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Between Nature and Ethics

Genealogy and Limits of Husserl's Notion of Vocation

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Abstract: This paper aims at providing with a discriminating discussion of Husserl's account of vocation from the perspective of his phenomenological axiology. In particular, I will deal with the relation between vocation and natural life. My core thesis is that the transcendental structure of vocation tends to "flow into" natural life, namely into the empirical world. Consistently with a number of claims in the *Crisis of the European Sciences*, I will argue that the phenomenon of "flowing" (*Einströmen*) of transcendental subjectivity in natural life is particularly observable in the domain of ethics. After a reconstruction of Husserl's lectures on ethics (1914 and 1920–'24), I will emphasize how the concept of absolute ought develops into the notion of vocation throughout the 20s, together with Husserl's interests in genetic phenomenology. In the final section I focus on the relation between vocation and the individual's empirical life with its temporal and intersubjective structures.

Key–words: Vocation, Phenomenology, Axiology, Value, Transcendental, Empirical.

Although an extended literature is available on the concept of vocation from a historical, sociological, and theological viewpoint,[1] the philosophical inspections of this issue are not copious. This paper intends to fill (at least partially) this gap, through the discussion of Husserl's account of vocation from the perspective of his phenomenological axiology. In particular, I will deal with the relation between vocation and natural life, an issue Husserl never approached extensively nor in his published works neither in his manuscripts. My aim is to demonstrate that the transcendental structure

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1. Cf. Garber 2014.

of vocation tends to "flow into" natural life, namely into the empirical world. In other words, in line with a number of claims (often neglected) in the *Crisis of the European Sciences*,[2] I will argue that the phenomenon of "flowing" (*Einströmen*) of transcendental subjectivity in natural life is particularly observable in the domain of ethics.

Following M. Robert's suggestion (2009), one could distinguish four meanings of the concept of vocation. Indeed, vocation may be understood as: *a)* a *divine command*, namely a person–relative command from God; *b)* a *natural order*, that is a call to be part of a divinely–ordained social structure; *c)* a *self–actualization* of a divinely–given personal essence; *d)* an *election*, namely the call to belong to a chosen community. As is self–evident, the former three options clearly refer to a theological meaning of vocation: as a means of exemplifying, let us remind of S. Kierkegaard and M. Scheler.[3] By contrast, the latter reveals a meaning of vocation fully independent from any reference to religion. For instance, in his *Critic of Practical Reason* Kant uses the word "vocation" (*Beruf*) in order to clarify the notion of the endless ethical progress leading to a perfect accordance between the individual's will and the moral law. More precisely, the moral law calls each rational being to carry on his/her moral strain *as if* it would be a vocation from God.[4] Accordingly, from Kant's perspective, vocation is a call to belong to a rational community made of all rational beings committed to their infinite ethical strain to attain the moral law.

As I shall demonstrate, in his late writings on ethics Husserl often describes the individual's process of decision making as grounded in a *vocation*,[5] namely a call to belong to a «personality of a higher order» (Husserl 1970: 188). Accordingly, it develops a theory of vocation from a strictly ethical standpoint, without any direct connection to theology. Indeed, in Husserl's view, vocation is the way through which the categorical imperative gives itself to each subjectivity. In other words, Husserl maintains that, when opting for an action, the individual feels to be called by an absolute ought which orients his/her choice among many possible actions. This means that, for Husserl, such an affective experience (*Wertnehmung*)[6] of being attracted by a certain realm of values plays a decisive role in our practical life. For instance, one may be called by the values of philosophy, law, music, painting, etc. and, accordingly, accept them as the main scope of his/her life. In other terms, in our natural life we are committed to the realm of

2. Cf. Husserl 1970: 113.
3. Cf. Kierkegaard 1986; Scheler 2010.
4. Cf. Kant 2015, book 2, chapter 2, section 35.
5. Cf. Husserl 1989: 118.
6. Cf. Husserl 1988.

values we love. More radically, in Husserl's view, it is only when we follow our vocation for a given realm of values that we are living the best possible life. Vocation provides our life with a rational goal, to the extent that, by developing decisions and convictions in line with it, we realize our own subjectivity as oriented towards our personal *telos* (ibid.).

Although this notion is highly useful in order to grasp Husserl's account of the absolute ought, it reveals some difficulties that deserve to be accurately discussed.[7] Notably, how is the relation between vocation and natural life to be conceived? One can divide this question as follows: *a)* How is the relation between vocation and the categorical imperative to be properly understood? *b)* May the vocation change throughout the individual's life and, if so, does vocation lose its absoluteness? *c)* How does the different vocations get along with each other within a certain community? With this aim, I will address the question of whether and how the phenomenological notion of vocation should be modified vis–à–vis the natural (intuitive, pre–scientific) structure of human experience.

My interpretive hypothesis is that the absoluteness of vocation is strictly intertwined with the ego's empirical life and its temporal and intersubjective structure. In other words, I will demonstrate that, rather than being an *extensive* notion (vocation is absolute insofar as it lasts forever), the vocation's absoluteness is to be understood as an *intensive* concept (vocation is absolute since it calls as an obligation). This means that the vocation's absoluteness has nothing to do with its temporal duration; rather, what distinguishes vocation is its unconditionedness, regardless of whether its duration consists in a given temporal range or the whole individual's life. As a result, vocation works as an absolute ought despite its possible changes over the ego's natural life.

1. Structure and Limits of Husserl's early Axiology

Husserl's interest in ethics is doubtless connected with Franz Brentano's lectures on practical philosophy from 1876 to 1894 (Brentano 2009 and 2009a). As is well known, in these lectures Brentano aims at providing an account of ethics able to include subjective feelings and desires without falling into subjectivism. His core argument is that the highest end of an action «consists in the best of what is attainable» (Brentano 2009a: 84). Brentano maintains that, although judgments of goodness are not based upon perceptions and, accordingly, cannot be immediately evident, we are able to make a judgment whether an action is right or wrong. This view

7. Cf. Loidolt, Crowell, Melle 2002 and Peucker 2008: 307–325.

depends on Brentano's belief that there are feelings deriving from instinct which are subordinate to a «higher class of emotional activities» (Brentano 2009a: 91). According to Brentano, such a higher class of feelings, common to all human beings, can be identified with the fact of being worthy of love rather than being merely considered as providing pleasure (ibid.). As a consequence, in Brentano's view, feelings are included in the process of decision making: our feeling love for an object (or action) is the basic condition for evaluating its goodness. Analogously, our feeling preference for an object or action is the basis upon which we judge this object or action to be better than other ones. Moreover, it must be emphasized that Brentano states that the acknowledgement of our feeling toward an object or action implies a certain act of universalization (Brentano 2009a: 93): for instance, when I reject a certain act of violence occurred in particular circumstances, I reject violence in general as well. As a consequence, the recognition of an action as good or bad entails the recognition of this action's concept. Thus, for instance, the experience of being beaten is the empirical condition for recognizing the rightness of the disapproval of violence in general. It goes without saying that this idea strongly inspires Husserl's account of phenomenology, and notably phenomenological ethics, as an eidetic science.

Under Brentano's influence, Husserl accepts the idea that ethics must take into account the role played by feelings in moral life. Furthermore, Husserl's theory of values inherits Brentano's view about a fundamental analogy between the laws of ethics and theoretical reason. In line with Brentano's perspective, Husserl develops his formulation of the highest end of human action as a formal categorical imperative: «Do the best that is attainable» (Husserl 1988: 221). Unlike Kant, Husserl attempts to develop a categorical imperative that takes into consideration the manifold results pragmatically achievable within the limits of a given situation. In a certain sense, Husserl's axiology is based on this project of "naturalization" of the categorical imperative, namely an absolute ought within the limits of a given empirical situation. Husserl's basic idea is that the best action must be a practicable one: to say it differently, a lesser achievement is better than a best failure. What is at stake in this ethical framework is the dependence of good actions on an evaluative process, through which each individual weighs different practical possibilities in order to choose the one that shows the best value and feasibility at the same time. According to Husserl, such a process consists of three steps: *a)* firstly, one desires certain practical possibilities; *b)* secondly, one becomes aware of all the practical possibilities within a given situation; *c)* lastly, one chooses the practical possibility provided with the best value and feasibility. Clearly, it follows that the process of decision making lays on the individual's capability to put his/her values in hierarchy

in order to identify which is endowed with the highest value. In other terms, for Husserl actions depends on a law of «value absorption of the lesser value by the higher value» (ibid.: 220). The notion of absorption is fundamental in order to determine the hierarchy of values, insofar as the highest value absorbs all the other ones without being absorbed in turn. This means that one good prevails on the multiplicity of achievable goods because of its higher rank of ethical value. To put it differently, when determining the highest good for us, we organize all other goods according to their contribution to the achievement of the highest good. As a consequence, in his lectures from 1897, 1914 (ibid.) and 1920–'24 (Husserl 2004), Husserl seeks to formulate a precise hierarchy of values. In line with his theory of absorption, he puts spiritual values (including values related to art, science, philosophy, etc.) on a higher level than sensual values, insofar as these latter are always in a position of being absorbed by the former. If there are two similar spiritual values, their connection with sensible values provides us with a criterion for the estimation of their rank in order to place them in hierarchy. However, Husserl is aware of the fact that there may be a conflict between two (or more) values: in this case, the categorical imperative allows the individual for determining which good is the worthiest. In other words, formal axiology is the condition for establishing the *a priori* goods internal to each material good.

Whichever experience of values is affective. This means that the feeling toward a thing gives us its value. Nevertheless, such a feeling depends on a cognitive experience, insofar as the thing, before becoming desirable or not, must be recognized as an object of experience. In this sense, the value of the thing is objective because it derives from its intersubjective constitution as an object of purely cognitive experience. It is clear that Husserl attempts to find *a priori* material goods as the content of formal axiology. Material *a priori*, identified by a process of eidetic variation, indicates the conditions for an object of being of a certain type: more precisely, material *a priori*'s function is to eliminate certain possibilities of variation in order to establish objective values. To put it differently, material *a priori* determines the limits of variation of practical possibilities when considering the best good achievable. For the sake of clarity, the best good one can reach in a given situation is not open to all possible actions, since only some of them are compatible with the material *a priori* and some are better than others. For this reason, the best possible option is attainable only through a process of limitation.

As a result, Husserl conceives of phenomenological axiology as performing three main tasks: (i) an accurate description of the intentional acts which constitute the different types of values; (ii) a precise discussion of the process of transformation of values in laws or norms; (iii) an analysis of the application of these laws or norms in social life (Husserl 1988: 138). Thus, from

Husserl's standpoint, phenomenological axiology consists of four main subareas: on the one hand, formal and material axiology focused on the noematic elements of ethical life; on the other hand, formal and material practice devoted to the noetic aspects of ethical life. To say it differently, whereas formal axiology takes into account the laws derived from values and material axiology inspects the laws' content, formal practice deals with the formal determinations of the highest ethical principle, the categorical imperative, and material practice provides values with a content. In so doing, material practice explains the constitution of both ethical subjectivity and community (ibid.: 139). The most relevant difficulty one has to deal with in the proper understanding of Husserl's 1920–'24 lectures is the absence of material axiology and practice, although Husserl himself bestows them a great importance in the framework of his phenomenological approach to ethics.[8]

However, after 1920 Husserl becomes more and more aware of the insufficiency of his account of the categorical imperative (Husserl F I 24: 75a). Indeed, in his lectures on ethics, the imperative seems to be in a neutral position and, analogously, any individual is expected to do the same thing within the limits of what is practically attainable. As a consequence, in this context the individual ends up being bereft of his moral responsibility.[9] In other words, Husserl admits that, in his 1920–'24 lectures, the best objectively achievable depends on external judgments rather than the individual's will (Husserl B I 21: 61a). Moreover, in my interpretive hypothesis, his version of the categorical imperative does not adequately emphasize the fact that natural life has a decisive function in the process of values' constitution. This means that, although Husserl follows Brentano's claim that feelings play a peculiar role in revealing values, his interpretation of the categorical imperative reduces the importance of the empirical world in order to avoid any variety of subjectivism, with the result of putting the individual in a position of unrealistic neutrality.

As I will demonstrate, the incompleteness of Husserl's account of the categorical imperative in his lectures on formal axiology derives from his static approach to ethics. Indeed, an ethical theory based upon the concept of the best objectively achievable does not take into account the real complexity of the individual's moral life. In other words, Husserl's theory of the categorical imperative only considers the structural features of the process of decision making. By contrast, ethical values are always experienced by means of the empirical context in its natural, historical, intersubjective,

8. Furthermore, it sounds quite strange that Husserl remained silent about Scheler's *Formalism in Ethics and Non–Formal Ethics of Values*, partially published in 1913 on the *Jahrbuch fur Phänomenologie*.

9. Cf. Melle 1988: XX.

and cultural aspects. Accordingly, phenomenological axiology should provide an in–depth explanation of the passive emergence of moral feelings throughout the flowing of the intuitive (pre–scientific) experience of the natural/empirical world. More precisely, axiology does not deal only with the intentional activity of values' constitution; rather, it must inspect the passive genesis of the primordial conditions of values' arising as well. In this way, axiology would be in a position of describing the development of values' constitution throughout the history of a given community. As emphasized by Husserl himself in *The Crisis of European Sciences*, the inquiry into axiology needs a systematic analysis of both the life–world of a certain culture and the constitution of personhood and community. Nevertheless, it must be noted at this point that the notion of *Lebenswelt* cannot be merely reduced to a cultural or sociological structure.[10] Rather, it consists of the multiplicity of the possible modes of givenness of the world for a possible subjectivity (Husserl 1970, 127). Accordingly, the life–world cannot be inhabited by any empirical subject, with a certain language, gender, history, etc. This means that Husserl does not think that the systems of values arise directly from the life–world, which remains a transcendental notion. Rather, values appear precisely in the process of "flowing" of the life–world into the empirical world of a given community. More precisely, the flowing of transcendental into the natural world is the condition of possibility of a phenomenological axiology. Far from being a merely passive contemplation of the system of values of a certain culture, this approach asks for a reconsideration of the natural and transcendental dimensions of values: thought, affectivity, and action.

2. From Static to Genetic Axiology

As is well known, throughout the 1920s Husserl substantially reshapes his account of the relation between transcendental subjectivity and natural world. Indeed, genetic method (Husserl 2001) leads him to reassess the interaction between natural and transcendental life, in order to show how these two realms are much more interconnected than Husserl himself seems to suggest, for instance, in *Ideas I*. In a series of manuscripts from 1917–'18, known as the *Bernauer Manuskripte* (2001a), where he develops (also thanks to E. Stein's accurate work of transcription) his 1904–'05 lectures on time–consciousness at the University of Göttingen (published first in 1928

10. Cf. Schütz 1982. For a precise reconstruction of the problem of the life–world, see Claesges 1972, Ströker 1979, Gethmann 1991, Grathoff 1989, Sommer 1990, Blumenberg, 1986 and 2010.

and then as the volume X of the *Husserliana* series),[11] Husserl scrutinizes his theory of time through the notion of "individuation", which largely prepares the reflection on passivity he develops throughout the 20s. Even though Husserl does not address the issue of individuation from an ethical standpoint, it doubtlessly provides us with useful phenomenological tools in order to approach the relation between values and natural world. In this section, I will suggest that formal (static) axiology is to be developed following the genetic approach to transcendental phenomenology.

In the light of these reflections, it becomes clear how the *Bernauer Manuskripte*, in which the problem of individuation is discussed in depth, represent a turning point in Husserl's phenomenology.[12] From 1917–'18 onwards, the irruption of the genetic method goes at the same pace with Husserl's awareness of the fact that constitution has to take into account its temporal features. This view is confirmed by the fact that, already in *Ideas I*, Husserl admits that not all constitutions are based upon the ego: this is precisely the case for passive constitutions. This decisive intuition leads Husserl straight to the problem of individuation as a temporal process, as described in the *Bernauer Manuskripte*. From a genetic point of view, it is precisely in this process that the ego originates in its immanence. In other words, the immanent "living–present" is the most originary kind of individuation, composed of a variety of sensible givens unified in sequence.

Consistently with Husserl's view, my claim is that such a project is to be extended to axiology as well, insofar as the process of sedimentation of pre–scientific experiences, far from including only perceptual ones, involves also the domain of ethical life. More closely, genetic phenomenology makes room for a reconsideration of the individual's ethical features, insofar as it inspects the process of values' arising from the natural world. In order to corroborate this view, I will show that, from the late 1920s onwards, Husserl is increasingly convinced that a phenomenological explanation of how the intuitive natural life contributes to the settling of certain systems of values is the condition for an in–depth description of practical life in general. As already explained, as early as 1914 Husserl works on the problem of the structure of the categorical imperative, notably in his 1917 lectures about Fichte's ideal of humanity (Husserl 1987: 267–292). Also due to the cultural crisis after World War I (during which he lost his son Wolfgang and a number of pupils),[13] in the well–known 1923–'24 *Kaizo Articles* Husserl argues that ethics, rather than merely establishing the best attainable in a

11. This lecture course from 1904–'05 has not been published in its entirety. Only its third and fourth parts have been published, respectively in Husserl 1980 and 1966 (English transl. 1991).

12. Cf. De Warren 2009.

13. Cf. De Warren, Wongehr 2018.

given situation, should provide an inspection of the development of the individual's moral attitude (Husserl 1989: 3–124). As a consequence, Husserl's commitment to the problem of the individual's ethical development leads him to the issue of the relation between subjectivity and the empirical life from which it originates.

Under these premises, how does Husserl's notion of the categorical imperative develop in his late writings? In a manuscript from 1924 (Husserl F I 28), Husserl argues that the individual's ought is absolute to the extent that it is only by a total adherence of the will to this ought that the individual is who he/she is. In other words, such an absolute ought provides the individual with his/her value as a human being. According to this manuscript, the absolute ought requires the individual to opt for the best possible life «from now on in all its acts and with its total content of mental processes, that it is my best possible life, my best possible, that means, the best possible that I can live. That ought is a correlate of the will, and indeed of a rational will. The ought is the truth of the will» (ibid.: 199a). To put it more clearly, one could say that, for Husserl, living the best possible life means having no regrets. In this light, Husserl does not abandon the formalism of his early approach to ethics; rather, he strongly reaffirms the relevance of the categorical imperative of doing the best achievable in a given situation. Nevertheless, according to Husserl's genetic phenomenology, such a categorical imperative has a different content for each individual insofar as it depends on the temporal process of sedimentation of habitual convictions and cultural conditionings. In other words, each individual must do the best possible consistently with his/her absolute ought: otherwise, his/her identity would run the risk of losing its inner coherence. It is for this reason that the categorical imperative loses its universality, namely its possibility of being applied identically to all moral situations. Rather, it is to be understood within the realm of the individual's life–world in order to preserve his/her individuality. In this framework, Husserl emphasizes the relevant role played by the categorical imperative in the process of values' arising: more closely, the absolute ought strongly influences the process of decision–making so as to develop all decisions into habits and convictions.

It is precisely in this context that Husserl introduces his idea of the absolute ought as a «vocation» (Husserl 1989: 118). In the next section I will discuss its implications and limits, both on the level of the active ethical decision and the intuitive genesis of values within a given culture.

3. Vocation and the Life–World

It goes without saying that the notion of vocation as a personal *telos* is to be put in connection with Husserl's early account of the categorical imperative. In the light of his late manuscripts on ethics,[14] as well as his meditation on the issue of a rational community,[15] it is clear that the imperative cannot uniquely be based upon the idea of the best practically achievable in a given situation. Rather, the absolute ought strongly depends on the individual's vocation for a realm of values, namely his/her personal aims and projects. Furthermore, in *The Crisis of European Sciences* Husserl explicitly intertwines this issue with the question of the ought of a community (Husserl 1970: 333). This means that the categorical imperative loses its universality if it is not placed within a complex framework of pre–scientific and intuitive coordinates, that is its life–world (Husserl K III 29). As shown in the previous section, the temporal sedimentation of the ego's decisions has an impact on its habits, including its ethical life (Husserl 2001: 227): this means that the entire life of the ego, included its ethical life, owes to time–consciousness its inner consistency. Without Husserl's genetic approach to the problem of time–consciousness, there would be no room for understanding subjectivity, including its ethical aspects, as a process of self–constitution.

Nevertheless, from Husserl's standpoint, ethical norms are not merely subjective and contingent. Although moral values are not timeless and absolutely universal, they come to light as particular features which determine the cultural identity of a given community. As a consequence, if on the one hand ethical decisions are influenced by the realm of values that we inherit from the past, on the other hand we are not imprisoned in these systems of values forever. Rather, we choose by ourselves our vocations, insofar as these latter are not provided by tradition. In this light, the process of decision–making consists of a reflection upon our personal vocation as a manifestation of our own identity in its essential connection with tradition. To put it differently, the vocation for a given realm of values is what makes the ego actually human: our choice for certain values is at the same time a choice for who we are. Accordingly, the process of becoming human is ultimately an ethical process, insofar as vocation sets up for each individual his/her absolute ought. Moreover, vocation is not only essential for the identity of the individual; rather, it is only by means of each individual's commitment that the identity of a certain community is preserved. With this respect, in a manuscript from 1920 Husserl argues that the ethical life of humanity is developed «in the midst of the configurations of manners, of

14. Cf. in particular manuscripts A V 22 (1931).
15. Cf. in particular manuscripts A V 4 (1932) and B III 3 (1931).

law, of the scientific life work, or religion and finally of universal language» (Husserl F I 28: 16a). This means that norms derive from community and contribute to constitute the life–world of posterity, namely the «pre–given spiritual surrounding world» (ibid.) into which the next generations will grow up. Thus, we assume moral norms through passive association insofar as they arise from our life–world: then, it is our responsibility to put these norms into question in order to accept or refuse them. It is precisely in this sense that Husserl argues that «the ethical stands before the individual as an objective, questionless given. And so it remains from generation to generation, although one does not generally realize it, to think about the last ground of legitimacy of the demands stated in the various concrete regulations, and to put them into question, to put them into theoretical themes» (Husserl F I 28: 37b). In this passage, by means of vocation, the deep interaction between the natural "questionless" world and transcendental subjectivity becomes patent.

As a matter of fact, Husserl implicitly introduces a hierarchy of vocations. Indeed, all individual vocations are subject to the universal vocation to rational life. This certainly means that Husserl is deeply convinced that the practice of philosophy fosters the sense of responsibility among the community members, precisely because philosophy allows for the process of critique of traditional values. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the best possible community is a community of philosophers. Rather, provided that in Husserl's view the main ethical task of reason is a discriminating inspection of the traditional system of values, the ideal of a community of philosophers is not limited to academic scholars in philosophy, but can be extended to all persons committed to the process of critique and renewal of moral values. However, it is worth noting that, at least in principle, this rational activity is open to everybody, provided that they are able to take on the task of reflecting upon their cultural tradition. In other words, if on the one hand it is clear that Husserl does not justify the exclusion of certain peoples from such a project, on the other hand he emphasizes that the basic condition is the ability to make a proper use of reason. The point that remains unclear in Husserl's manuscripts is whether he believes that all men are capable of thinking correctly or certain peoples (and cultures) make an inappropriate use of rationality. At first glance, it appears to be the case of Eskimos, Indians, and Gypsies, according to a highly controversial

passage of the *Crisis*,[16] often assessed for Eurocentrism and racism.[17] The reason of Husserl's claim is that certain cultures reveal different account of community and temporality with respect to European civilization. As a consequence, there seems to arise a strong tension between Husserl's account of universality, according to which every human being, «no matter how primitive he is» (Husserl 1970: 378), is characterized by rationality, with his idea of the self–enclosed particularity of certain cultures. As insightfully emphasized by D. Moran (2001: 463), Husserl's account of European civilization is to be understood not only in reference to the cultural context (and prejudices) of his time, but also with regard to his project of a phenomenological explanation of the life–world as a ground for a scientific community (Moran 2001: 493). Furthermore, it is only from the standpoint of Husserl's account of the transcendental subjectivity, with its intrinsic commitment to ideality, teleology, and infinity, that his discussion of cultural particularities and his remarks about certain cultural types can be correctly addressed. In this perspective, the notion of vocation does not lose its absoluteness also in consideration of the empirical differences among different cultures.

However, the notion of vocation reveals other difficulties as well. For instance, the relation between vocation and absolute ought is addressed in different ways in Husserl's late manuscripts and in *The Crisis of European Sciences*. Indeed, whereas in a number of manuscripts Husserl conceives of vocation as providing for the individual's identity (Husserl F I 28: 12–15a and 176a), in the *Crisis* he refers to vocation as something the individual can take on or leave depending on the empirical situation (Husserl 1970: 136). On the one hand, vocation establishes each person's absolute ought and realm of values as something all–pervasive. On the other hand, vocation is one among many possible attitudes towards the world: «When we actualize one of our habitual interests and are thus involved in our vocational activity [...], we assume a posture of epoché toward our other life–interests, even though these still exist and are still ours» (ibid.). If this view is perfectly understandable on the level of our everyday practical activities, it becomes much more puzzling with regard to ethics. More precisely, is it possible to put into brackets an absolute ought while performing other activities? Husserl does not address such an issue. In my interpretive hypothesis, it seems that the only possible answer is negative, insofar as the absolute ought

16. «We may ask, "How is the spiritual image of Europe to be characterized?" This does not mean Europe geographically, as it appears on maps, as though European man were to be in this way confined to the circle of those who live together in this territory. In the spiritual sense it is clear that to Europe belong the English dominions, the United States, etc., but not, however, the Eskimos or Indians of the country fairs, or the Gypsies, who are constantly wandering about Europe» (Husserl 1970: 273).

17. Cf. for instance Derrida 2003: 154–157, and Bernasconi, Cook 2003: 13–14.

can be preserved even when vocation is put into brackets. For instance, I can retain my absolute ought based on the vocation for academia's realm of values even when I am playing my guitar. Furthermore, the idea that the absolute ought can be put into brackets is in contrast with Husserl's claim, mentioned above, that the absolute ought operates «from now on in all its acts and with its total content of mental processes» (F I 28: 199a). As a consequence, once an absolute ought has been set up through the individual's choice of a vocation, it cannot be bracketed, although the individual may bracket the vocation for that ought.

A last objection. At first glance, one could think that the major outcome of this account of vocation is that the absolute ought, once chosen, must remain the same «from now on», that is for the entire life. Nevertheless, although Husserl does not discuss this point explicitly, under closer scrutiny the claim that a moral ought is absolute *if and only if* it calls an individual for the entire life is totally inconsistent with the general framework of Husserl's thought. Indeed, given that, on the one hand, all our ethical decisions are influenced by the realm of values rooted in our life–world and, on the other hand, we have the power to modify these systems of values, a static/unmodifiable account of the absolute ought is a nonsense insofar as it excludes that this latter may develop and change throughout life. In other words, the intuitive, intersubjective, historical, and cultural structure of vocation constantly reshapes the process of ethical decision, in a way that the absolute ought keeps its absoluteness despite its transformations throughout the concrete subjective life. As a result, the ought's absoluteness is to be understood as *intensive*, rather than *extensive*. This means that a vocation for a certain realm of values may call me unconditionally (that is, as an absolute ought) throughout a given season of my life and, then, fade off or gradually develop into another vocation. In synthesis, the absolute ought has a temporal feature despite its absoluteness does not derive from temporal duration. Such a peculiar structure is in a position to defend both the absoluteness and the constant flow of the vocation: far from giving itself within a steady structure composed by intentionality and intuitive fulfillment, vocation appears throughout the flow of subjective life, in which nature, time, history, and intersubjectivity are inextricably intertwined.

4. The Ethical Relevance of Intersubjectivity

As shown above, Husserl's notion of vocation allows for an accurate inspection of the process of values' arising from the ego's natural life. Nevertheless, such a process is necessarily intersubjective. In brief, practical life excludes isolation. Rather, it takes place in a world constituted by others and inher-

ited from previous generations. Thus, from an ethical viewpoint, each ego constitutes itself in a life–world of intersubjective values. So doing, the ego becomes a member of a historical community composed by other subjectivities with their personal vocations. To some extent, the ego belongs to a personality of a higher order and, accordingly, is called to the preservation of this communal self. Although the analogy between individual and communal personality is highly problematic, to the extent that a community often gathers together different traditions and oughts, Husserl argues that this personality of a higher order can have a unified will and act as a unity (Husserl 1989: 22). Reciprocally, such a many headed self depends on the individuals of which it consists. In other terms, its members are interconnected so as one's vocation cannot exclude the vocation of any other. Rather, the individual's vocation requires that the other follows his/her own vocation. This means that our will influences the other and the others' will is also our own, as if we live in one another. In this way, all men can contribute to the absolute ought of a community (Husserl F I 24: 128).[18]

For the sake of clarity, it is worth emphasizing the strict connection between Husserl's account of community and the «transcendental theory of experiencing someone else, a transcendental theory of so–called empathy (*Einfühlung*)» (Husserl 1982: 92). As is well known, Husserl introduces this notion in the *Fifth Cartesian Meditation* in order to explain how «within myself, within the limits of my transcendentally reduced pure conscious life, I experience the world (including others) [...] as an intersubjective world, actually there for everyone, accessible in respect of its objects to everyone» (ibid.: 91). Consistently, in the *Fifth Cartesian Meditation* Husserl makes a distinction between the physical body (*Körper*) and the lived–body (*Leib*), namely the originary sphere of consciousness' «peculiar owness» (ibid.: 93). Whereas, on the one hand, I can perceive the other's physical body (as well as my own body), on the other hand, only my lived–body gives itself as a direct presentation for me. Instead, the other's lived–body is given to me only by means of an act of indirect intentionality, namely an «analogical apperception» (ibid.: 108). In Husserl's words:

> Since, in this nature and this world, my animate organism is the only body that is or can be constituted originally as an animate organism (a functioning organ), the body over there, which is nevertheless apprehended as an animate organism, must have derived this sense by an apperceptive transfer from my animate organism, and done so a manner that excludes an actually direct, and hence primordial, showing of the predicates belonging to an animate organism specifically, a showing of them in perception proper (ibid.: 110–111).

18. Cf. Hart 1992: 344.

This means that, following Husserl's argumentation, each transcendental ego constitutes the world in communion with other subjects, whose sphere of pure owness, therefore, cannot in principle be given in a direct presentation, but rather through an analogical association. Accordingly, although my experience of otherness entails the fact that I cannot have access to the other's very subjectivity, «[...] the only thing I can posit in absolute apodicticity as existing can be a world–experiencing ego only by being in communion with others like himself: a member of a community of monads, which is given orientedly, starting from himself» (ibid.: 139).

Nevertheless, such an account of empathy seems to play uniquely a transcendental role, without any relevance for ethics. More closely, Husserl apparently conceives of empathy merely on a perceptive (or apperceptive) plan, without any further clarification about the fruitfulness of empathy in the practical life of individuals and communities. In my view, it could be demonstrated that Husserl shapes the notion of empathy precisely in order to explain how individuals are essentially interconnected and, by virtue of their intersubjective relation, give rise to a community as a personality of a higher order. Indeed, a number of late writings (published or unpublished manuscripts) provide evidence of Husserl's commitment to an in–depth inspection of the relation between empathy, life–world, and community. For instance, Husserl writes on April 1934: «The main premise of empathy is the comprehension of the other I [...] as "putting in similarity" of myself by an identification of the surrounding primordial worlds. [...] The I as the I of my activity, of my affectivity, of my perceptive possibilities, of my possibilities to instinctively aim at objects of pleasure, practical possibilities, actions» (Husserl 1973: 661). Furthermore, in the last section of the *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*, Husserl clearly attests the importance of empathy for the relation among different cultures: «To me and to those who share in my culture, an alien culture is accessible only by a kind of "experience of someone else", a kind of "empathy", by which we project ourselves into the alien cultural community and its culture» (Husserl 1982: 134–35).

As a result, if one puts into relation Husserl's genetic phenomenology with his analysis of intersubjectivity, it becomes clear that the transcendental ego is to be understood as the effect of the interaction among different life–worlds. More precisely, given that the individual's experience of the world is oriented by the empirical and cultural sedimentations of the community where he/she lives, it follows that temporality and intersubjectivity are the most basic features of his/her life. Moreover, since each culture is essentially interconnected with other cultures, such a relation strongly influences the individual's experience. According to my interpretive hypothesis, what is at stake in the phenomenological approach to ethics is precisely an in–depth description of the genesis of values through the interaction among different

cultures and their own life–world. Only in this way the phenomenological method is in a position to set up an intercultural ethics.

In the last years of his intellectual path, Husserl is committed precisely to this project. Indeed, once clarified the role of empathy as openness to alterity, namely the condition of social interaction, Husserl can address the issue of the relation among different cultures. Despite the others live in different life–worlds from ours, this difference is to be included in a broader framework, within which we all share empathy as an originary relation with them. Although we often do not understand their culture, their beliefs, their vocations, and the social structure of their communities, we cannot but acknowledge that they are subjects like us. Their life–world is precisely what makes them different from us; nevertheless, the simple fact that they have a life–world makes them similar to us. With this regard, Husserl argues: «I cannot understand their relation to this world and [...] how this world is for them [...]. Yet, I understand them and we understand each other as men. In our basic relation we have a layer that is suitable to this aim» (Husserl 2001: 643).

In conclusion, throughout the theoretical path just sketched, I suggested that the phenomenological notion of vocation plays a decisive function in order to make sense of Husserl's perspective on the relation between natural life in its intersubjectivity, historicity, and community. With this respect, it is worth recalling his reflection on the idea of Europe in the *Crisis of European Sciences*. Following Husserl, European identity is the result of the interaction with other cultures (Husserl 1970: 374), in a sense that the relation to alterity shows that the problem of truth is to be addressed from a teleological perspective. Although, in Husserl's view, such an infinite process plays a peculiar role in universal history, at first glance it seems to give rise to a particular variety of Eurocentrism. Yet, on closer inspection, in the *Crisis of European Sciences* there emerges a different account of Europe, which is in no way geographically connoted. Rather, by virtue of its essential openness to alterity, European identity overcomes the empirical aspects of each local culture, in order to pose the question of the meaning of totality. Thus, Europe has an open identity, insofar as is not characterized by a final view of itself, as demonstrated for instance by the public debate about the redaction of European constitution. Instead, according to Husserl, Europe has always been open to modify its traditions, beliefs, and ways of life. In extreme synthesis, Europe is an *idea*, which strongly resists to any definition: «Thus we refer to Europe not as it is understood geographically, as on a map, as if thereby the group of people who live together in this territory would define European humanity» (Husserl 1970: 273). By contrast, what is at stake is «the philosophical idea which is immanent in the history of Europe (spiritual Europe) or, in other words, the teleology which is

immanent in it» (ibid.). This means that, in Husserl's eyes, even though we live in an extremely conflicting world, we are led by an ideal which manifests itself through the empathic interconnection among individuals. It is precisely within this framework that, from Husserl's perspective, practical life is to be understood as an attempt to become citizen of a rational world. Doing so, European identity is in a position to overcome each local culture. However, it is to be noted that Husserl is perfectly aware that such a process is not necessarily oriented towards a moral improvement. Indeed, as the XIXth century history clearly demonstrates, we constantly run the risk of repudiating our empathic relation with the others, falling into violence and barbarism.

As demonstrated, Husserl's genetic phenomenology shows how each individual constitutes his/her subjectivity through a passive process of sedimentation of natural life, history, culture, and values in his/her life–world. Since this process, which plays a decisive role in the individual's practical life, is necessarily intersubjective, it follows that ethics has to deal with the issues of value–constitution and the foundation of a community. In other words, what is primarily at stake in Husserl's axiology is a phenomenological description of the teleological process by which different personal ought gather together in a community as a personality of a higher order and, analogically, different cultures are synthesized in a rational entity of a higher order, for instance European rationality. To put it briefly: Husserl's Eurocentrism consists in this, that those cultures which undertake the European teleological task of a rational life open to other cultures are to be included in European spirit, whereas those who refuse it are definitely out. It is precisely from this perspective that, in conclusion of the Vienna lecture *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity*, Husserl argues:

> There are only two escapes from the crisis of European existence: the downfall of Europe in its estrangement from its own rational sense of life, its fall into hostility toward the spirit and into barbarity; or the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy through a heroism of reason that overcomes naturalism once and for all. Europe's greatest danger is weariness. If we struggle against this greatest of all dangers as "good Europeans" with the sort of courage that does not fear even an infinite struggle, then out of the destructive blaze of lack of faith, the smoldering fire of despair over the West's mission for humanity, the ashes of great weariness, will rise up the phoenix of a new life–inwardness and spiritualization as the pledge of a great and distant future for man: for the spirit alone is immortal (Husserl 1970: 299).

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