between a broad and a strict meaning of it. As far as the broader sense is concerned, axiological properties are those properties that make a thing good or bad, thus opposing what is neutral. If by "good" or "bad" we mean whatever is positively or negatively important, the expression can be applied to all three categories of importance that – as we shall see – are introduced by Hildebrand, albeit in a different sense for each. In a more specific sense, on the other hand, axiological properties indicate the objective foundation of the importance of things, actions, states of affairs. With reference to this meaning, only values are axiological properties.

I will try to distinguish between the noematic aspect of the question (what is the nature of axiological properties) and the noetical aspect (how we experience axiological properties) and I will deal mainly with the first issue. However, for Hildebrand, as in all phenomenologists, these aspects cannot be separated: the manner of experiencing values depends on their nature, and their nature can only be truly grasped by experiencing values. This inseparable relationship between experience of values and the nature of values is based on a solid epistemological framework, which Hildebrand presents in *What is Philosophy?* (2021) and in the first part of his most important works (2020; 2016; 2009). The theory of knowledge described in them allows us to include Hildebrand among the realist phenomenologists, namely to the group of Husserl's early disciples who took up the call to "return to things themselves" expressed in the *Logical Investigations* and turned it into their main philosophical vocation.

The most important feature of their approach to axiological properties is that they are not constituted by the evaluative activity of the subject but are rather discovered as properties of objects (Drummond 2002, p. 8).

In order to expound Hildebrand's conception of ontological properties, I think it is first necessary to clarify what the categories of importance are, which Hildebrand introduces on the basis of the types of human motivation (§ 2). Secondly, I will follow Hildebrand to explain in what sense each of them can be considered a property of things, so as to understand that values are the foundation of all intrinsic importance (§ 3). To expound the ontological status of values, I will then examine the question of the relation between value and being (§ 4) and, to describe their explicitly axiological character, I will introduce Hildebrand's analysis of the relation between values and ought-to-be (§ 5). It will then be possible to address the decisive metaphysical question of whether values, which are the foundation of any good, have metaphysical primacy over evil (§ 6). Finally, I will briefly address the epistemological premise of Hildebrand's philosophy of values, i.e. how we know values and in particular how it is possible to regard them as properties of objects and not mere subjective feelings (§ 7).

As a consistent phenomenologist, Hildebrand introduces the discussion of values starting from experience, and more precisely from the experience of what is important. In the first chapter of *Ethics*, he writes that before discussing the ontological foundation of importance, it is necessary to clarify the data we experience in a certain and indisputable way (2020, p. 28). Importance for Hildebrand coincides with what can motivate our will and affectivity. In the second chapter of *Ethics*, Hildebrand explains that motivation can be equated with desire, if a) desiring is understood as a typically personal act and b) the objects of desire also include what can affect our feeling and elicit affective responses, such as joy, vengeance, etc. Only under these conditions, the classic definition "*Bonum est quod omnes desiderant*" is acceptable (2020, pp. 30 ff). However, the motivation relation shows that reality itself presents relevant aspects: if being were completely neutral, nothing would be able to motivate our will and our affective sphere. In other words, as well expressed by Crosby, «because something is important, therefore it necessarily has the power to motivate» (1977, p. 255). Spinoza's thesis that we do not desire a thing because we judge it to be good, but on the contrary what we desire we call good, (Spinoza 2018, III, prop. 9 scolio) is therefore completely unacceptable to Hildebrand (2016, p. 31).

He then distinguishes between neutral being and positively or negatively important being, and calls the former good and the latter evil (2020, p. 25). This distinction precedes that between the objective importance of a being and the importance of that being for a subject. Metaphysics goes beyond phenomenology precisely in seeking what importance is, what its meaning is.¹

After distinguishing between being endowed with importance and being neutral, Hildebrand examines the different types of importance, which he calls categories. The distinction of the categories of importance as basic views of motivation is therefore a prerequisite for asking

2. The difference between important and neutral being

3. The categories of importance as properties of being

¹ For Hildebrand there is no real "leap" between phenomenology and metaphysics. Rather, phenomenology is that method which allows us to purify our experience of prejudices, naivety and premature systematization, so as to obtain a philosophical knowledge of necessary essences and the laws rooted in them. Although it is based on experience, this rigorous knowledge for Hildebrand transcends empirical knowledge, and is therefore a priori. Metaphysical investigation makes use of precisely this knowledge of essences. For example, we can start from everyday experience to distinguish between the essential and accidental aspects of a human person, but when we focus on the essence of the person as such, on his or her specifically personal perfections and capacities, we enter metaphysical enquiry.

what kinds of importance a being can possess, independently of the relations of motivation (2020, p. 34).

The experience of receiving a compliment and that of witnessing the act of forgiving a serious offence are perceived as two positive events that can motivate our volitional and affective acts. However, while the former concerns an object that is only subjectively important, the latter refer to an object that is important in itself: its positive importance does not depend on the effect it produces in us. Hildebrand calls this intrinsic importance “value”. Even if things endowed with value, such as a noble moral action or a beautiful starry sky, have a capacity to influence us, do not leave us indifferent, provide delight, nevertheless they have importance regardless of the effect they may have on us. Objects that are only satisfactory to the subject and those endowed with value are both capable of engendering bliss, but whereas the former kind of bliss is an egocentric and transitory delight, the objects endowed with value engender a qualitatively much deeper and fuller happiness (2020, p. 38). These two forms of happiness according to Hildebrand reveals the *essential* difference between the two kinds of importance. Every object possessing value «stands before us, a message, as it were, from on high, elevating us beyond ourselves»: it requires the person experiencing it to give it an adequate response (2020, pp. 38 f). This call does not arise in the face of goods that are merely subjectively satisfying, such as a delicious meal or a game of cards. These goods exert an entirely different, more intrusive attraction on us, they do not make a demand on us, but flatter us (2020, p. 43). In this context Hildebrand makes an explicit criticism of Scheler, accusing him of not having grasped that the difference between the importance in itself and the merely subjective importance of the pleasurable is not a difference of degree (2020, p. 42, reference to Scheler 1921, p. 84 ff). According to Hildebrand, Scheler wrongly considered what is only subjectively satisfying as a lower value because he failed to distinguish between the level of the motivation relationship and the level of the objective importance that beings possess in themselves (2020, p. 45).²

In addition to values and what is only subjectively satisfactory, Hildebrand introduces as a third category of importance the “objective good for the person”. This includes all those goods that are objectively in the true interest of the person (of all persons, of a category of persons or of a specific person). Gratitude, for example, is always motivated by an objective good that we have received. Joy at a friend’s recovery from a serious illness is motivated by an objective good for another person. Many human goods, such as a medicine, technology, means of transport, have no value in themselves and are not only satisfactory for the subject, but constitute objective goods for the person. To investigate the nature of axiological properties, however, we must focus our attention on values, because they are the foundation of the importance in itself of the things, «the true, the valid, the objectively important» (2020, p. 50). At this point we find the transition from phenomenology to metaphysics. Hildebrand states that «the question of importance has as much an original and objective meaning as the question of truth and existence» and is «as fundamental as being» (2020, p. 74). Although this issue has an existential relevance for man, it refers to the metaphysical dimension of reality:

² The concept of value has an economic origin, indicating the capacity of a good to satisfy a need or its capacity to acquire other goods, hence its price. In the light of this usage, one can fully understand why Kant states that the person has dignity, i.e. a value that is priceless. In the philosophical sphere, value gained a significant role in the first half of the 20th century, with R. H. Lotze, A. Meinong, C. von Ehrenfels, W. Windelband, and H. Rickert. It also plays an important role for phenomenology, especially for ethics and aesthetics. Early phenomenology criticizes both Kantian formalism and the psychologistic reduction of value to an effect of human feelings, and seeks to ground the objective character of values. This unites Hildebrand and Scheler, but the distinction between the three categories of importance leads Hildebrand to a more articulate conception of axiological properties than that of Scheler.

it concerns the meaning and *raison d'être* of beings (2020, p. 75). Just as only the being in itself which is autonomous and independent of our intellect can fulfil our search for truth, only what is important in itself can answer the question of importance. In a completely neutral world, everything would lose its meaning: praising a man because he is reliable, persuading someone of the importance of science, appreciating a poem, or following one's conscience are just some of the actions that would lose any meaning (2020, p. 77). But human life would also collapse if only the importance of the subjectively satisfying existed, because we would be imprisoned in egocentrism, without points of reference, and we would have no objective reason to motivate our choices. It is not at all a question of introducing value as a postulate, but rather of pointing out that the concept of value is constantly presupposed. It is such an evident fact that at every moment, even when we try to deny it, we reintroduce it (2020, p. 78). At the same time, value is "the heart and soul of being", "the ultimate word" (2020, p. 80). Chapter 7 of Hildebrand's *Ethics* moves decisively into the ontological question we are interested in, because it examines the question of whether the three categories of importance are only points of view of motivation, inseparable from it, or they are properties of being, independently of any motivation.

As far as the category of what is subjectively satisfying is concerned, its qualitative content is rooted in the pleasure that things can provoke in us; from the point of view of objects, their property is to be pleasant. Pleasant things, however, have the character of a gift for the person, so they are also an objective good for the person, even if on the lowest level of the goods that belong to this category. This gives them an objective character that cannot be reduced to the feeling of pleasure they produce in the subject. For Hildebrand to consider things pleasurable only in the light of the satisfaction they produce in us, is to falsify the universe, because it blinds us to the objective importance they possess. On the other hand, the category of objective goods for the person (and not only those goods that are subjectively satisfying) also refers to a property of beings. Goods such as health and works of art have an importance that implies a relationship with a person, but at the same time is objective, irrespective of the fact that it is the object of a motivation. Hildebrand, in other words, attributes an objective, albeit different, ground to all three categories of importance. This is why in the introduction I clarified that if we consider the expression in a broad sense, all types of importance can be referred to as "axiological properties". The crucial question concerning the nature of axiological properties, however, is whether values are real properties of being, independently of any motivation.

In the tenth chapter of *Ethics*, Hildebrand addresses the question examining the different families of values. In fact, values differ by belonging to groups that are irreducible to each other. The first distinction to be made is between ontological values, such as the value of the human person or of a living being, and qualitative values, which are in turn subdivided into different families, such as moral values and aesthetic ones. The ontological value of a being is proper to that being as such. Once that being exists, it possesses that ontological value and cannot lose it. It cannot possess that value to a greater degree than another being. Qualitative values, on the contrary, may or may not be embodied in a being. For example, a horse may or may not be beautiful, without ceasing to be a horse. Qualitative values can also be possessed in different degrees (2020, p. 141).

As far as qualitative values are concerned, Hildebrand mainly mentions four families: vital values, intellectual values, moral values and aesthetic values. Vital values include those qualities that pertain to life, such as physical energy, health, a strong temperament (Hildebrand 2016, p. 80). Intellectual values are specifically personal, i.e., they require a person as a bearer and include all the capacities pertaining to the sphere of reason and intelligence, such as intellectual acuteness, but also geniality and sensitivity to artistic values (2020, p. 136 note 3). Moral values have as a common denominator the reference to goodness (just as

disvalues have moral evilness as a common reference). Furthermore, the human person is held responsible for them: he or she can be blamed if he or she is stingy or unjust, praised if he or she is generous or fair. This is because the realization of moral values requires a free will. Only moral values, then, can awaken the voice of our conscience and imply a link to reward and punishment (2020, p. 182). Aesthetic values, on the other hand, have the peculiarity of including, as a principal and supreme value, that of beauty, but this does not embrace all values in this sphere. There are aesthetic values that are not a subspecies of beauty, such as the elegant, the poetic, the pleasant (2016, p. 83).

Hildebrand believes that the difference between ontological and qualitative values can explain the divergent conception of good between Plato and Aristotle: Plato, with the idea of transcendent and absolute goodness, in which things participate, develops a vision more suitable for qualitative values; Aristotle, on the other hand, privileging the goodness immanent to every being, has a vision more suitable to describe ontological values (2020, p. 140). In other words, ontological values are closely connected to the corresponding being, they are immanent to that being, whereas for qualitative values one can speak of participation: they transcend the beings that support them, and these beings participate in them. This does not mean, however, that qualitative values are accorded a subsistent reality. As we will see later, they have an ultimate reality in God, but in the created world they are a concrete reality only when they are embodied in an existing being (2020, p. 144, also note 8). We must therefore distinguish between values and their bearers, i.e., the objects that can embody those values. There is an essential relationship between values and their possible bearers: for example, only personal acts can be bearers of a moral value, whereas nature, people, animals, things and works of art can all embody aesthetic values. We can call (intrinsically) “good” those beings that are bearers of one or more values. Therefore, it would be a mistake to regard value only as «an ideal, rooted in the essence of something» and not as a real, concrete, individual property. Just as extension essentially belongs to the nature of matter, and therefore every material being possesses extension among its real, concrete properties, so too values, as soon as an object that embodies them comes into existence, become real properties of that being (2020, p. 92). Josef Seifert pointed out that Hildebrand’s concept of value allows the good to be rooted in being «far more firmly than has ever been done in the history of philosophy» (Seifert 1989, p. 173). For if value is the intrinsic preciousness of a being, it is a genuine property of that being and depends on its essence (Seifert 1996 p. 438 ff). Therefore, only value “makes possible an authentically metaphysical concept of the good” (Seifert 1989, p. 274): having value is a fundamental dimension of being, because it indicates “being insofar as it is precious in itself” (1989, p. 275). John Crosby noted that it may seem self-contradictory to call value as important in itself, for importance seems to include a relation to someone. But we can resolve the apparent contradiction if we consider that “importance is *that in virtue of which a being can motivate or interest someone*”, therefore “value is that kind of importance that lets a being motivate us *just because* of its intrinsic excellence or splendor” (2002, p. 478). One and the same being can be the bearer of several values, ontological and qualitative ones. A human person, for example, possesses the ontological value of the person, but also various capacities that also have an ontological value, such as the will, the intelligence, the heart. In addition, it can possess many kinds of qualitative values, as aesthetic, vital, moral ones. Hildebrand believes that the higher the status of a being, the more values it can possess (2020, p. 150). Moral values have a character of indispensability that is absent for aesthetic or intellectual values; an individual may not possess intellectual values, or may possess only some of them, whereas moral values “are what is primarily demanded of man as such”, because “being morally good pertains essentially to the end of human existence and to man’s destiny” (2020, p. 183).

Once we have understood the essence of values, as the foundation of all importance in itself, it is possible to investigate their ontological status, hence their relationship to being. Hildebrand begins the twelfth chapter of his *Ethics* by stating that the relation between being and value is “one of the most fundamental problems of metaphysics” (2020, p. 152). In the chapter he examines both the *value of being* and the *being of value*.

Regarding the question of *the value of being*, he states that “there is a general value that is proper to being as such”, since “every being possesses a certain value insofar it is something, it is a being” (2020, p. 153). We understand this when we compare a real being to a mere fiction, a product of our imagination. The real being presents itself with an autonomous consistency, a dignity and majesty that is absent in what is a mere imaginary product. The formal value of being as such is not a qualitative value, but is also distinguished from ontological values, because it is based on being as opposed to non-being, and not on the essence and specific existence of a being. It can be grasped in a radical abstraction (2020, p. 154). In virtue of this value, any object, even a useless tool or a stone, if it exists, has an importance. Having said this, when a being has no qualitative value or a very low ontological value, it can be considered as neutral. Moreover, the other values cannot be deduced from the formal value of being. On the contrary, ontological and qualitative values override this value, for example because the general formal value of being is not sufficient to answer the question of whether the world is good or bad (2020, p. 161). Finally, for Hildebrand all beings possess, in addition to their qualitative and ontological values and the general value of being, a value that derives from the fact that they are created by God, the Infinite Good. The link with God “deneutralizes the entire reality in giving to everything an indirect dignity and preciousness that we have seen are present to the mind of the saints” (2020, p. 159).

Regarding the second question, that of *the being of value*, Hildebrand holds that “every value is itself objectively a being”. Both the value of being as such, the ontological value of individual beings, and the qualitative values they embody, are also beings. This has a mysterious character: on the one hand, ontological and qualitative values cannot be reduced to the notion of being, on the other hand they are themselves being (2020, p. 159 f.).

Hildebrand’s disciples investigate the issue in more detail. John Crosby examines Hildebrand’s critique of the classical assertion that “*bonum et ens convertuntur*”, and argues that value is not coextensive with being, but the notion of intrinsic preciousness provides a better metaphysical foundation for the good than the definition of the good as appetible (1977). Josef Seifert deepens the relationship between values and the Absolute Being, starting from the doctrine of pure perfections of Anselm of Aosta (1989). For the purpose of this paper, which is to investigate the nature of axiological properties, it seems important to me, however, to investigate the nature of the relation between being, ought-to-be and value.

Axiological properties are not only characterized by importance, but also by a normative dimension, a relation to oughtness. To elucidate the metaphysical status of values, it is therefore necessary to examine not only their relationship with being, but also their relationship with ought-to-be. In *Moralia* Hildebrand states that there are three different forms of ought (1980, pp. 407 ff).

Firstly, there is the ought-to-be which characterizes all that is non-neutral, important. This is a new metaphysical category with respect to being and non-being that depends essentially on importance, since we affirm that what is endowed with value not only is, but also ought to be: this form of due, therefore, indicates a relation of the good to its existence, which we could express as the convenience of the good existing. John Crosby describes this form of duty as “being justified in existence”; or even “being worthy of existence” (Crosby 1977, p. 301). In the twelfth chapter of *Ethics*, Hildebrand applies this meaning of oughtness to describe

4. The relation between being and value

5. The axiological properties as due relations

the axiological relationship between qualitative values and their existence: “qualitative values – he writes – *should* be realized; their existence is itself something having a value”, just as “qualitative disvalues should not be realized, their non-existence is itself a good” (2020, p. 160). This principle, however, applies to every good, as it is something endowed with positive importance.

The second form of ought concerns the relationship between values and the response of the person and can be expressed by the principle that any good that is important in itself is due a response. This ought manifests itself as a “you should”, as an imperative addressed to the person. Failure to comply with this ought, however, implies disharmony, but not moral guilt. (2020, p. 255). For Hildebrand, this second form of due relation is also a metaphysical, objective relationship, which stems from the nature of values, even if it also implies an essential reference to the person, since the response is always an act that presupposes the person; this form of ought also founds the ability to motivate and makes any realization of values desirable, pleasing, opportune, that is, also endowed with value. Hildebrand also adds that “the person is aware, nevertheless, that when he fails to give an adequate response, it is at his own cost and not at the cost of the object”. Indeed, to say that a response is due every object possessing a value does not mean that the object needs that response (2020, p. 265). Rather, the claim shows that values are withdrawn from the arbitrariness of the person (2020, p. 259). The response must be appropriate both to the quality of the value and to its hierarchical position. There is a proportionality between the duty to give a response and the highness of the value concerned.

The third type of ought is the duty of moral obligation, which can be expressed as “you must”. In *Ethics*, Hildebrand introduces it based on the limits imposed on human will, and distinguishes two types of norms, factual norms, and moral norms. The former refers to the immanent laws of nature, e.g., to move from one place to another, we must walk on the ground, or to construct a machine we need to follow the laws of mechanics. These norms are required to achieve the corresponding purpose, but they do not impose any moral duty, they have a factual, neutral basis, and acting in accordance with them simply means acting rationally and cleverly. Moral norms, on the other hand, are imposed on our consciousness, they imply guilt or merit, and following or violating them makes our conduct morally good or bad (2020, p. 192 ff.). Moral obligation has a categorical character and a unique gravity, expressing the intimate connection with human destiny, moral conscience, and eternity that, as we have seen, is a specific quality of moral values.

A cornerstone of Hildebrand’s ethics is the thesis that the obligation inherent in moral values cannot be explained from “acting according to nature”, understood in a factual way. The objective basis of moral goodness lies in the relationship to moral values, which, as we have seen, are the opposite of the factual and neutral (2020, pp. 250 ff). This is clearly expressed by Hildebrand regarding the knowledge of moral obligations, for example he writes that “in order to understand that man *should* be just, we have to grasp the intrinsic goodness of justice, that is, its value” (2020, p. 198). If there were no objective good and evil, there would be no duty, no moral obligation (1980, p. 171).

One of the objections that has been raised against value ethics is that it fails to adequately ground normativity. If values are seen in their ideal hierarchy, it is argued, it becomes problematic to justify practical norms for action, especially in the face of conflicts between values (Da Re, 1991). We can try to answer this objection in the light of Hildebrand’s perspective. I think it is necessary to distinguish between two aspects of the question: the justification of normativity in general and the justification of moral obligation, which applies to the free action of human beings. Regarding the former, it is precisely the new dimension of being that is constituted by values that objectively justifies norms, because

they indicate what is important, what is worthy of existence. As regards the second aspect, Drummond objected to Hildebrand that, by rooting the moral obligation in values, he neglects the relation between the obligation and what is important for the agent (2002, p. 12). This objection, however, forgets that for Hildebrand the person is objectively ordered to moral values, to the extent that they are the only thing necessary for her realization as a person. Following moral obligations is not only in her interest but is an essential objective good for her. The problem of moral choice, therefore, does not consist in justifying duties, but in grasping values and understanding that only the adequate response to the moral sphere enables us to reach the fullness of our personal vocation. The problem is that the moral subject acquires such a profound contact with moral values as to grasp their seriousness and centrality. It is precisely in this experience that it is also possible to become aware of the claim inherent in moral obligations. The experience of moral values and the effort to fulfil moral obligations, moreover, makes the person increasingly skilled at discerning what his or her duty is in each concrete situation, and thus also at dealing with cases where a conflict between values arises.

Another relevant metaphysical question regarding values is whether, despite the undeniable presence of evil in the world, “the good metaphysically and ultimately triumphs” (2020, p. 165). We could also formulate it as follows: do positive axiological properties have any primacy over negative ones? Can we say that they have a greater right to be? Hildebrand poses this question in chapter 13 of *Ethics* and believes that an answer can be found on a metaphysical level, without appealing to a revealed religion; more precisely the answer is to be sought by examining the qualitative values and the message they communicate. Beauty, moral virtues and good deeds contain, Hildebrand writes, “a promise that all the splendor and intrinsic light shining forth from the values is not simply a qualitative entity, but a triumphant metaphysical *reality*” (2020, p. 165). Even if they do not have the power to overcome all evil, “they nonetheless imply essentially the promise of a metaphysical power, of a final word also in the order of actual being” (2020, p. 166).

Plato already grasped the essential link between values and ultimate reality and therefore placed the idea of the good at the peak in the realm of ideas. Hildebrand believes that we can overcome Plato, because “once we reach the idea of an absolute, almighty person, we can grasp that this person must be the infinite wisdom, the infinite beauty and the infinite goodness”. Only a good and personal Absolute Being can confirm the promise inherent in the values we experience. If God were neutral or bad (or if God did not exist), the message that qualitative values address us when we experience them would be a lie. In contrast, in the Absolute Being “there is a necessary relation between value and being” (2020, p. 166 f), since “whereas man is good only by participation, God is essentially good” and, as Thomas Aquinas states, He is “the very goodness itself of every good thing” (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 40). The consequence of the relationship between being and goodness in God is that in Him the most sublime qualitative values have their substantial reality.

Each value, therefore, reflects God in a specific way. As far as ontological values are concerned, they are an image of God, an exemplar that refers to God as an archetype. This image presents itself in different degrees, depending on the essence of the individual being. Traditional philosophy, for example Bonaventure in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1, 2) has attributed to all impersonal substances the character of *vestigium* (trace), while only to man the character of *imago* (image) in the strict sense (Hildebrand 2020, p. 170). The ontological value is the core of this *imago* and the message of God present in a being. Hildebrand adds that just as, to know the existence of contingent beings, it is not necessary to prove the existence of God, to know the ontological value of a being, it is not necessary to start from the notion of God, but this value

6. The question of whether good triumphs

objectively presupposes God – just as the existence of a contingent being presupposes the existence of God (2020, p. 171).³

As far as qualitative values are concerned, they contain a much deeper and more explicit “message” from God. This can be seen, above all, in moral values and aesthetic values, which speak to us of a higher world, lift our spirits and arouse in us a longing for that higher world. The moral sphere has such gravity that it not only determines man’s eternal destiny, but also refers to the existence of an afterlife reality in a much more direct and profound way than do the other qualitative values. Moreover, the relationship with punishment and reward implies the notion of God, the only one who can give a valid and definitive answer to the good and evil done by men (2020, p. 185). The moral sphere consequently has a unique link with the religious sphere: the essence of moral values and the seriousness of moral good and evil remain closed to us if we regard them as a merely human reality (2020, p. 189).

We can conclude that Hildebrand’s theory of values, which provides an objective foundation for the axiological properties we experience, results in a metaphysical conception of reality as the effect and manifestation of the good, or better still, of the infinite goodness of a personal God.

7. Experience as a starting point for philosophical knowledge of axiological properties

Finally, I think it is necessary to mention at least one point of the noetical question identified at the beginning, namely the problem of how we know values. As we have seen, Hildebrand addresses the issue of importance from the phenomenological perspective, i.e., from the point of view according to which an object presents itself as important in experience. In the second chapter of *Ethics*, however, he points out that this is not an analysis of empirical psychology, but a philosophical investigation, because it has to do with necessary and highly intelligible data, as the Aristotelian analysis of the categories of predication (2020, p. 33).

Hildebrand is fully aware of the fact that a radical objection to his position on the objectivity of values has to reckon with the contraposition, to which a significant part of modern thought has adhered, between facts and values and the consequent thesis according to which we can know facts, (through sensible experience or deduction), but not values, because the latter are not “data”, like facts, but are purely subjective “feelings”. According to this view, facts are what is “objectively” given to us in experience, and this merely presents us with neutral objects. Values, instead, are the result of the evaluative activity of the subject, they are not data of experience, but emotional reactions and therefore have no objective basis outside the subject. According to Hildebrand, this position was inaugurated by Hume and is found, with different modulations, in George Santayana, William James and Benedetto Croce. Hildebrand criticizes this subjectivism of values in chapter 9 of his *Ethics* and in chapter 1 of his *Aesthetics*. Hildebrand accepts that there is a distinction between facts and values: “for there is obviously a great difference between merely noting that something exists and speaking of the value of this thing” (2016, p. 19). However, he thinks that it is incorrect to rely on this distinction to reduce all apprehension to facts and to deny that it is possible to apprehend values or objects endowed with importance in themselves. Even if the act of knowing values and that of knowing neutral facts are different, the difference “does not disqualify the perception of values from being a genuine act of knowing” (2016, p. 19). There are indeed many types of apprehension, depending on the object known. The five senses already show us this, but there is also a specific apprehension for knowing people, which is different from the perception of bodily objects, just as there is a specific apprehension for grasping melodies, which is different

³ On this point Hildebrand seems to implicitly refer to Thomas Aquinas’ third way to prove the existence of God (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 2, a. 3).

from the apprehension of the moral value of an act of generosity. In all cases, though, a knowledge can be given, a “consciousness of” something that is not reducible to the perceiving subject.

The experience of values is a type of “consciousness of”, in which the object is in front of me. It is not a feeling, as when one feels happy, which we experience as part of our being, something that happens in us and of which we are only aware in a “lateral” way, while we experience it. The apprehension of values is an intuitive awareness that implies the contact with an object, the value. Crosby observed that the experience of values has an affective component because they are endowed with a metaphysical beauty that affects the heart and causes delight in the one who grasps them (2002, p. 478). If, as we have seen, values do not belong to the psychic sphere, but are properties of objects, then it is a mistake to regard them as the result of a subject’s act of evaluation or as an effect of delight.

The fact that there are human beings who do not grasp certain ethical values or do not have a sensitivity to aesthetic values for Hildebrand cannot lead to deny that qualitative values are objective properties of beings. To draw this conclusion would be to confuse the reality with our ability to know it. This is the error of all relativism. Hildebrand, on the contrary, believes that the knowledge of values can be the object of absolutely certain knowledge, because it is given with evidence. In *Ethics* we read as follows:

Despite the facts that values are disclosed to us in an authentic act of knowledge, and that we can speak of a value perception and of an intellectual intuition of values, the very nature of values is such that in perceiving them a specific object-communion already takes place that has no analogy in any other kind of knowledge. In understanding a value, we surpass the mere ontological and enter into the axiological rhythm. We cannot understand value if we try to grasp it from without or see it neutrally as something merely existent. The very nature of value insures that in our grasp of value, we simultaneously surpass the theme of a mere knowledge of being. (Hildebrand, 2020, p. 262)

The transcendence required by the knowledge of values, in other words, does not involve abandoning the contact with reality, but admitting that we can know not only the being of things, but also their intrinsic importance. Moreover, for Hildebrand values possess an intelligible essence, such that absolutely certain knowledge is possible, if one is willing to subject them to a philosophical investigation that purifies our knowledge of prejudices, hasty conclusions or linguistic confusions. The experience of values, which like all experience involves an intuitive contact with its object, is therefore in no way incompatible with rational enquiry, but on the contrary generates it and requires it.

In this paper, I have attempted to trace Hildebrand’s value theory, according to which there are axiological properties of objects that cannot be reduced to the evaluative capacities of the subject. Hildebrand begins his analysis from the phenomenology of what we experience as important and distinguishes three categories of importance: the subjectively satisfying, the value and the objective good of the person. He then moves on to metaphysical analysis to clarify whether the categories describe properties of objects and concludes that the foundation of all importance is value, the intrinsic preciousness. Although the starting point of Hildebrand’s analysis is the motivation relation, he shows that each of the three categories of importance has a different objective foundation. Above all, values indicate what is important in itself and have an ontological status, because they indicate the intrinsic valuable dimension of being, but also an axiological status, because they ground all ought-to-be. The different

Conclusion

types of ought – the ought-to-be of what is important, the due to respond to goods endowed with value, and the moral obligation – allow us to understand the foundation of norms. Hildebrand introduces different important metaphysical questions, e.g. whether we should affirm that every being has some importance, or there are things that are completely neutral. However, I have examined the one that seems crucial to me, that is, the question of whether good can triumph over evil. On the basis of his metaphysics of values, Hildebrand answers this question positively and shows that only if God exists is it possible to answer the “promise” that every value contains within itself. Hildebrand’s entire analysis rests on an epistemological premise, namely that we can experience not only facts, but also values. On the basis of this experience we can carry out a rational and rigorous philosophical investigation of axiological properties.

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