

Husserl on Personal Aspects of Moral Normativity

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ABSTRACT. The present article deals with the tension between so-called objective values that somehow originate from valuable objects, and the subjective values, which have their source in a loving subject who gives certain objects their particular value through his or her loving act that is directed toward the said objects. The latter values are important for introducing individuality into the discipline of ethics, which is an objective science. These issues emerged in Husserl's later writings on ethics where he considers it possible, in some way, to regard the individuality of the agent as a source of normativity without, as a result, 'dissolving' ethics into a catalogue of individual experiences. The article endeavours to present the main elements of Husserl's view on the possibility of taking an agent's individuality into account in explaining his moral ideal.

KEYWORDS. Husserl, imperatives, ethics, phenomenology, personal individuality

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important questions we face in making concrete ethical decisions can be formulated as follows: how are we to negotiate between supposedly universal moral ideas and the particularities of our own individual, personal experience, needs, circumstances, etc.? Some of these concrete ethical decisions or actions seem to be – or at least they are given to us as being – obligatory. We have the impression that if we make certain decisions or perform certain actions, we are fulfilling our moral duty and if not, we are acting wrongly. Related to this central question, relevant philosophers such as Immanuel Kant have argued for an objective moral obligation, which obliges us in an unconditional way. As is well known, Kant's answer is grounded in the idea that there are

laws governing human actions and that these laws are *a priori* and necessarily universal. This view serves as the foundation for Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’: if someone in a given situation were to act in a way such that the universalization of his maxim was impossible, then he would surely be acting wrongly. In other words: if an individual acts rightly, then any other individual who is in the same situation as the agent would act in the same way. The only differences between the acting individuals would be those related to their different individual *de facto* situations. Nevertheless, the same *a priori* laws decide what is right in each case.

But does this mean that the abovementioned particularities of our own individual, personal experience, needs, circumstances, etc. cannot in some way be a source of obligations, of moral normativity?¹ Would it not be possible to regard the personal individuality of the agent as a source of normativity without, as a result, ‘dissolving’ ethics into a catalogue of singular experiences? In his lecture *Introduction to Philosophy* (Winter Semester 1919-1920), Husserl referred to this point:

For individuals and in individual cases the ethical question is continuously asked: what should I do? What is absolutely obligatory here and now and what is in general my true life-task? Ethics as a science cannot deal with every specific individual and every particular case within its praxis, but it can teach us – universally and, firstly, in relation to the universality of supra-empirical ideality – about the essence of a willing subject who acts as an agent in general, and about the essence of situations and spheres of choice in general, which characterize his will as ethical (2012, 136).

Setting aside the question of the supposedly scientific character of ethics, a text like this could give the impression that Husserl’s answer to the question on the source of moral normativity is that this is just the “essence of a willing subject who acts as an agent in general”. However, as I will argue below, stressing this aspect and mentioning the “essence of situations and spheres of choice in general” is compatible with Husserl’s progressive awareness of personal individuality as a source of moral

normativity. In other words, it would be possible to acknowledge this personal individuality of the acting subject in some way without renouncing what Husserl called the ‘true thought’ of Kant’s theory, namely that moral laws’ objective validity (*objektive Geltung*) is a validity in accordance with laws (*gesetzmässige Geltung*).² This leads us to what Husserl calls the *zentralste Problem der Ethik*, namely the problem of the categorical imperative, which is broader than its Kantian formulation.³ Clarifying this ‘core issue of ethics’ involved a critical discussion by Husserl of its formulation by the philosopher of Königsberg. I will refer, therefore, to this Husserlian criticism, which is not free of important exegetical problems. As Rinofner-Kreidl (2010) has shown, Husserl was not especially careful in his interpretative and analytic criticism of Kant’s texts.⁴ However, I do not pretend here to exhaust Husserl’s criticism of the Kantian formulation of the categorical imperative⁵. Rather, I would like to present the main elements of a positive answer to the questions I asked above on the possibility of taking into account the agent’s personal individuality.

Light is shed on this matter by some of the already published Husserlian texts, such as the *Kaizo-Articles*, the *Vorlesungen über Ethik und Wertlehre* (1908-1914), the *Einleitung in die Ethik* (1920/1924), the *Introduction to Philosophy* (1916-1920) and the fourth part of the recently published XLII volume of *Husserliana*, entitled *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*. This volume includes a series of manuscripts from what some have called the ‘late phase’ of Husserl’s ethics, which focus precisely on the problem of personal individuality as a source of moral normativity. In this study, I also propose to highlight not only the unquestionable interest that these manuscripts have for Husserlian hermeneutics but, above all, I will focus on the philosophical importance of the question itself, referring to various themes in which personal individuality, from the viewpoint of Husserl, plays an important role in moral normativity. Since the abovementioned texts correspond to different periods of Husserl’s ethics, I will start with a brief contextualization.

II. HUSSERL'S EARLY ETHICS

Before focusing directly on the key theme of this study, I believe it is important to take into account the ethical views of Husserl during the years that he taught at the University of Göttingen and in his early years at the University of Freiburg. I am primarily referring to the lectures he gave on ethical issues during the winter semester of 1908-1909 at Göttingen, as well as during the summer semesters of 1911 and 1914. With respect to his early years at Freiburg, the lecture *Introduction to Philosophy*, dictated by Husserl during the summer semester of 1919-1920, is significant. The first part is from a lecture with the same name delivered in 1916, which Husserl repeated in the summer semester of 1918. This lecture includes a long section entitled by the editor “*A Priori* Theory of Values and Ethics”.⁶

Generally speaking one can say that Husserl's early account seeks to establish a rationalistic approach to ethics. In the abovementioned lectures, he tries to show that ethics is a region of reason that can be defined in parallel to logic and is founded on it. After having demonstrated the negative consequences a psychologistic conception of ethics would have, Husserl develops a detailed analysis of the parallelism between ethical laws and logical laws. The first has to do with the ‘pure form of judgment’, with ‘theoretical rightness’; the second, in turn, refers to the conditions of possibility of ‘practical rightness’. According to Husserl, the realm of ethics is comprised of an *a priori* formal axiology of values and praxis, with the latter being founded on the former. The praxis refers to volitional acts with their correlate goals of actions, as well as to actions *simpliciter*.

During this early period of his moral philosophy, one of Husserl's central objectives was the scientific *a priori* grounding of ethics. Just as cognitive functions are universal in the sphere of theoretical reasoning, such universality also applies in reference to valuing (*wertende*) and practical functions. So we find ourselves with three formal *Prinzipienwissenschaften*, namely logic, the formal theory of values or formal axiology, and the

formal science of praxis or formal practice. To put it simply, the first of these, as a formal scientific theory, concerns itself with the conditions of possibility that any theory has to meet in order to be a science. For its part, formal axiology includes all value spheres in its formal universality. Formal practice constitutes ‘the *a priori* science of every possible praxis in general’. These three sciences – which refer to cognitive, evaluative and practical reason respectively – interpenetrate one another since they apply to different ‘aspects’ of one and the same reason.

Husserl’s analysis of rational laws (*Vernunftgesetze*) is important with respect to both formal axiology and practice. In the case of the former of these sciences, the acts by means of which values are grasped are the subject of study and, in the case of the latter, acts of volition.⁷ One of the basic laws of this latter type of act is formulated by Husserl as follows:

If any volitional subject has to choose between two practical possibilities, the respective values of which are V_1 and V_2 , such that $V_1 < V_2$, then the practical decision in favour of V_1 is not only worse than the decision in favour of V_2 , but it is worse in itself. The relegation of what is better and the preference for what is worse are wrong and, as such, the choice has to be judged as bad (Hua XXVIII, 130).

Whatever the formulation may be, what this law proposes is a relative duty, an obligation that is ‘conditional’ (*unter Vorbehalt*). The emergence of an alternate duty, in the practical sphere of a duty, which ‘absorbs’ the one that up until that moment was regarded as ‘the’ duty, will always be possible. As Husserl points out, the relativity of these duties depends on the absence of a final defined limit. The agent, who has to choose, can always open space for new practical possibilities. Thus, he ‘expands’ his practical field (*praktischer Bereich, praktisches Wirkungsfeld*). This is precisely the context in which, to use Husserl’s own words, the ‘central problem of ethics’ appears, namely the problem of the categorical imperative. What characterizes this imperative is precisely its inability to be absorbed. In other words, the possibility of a categorical imperative depends on

finding a subject's practical field that cannot be further 'expanded', or that is, in Husserl's words, objectively defined (Hua XXVIII, 137). The central question here is whether there are such 'unexpandable practical fields' for each moral subject or if there is a single unexpandable practical field that is *a priori* the same for every moral agent.

As we know, Husserl's formulation of the categorical imperative is strongly influenced by Brentano. In Hua XXVIII, we find at least two of these formulations: "Unter allen erreichbaren Gütern dann das Beste zu tun, das ist das absolut Richtige und somit kategorisch Geforderte" (Hua XXVIII, 137)⁸; "Tue das Beste unter dem erreichbaren Guten innerhalb deiner jeweiligen praktischen Gesamtsphäre" (Hua XXVIII, 142).

Notice that Husserl is here applying the categorical imperative to the practical sphere of action and evaluation and that he reformulates it in a Brentanian way. Here there is no longer any primacy of the 'I should' over the practical 'I can' (as we find in Kant). Rather, Husserl formulates a new *a priori* law that is based on the concrete potentialities of human beings: nothing can be demanded from a human being that he or she is not able to do. What someone cannot do is something that he or she should also not do. It is important not to forget that the Brentanian-Husserlian notion makes explicit reference to both the notion of a material good ('do the best') and the circumstances in which the action is to be performed ('unter dem erreichbaren Guten'); the Kantian formulation, by contrast, mentions neither of these. Reference to the end of the action and its circumstances are to be found instead in the maxim governing the action, and the imperative provides a test that the maxim must satisfy if the action performed under its guidance is to have moral worth.

Be it in one sense or another, what the categorical imperative demands – always according to Husserl's formulation – is the carrying out of the best among attainable goods. This would be the general sense of this imperative. However – and this is how Husserl critiques Kant – what the good is, and therefore, the best, is not something that can be formally decided, just as the true cannot be decided merely by the laws of formal

logic. It is necessary, therefore, to keep in mind the material content of the respective goods and of the best. This does not mean falling into any sort of relativism, since *a priori* laws exist referring to the matters under evaluation and to their essential types. Despite the fact that the practical realm and, as a result, the best from the practical point of view, is different in each subject, every rational subject must recognize that when something is judged as being good or correct, anyone who considers the same matters will judge it as good or correct as well.⁹

In this way, Husserl believes he is doing justice to what he considers the only thing valid in the Kantian demand for a practical law and for a categorical imperative: if, in a given situation, someone acts so that the universalization of his or her maxim is impossible, then he or she acts incorrectly. This means only that the perfect correctness of the will is an idea that is built on the idea of the practical sphere (*praktischer Bereich*) and on the idea of the *optimum* in this same sphere, and that all these foundational ideas – and the ideas founded on them – depend on certain ideal laws. According to these laws, if a subject acts correctly in this way, then every other subject must act thus if we exchange the respective practical spheres. This is the reason: correctness prescribes exclusively essential laws, such that in the facticity of the given situation and of the subject they encounter their application.

As I observed above, just as formal logic does not occupy itself with specific objects, formal practice does not occupy itself with material goods or values, nor does it provide a foundation for any determined material truth. This does not eliminate the fact that determined material truths exist, which are linked, with respect to their matter, by essential *a priori* laws, under which the diverse species and genera of material contents fall. A material *a priori* thus exists in this domain. The difference with the Kantian position is thus established¹⁰: Husserl holds that the analogy between the formal and the material in the practical sphere and the formal and the material in the logical sphere holds in its fullness (*durchaus statthaft*). Therefore, it is not possible to fall into the error of wanting to pre-delineate, with the

sole aid of a categorical imperative emptied of content, what would be demanded practically (*praktisch Geforderte*) “[...] in dem jeweilig gegebenen und material bestimmten Einzelfall” (Hua XXVIII, 139-140). The formal law tells us that between two good options, we must choose the best, and it still does not say anything about what the good, the best and the optimum are. It is thus necessary to define the fundamental classes of values and of practical goods in order to later study the laws of preference, or, stated in another way, to systematically set forth the material *a priori*, that is, to develop an *a priori* material axiology. Nevertheless, Husserl did not take this path. Rather, instead of developing an *a priori* material axiology, he directed his attention to the valuing and acting subject and to the development of an ontology of the person.¹¹

In any case, the overall aim of Husserl’s early ethics is to define formal and *a priori* laws, i.e. he seeks to provide an answer to the question ‘how should I behave?’ that would be valid in all possible circumstances. The subject should be able to achieve the highest possible value in every possible situation. Even though Husserl questions the primacy of the ‘I should’ and tries to integrate the abilities (I can) of subjectivity on a general and concrete level, for Husserl this does not represent individuality but instead an *a priori* law (the imperative to do the best under the given circumstances and limitations).

III. HUSSERL’S REFORMULATION OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Husserl’s approach to an ontology of the person – instead of the development of an *a priori* material axiology – is deeply interconnected with the change in his ethics from a rationalistic to a personalistic approach. In the later ontology of the person, the source of a person and his or her individuality can no longer be found only in reason or the rational striving for it, but is now defined by Husserl as love, striving for a true and authentic existence. In the later ethics, love functions as an ethical principle and individual motive.

As mentioned above, Husserl reformulates the categorical imperative – to the point that the editors of *Hua XLII* refer to ‘the new categorical imperative’ – during the Freiburg years (1916-1938). It is particularly significant that during those same years – more specifically from 1922 to 1924 – Husserl prepared a series of articles about renovation in the moral sphere for the journal *Kairos*. In these lectures, the founder of the phenomenological method shares with Kant the idea that every individual human being lives subject to a categorical imperative, in the sense that the life worthy of being lived is that in which one aspires to live according to evidence, to make all decisions in accordance with the best science and one’s conscience. The “categorical imperative of reason” demands that life “[...] be the best possible in the view of reason, as well in regards to all the personal acts possible”. Therefore it is necessary, on the one hand, “[...] to establish whether the vocational-professional form of life can be justified as such in the formal framework of a life subject to imperatives” and, on the other hand, to “[...] determine, first, whether the special forms of the scientific, artistic or political life are possible as ethical lives, and next whether they are demanded by that life, and in which formal circumstances and under which restrictions” (*Hua XLII*, 35). Husserl thinks that in order to carry out this task Kant’s categorical imperative is insufficient, given that it moves amidst absolute generality and does not take into account these aspects of the vocational-professional life of persons or of the special forms of scientific, artistic or political life. This brings him to affirm the following:

The categorical imperative, even while being *such* an imperative, is certainly nothing more than a meaningful form empty of content, empty of all the individual imperatives of a determined content that can be valid (*Hua XLII*, 36).

Therefore, Ethics must delimit the specifications of this life according to the best science and conscience “[...] in relation to the forms of possible personalities and possible circumstances”, investigating critically the “[...]”

possible forms of life enclosed *a priori* in the essence of the human being (Hua XLII, 36). This brings Husserl to hold that

[E]very man has, then, in addition to his individuality, his own individual ethical idea and his individual ethical method, his individual categorical imperative determined concretely for his case. Only the general form of the essence of the ethical human being and of a life under the formally identical categorical imperative is common to all human beings as such; also common are, naturally, all of the aprioric norms that a scientific and fundamental (and therefore formal) ethic is able to deduce from the essence of the human being (Hua XLII, 36).

Both in these articles and in the texts included in Hua XLII, Husserl does not reject the position he adopted in his 1914 lecture. Rather, he suggests that it needed to be defined more precisely. This is because – as we have already indicated – the categorical imperative in its Kantian formulation “[...] is nothing other than a form that is significant but devoid of content, of all the individual imperatives with a specific content that may be valid” (Hua XXVII, 141). Consequently, as I have pointed out, one of the fundamental tasks of ethics is to define the different characteristics of this imperative, required by different personalities and circumstances. In other words, every human being has his or her specific and individual categorical imperative, which refers to his or her own practical sphere (Hua XLII, 321). The fact that Brentano was not sufficiently aware of this fact explains Husserl’s dissatisfaction with the former’s formulation of the categorical imperative, initially seconded by Husserl himself:

All these ethics of the supreme practical good, as developed by Brentano and which I broadly accepted, cannot represent the last word. It requires basic limitations! It does not do justice to vocation and inner calling (Hua XLII, 391-392).¹²

This dissatisfaction persists in so far as it ignores the fact that – according to Husserl – in addition to the moral duties that correspond to human

beings as such, there are obligations that are absolute, and hence correspond to individuals as such. These are ‘personal obligations’ that belong to my own practical sphere. It is not simply a question of asking me what is best in a range of good options; rather, it is a matter of what I should do, or what I must do now. This led to Husserl presenting what he calls the ‘(comparatively) higher demand’ (*die höhere Forderung*):

Do your best as the best, in the sense of the absolute best you can do, as that toward the sense of your life, and the sense of the life of all human beings, has to be oriented (Hua XLII, 390).¹³

As Ferrer and Sánchez-Migallón (2011) have pointed out, we are witnessing an individualization of duty that results from referring all duties to the particular ego as its subject. As these same authors comment, the type of being to which we aspire, according to Husserl, is a symbiosis between the general human type and the individual type found in each human being.¹⁴

In *Reflexionen zur Ethik aus den Freiburger Jahren*, Husserl further analyses this individual dimension of the moral and ethical ideal in a series of reflexions that, in my view, focus on two central themes, namely the relationship between duties and values, and the clarification of the notion of ‘vocation’ or ‘inner calling’, on the other.

With respect to the first issue, Husserl begins by emphasizing the central role that the awareness of duty has in our moral life and how it is linked with values. All imperatives take as their benchmark absolute values, which constitute a sphere of obligation for people (Hua XLII, 377). These imperatives, which are intended for everyone, refer in turn to intersubjective values, to values that are not just for me, but for all human beings.¹⁵ Here we are talking about the appraisal of the impartial spectator and the values that he or she – or any other person – can in fact put into practice (*nachverstehen*) (Hua XLII, 351). Together with this type of value, there are other ‘subjective’ or ‘egoic’ values that refer exclusively to a particular ego.

In the latter case, love functions in Husserl's ethics as an ethical principle and individual motive. Husserl explains this with two examples, the love of a mother for her child and the call to a specific duty in life (e.g. to be a philosopher). In the first case, the interest of the mother in her child has instinctive and biological roots, and love transforms this into a conscious and rational decision. In the second, there is an individual call to put one's work and talent into the service of a specific region of values, for example art, politics, education or science, while the mother has a 'maternal' duty exclusively towards her child. What is loved has value for the ego. Ultimately, however, we want to know where this value resides. In some cases it resides in the special type of object that affects the subject. However, what happens in other cases, Husserl points out, is that a "[...] love-inspired valuation" (*liebendes Werten*) flows from the subject towards the individual object and imparts a value to the latter that does not derive from the object itself but, ultimately, from the ego. A practical duty which is not on the same level as any other imperative that emerges from the value of the object follows from this value (Hua XLII, 352). To risk this value constitutes an absolute disvalue for the mother. As Husserl remarked in a text with a clear personal character, even if the son gives his life for the country, his death is an absolute disvalue for the mother.¹⁶

Values that apply to all subjects are referred to as 'objective values' by Husserl, whereas values that arise from the aforementioned 'love-inspired valuation' are described as 'absolutely subjective' or as 'love values' (*Liebeswerte*). The laws of formal axiology and practice are applied to values of the former class (Sowa 2014, ciii). In the case of 'love values', the 'individual values' that particular subjects (children, for example) or groups of individuals (e.g. the family) acquire for the volitional and evaluational subject, play a special role.¹⁷ From these individual values other imperatives arise, such as looking after one's own child, and they give rise to 'individual categorical imperatives', such as bathing our child rather than listening to one of Mozart's sonatas, as Husserl graphically points out (Hua XLII, 390). All values of this kind are unconditional and absolutely

imperative. To decide against them implies being unfaithful to oneself and betraying the true ego (Hua XLII, 356). So, failing to comply with them means we commit a moral wrong. It is precisely this unconditional nature that explains why, unlike the case of values that are merely objective, the law of absorption does not apply.¹⁸ Compared to what represents a value for me, an objective value ‘weighs’ nothing. It is true, Husserl recognizes, that in the practical duties of the mother (‘look after your child!’), comparisons of value and choices have a role to play, yet always against the background of the absolute subjective value of her child (Hua XLII, 357). In virtue of the fact that these two types of values and the corresponding imperatives founded upon them are not on the same level, my conscience might require me to perform an action which the faculty of understanding that compares values may not identify as the best possible action.

That which is foolishness for the faculty of understanding that compares values, is approved as ethical and may even become an object of the greatest veneration (Hua XLII, 390).

Love is not only the source from which absolute subjective values arise; indeed, the recognition of these values depends on it. This is particularly the case for the love felt towards people, in other words, the love of our neighbour. Here love appears in the form of a liking felt towards another person that acquires a special value for me. This love is the ultimate root of my valuation; in it resides what is – ultimately – valuable and ‘loved’ (*lieb*) by me (Hua XLII, 354). Thus, my ‘personal love’ belongs, along with my personal decisions and obligations, to my ‘essence’ or my practical sphere as a personal individual. Despite these claims, Husserl does not forget that there is an optimal objective that is based on intersubjective values and that constitutes the source of specific obligations for everyone who is in the same situation as me. Even in a case of what is right for me personally, and despite the fact that nobody, in the strict sense, can make the same value judgements

as me, someone could make value judgements in the same way as me, although in relation to other objects. So, we would be dealing with a sort of “[...] general typing of forms of personal vocation and love that determines universal norms” (Hua XLII, 355). Despite the fact that each personal subject has their own “ethical universe of values and anti-values”, it is not something private. All these ‘universes’ are inter-related within the community of human beings (Hua XLII, 391).

Whatever the case, Husserl insists on the idea that I do not know what I have to do by virtue of any causal investigation. I am the only person who knows what I have to do.

I do not know what I have to do by virtue of any causal investigation that I undertake or that others undertake on my behalf. I am the only person responsible for what I must do by virtue of who I am. I have to reflect as the person that I am now, as the ego in the ‘instant’ in which I exist, as the arbiter of my life which is now actual, and which has its current horizon and its present, a context that carries its past in its present for me (Hua XLII, 404).

For this ‘you must’, which addresses itself to the person, there is no underlying rational foundation. Instead, the founder of phenomenology maintains that it is an absolute affection that goes ‘before’ any rational explanation. Husserl explains this point by resorting to the example of the duty to look after her child that a mother experiences in such a personal way.

The well-being of my child is entrusted to me. I am responsible for him. To foster his well-being is ‘an absolute obligation’. Yet the suffering of my child is my suffering. I suffer because he suffers [...] and I suffer in such a way that anything else becomes secondary. To eliminate my suffering is not my aim. The absolute aim is unique and exclusively to eliminate the suffering of my child [...] (Hua XLII, 391-392).

The second theme, which is closely related to the first, and on which the *Reflexionen zur Ethik aus den Freiburger Jahren* are based, is the idea of

vocation for a life-task and an inner calling. Every human being, just because of being such, is called to become ‘a true human being’. This call is expressed in acting according to the absolute values that we all have. But, together with this universal vocation, there is an inner calling or individual vocation in every human being “[...] related to a class of values that are the object of ‘pure’ love on the part of the human being who feels it. The attainment of these values should, therefore, bring ‘pure’ satisfaction to this human being” (Hua XXVII, 38). Some of these values have, we can say, an ‘extremely personal’ character, as in the case of a child in the eyes of his or her mother. Other such personal values derive from particular spheres of values to which the subject feels especially attracted. To live authentically means precisely to be faithful to these personal values. This fidelity is expressed subjectively in the ‘quality’ of the satisfaction that is associated to it. It is a genuine satisfaction (Hua XLII, 396).

Ethical obligations derive from this ‘calling’ or individual vocation. While the aims of one’s will and the spheres of good may change, each of us has a vocation that we feel with a special conviction and significance, unlike the dilettante, for example, who concerns him or herself with science and art but without seriously living in accordance with his or her values. (Husserliana-Materialien IX, 142).

As Rochus Sowa also points out in his introduction to Hua XLII, this idea of a professional life dedicated to a vocation serves Husserl as a model for an ethical life in general. This is also a life that “begs” to be lived “with the sincerity of the decision to live a true and authentic existence”:

In the weight of the decision to live a true and authentic existence there resides the condition that encompasses the possibility of making a genuine and individual decision, one that is in conformance with the situation and time. Every decision taken this seriously is eo ipso ethical and, insofar as the decision in favour of a true existence is in itself absolutely right, that existence is also absolutely as it should be (Hua XLII, 455; italics original).

The ‘ethical decision’, namely the decision in favour of a true and authentic existence, the decision to be an authentic man or woman, ultimately constitutes the general vocation of a human being.¹⁹ This life vocation is the most universal and absolute of all vocations, and is the one to which any other vocation subordinates itself. At the same time, this ‘ethical decision’ has, Husserl points out, the potentiality to change the way my environment exists for me. What had previously seemed a disjointed chain of practical situations is now a series of situations ‘linked together’ – if I may use the expression – by the ethical decision, so that we can say that, in reality, I live in a unique circumstance, the content of which changes over time. Consequently, the ethical decision fulfils the important role of putting my moral life in order. Depending on the extent to which this decision is taken consciously and succeeds in putting my life in order, I will be faithful to my vocation as a human being, to the calling to be a true and authentic human being.

I am *ethical* if I maintain a serious ethical attitude in which I do not allow myself to be carried away. Rather, I live in a state of ethical self-consciousness, willing and deciding ethically for myself; and my *ethical question* is: What must I do *for myself*? But this question includes – and I include it specifically – what I also have to do for *others*. This again leads us to reflect on the *universality of the interconnectedness of human existence (Daseinsverflochtenheit)* and the possibility of an ethical being that is shared by all humans, or the viability of attaining an ethical existence. *Without ethical self-reflection (Selbstbesinnung) no ethical conclusion, no vital ethical horizon, in other words no universal perspective, such as that of an existence which is true to itself, is possible* (Hua XLII, 456; italics original).²⁰

Finally, one of the most interesting and innovative aspects (in the light of the Kaizo lectures) has to do with Husserl’s reflections on the ego. Once again we see the idea of the central and revelatory nature of the love of genuinely personal values. A very significant Husserlian text reads as follows:

The genuine ego loves, surrenders itself lovingly to its authentic end and its care (*Sorge*) is loving care. The authentic life is a life absolutely

immersed in love or, what amounts to the same thing, ‘life in absolute obedience to duty’. What I desire I also define with the words: ‘I must do that’. I fulfil an obligation. Here I comply with what is demanded of me very personally, and this is nothing other than what I love in the deepest sense, what I genuinely love in that deepest sense. For my part, I cannot love anything other than what I very personally love. Love is the channelling of the ego towards what individually attracts it and that, once achieved, is regarded as an attainment (Hua XLII, 397).

In a manuscript dating from the middle of the 1920s and included as *Beilage (Appendix) XXIV* in Hua XLII, Husserl stresses that, although the ego is an axis, this does not mean it is an empty point in a substrate of attributes. The ego is more like a centre of action with various depths (Hua XLII, 358). Here Husserl uses a concept of the ego that is very similar to that found in the work of one of his collaborators. I am referring to Pfänder (1916) who refers to the error of regarding the ego as if it were a ‘point’ (*ein punktförmiges Wesen*) and not as an entity with divisions (*ein in sich gegliedertes Gebilde*).²¹ The ego can expand in different ‘places’ but they are not all of the same order, and one of them acts as the psychic centre of all the other places as a whole. This psychic centre is what Pfänder calls the ego-center (*Ich-Zentrum*). For his part, Husserl indicates that this centre of the ego is at the root of people’s moral life, their actions, decisions, etc. It is the ‘place’ in which one hears the calling to pursue certain individual values or goals, or as Husserl rectifies himself, where certain objective ideal value spheres are found. This is the calling to surrender oneself to them in a different manner from that in which the ego devotes itself to what is beautiful, good and true in general.²²

IV. SOME QUESTIONS AND DIFFICULTIES

I have tried thus far to highlight certain aspects of the mature ethical views of Edmund Husserl that emphasize the importance of taking into consideration the individuality of the moral subject when we contemplate

the normativity of the moral imperatives that apply to him or her. Many of these aspects are found in the texts included in the fourth part of Hua XLII. The aspects I have focused on have not been exhausted, nor are they unique. Be that as it may, Husserl's analyses seem to stress that in the same way that a person's dignity cannot be explained solely by an attribute common (universal) to all, his or her individuality must be taken into consideration, for moral normativity cannot be explained without accounting for some form of individuality of the moral subject. Certainly there are many questions and difficulties that still have to be solved here. I want to mention just three of them.

As I observed at the beginning of this article, a first group of difficulties has to do with the problems of Husserl's interpretation of the Kantian notion of the categorical imperative. These difficulties can be summarized – following Rinofner-Kreidl (2010) – in the tension between a purely formal imperative, considered from the theoretical point of view of formal praxeology and a hypothetical imperative. From the practical point of view, in contrast, it is a matter of bringing together formal praxeology and formal axiology according to the requirements of the concrete situation. So, as Rinofner-Kreidl points out, a rift between Kantian moral philosophy and Husserl's has opened up:

Husserl's so-called 'CI' [Categorical Imperative] does not represent a moral law, i.e., an unconditioned ought, either because it is of merely hypothetical nature because it is a purely formal, maximizing or optimizing law that represents a generally acknowledged law of prudence, or because it is of a merely hypothetical nature [...] In both cases it "does not characterize the nature of obligation as it does for Kant" (2010, 201-202).

A second group of questions, which would deserve more attention, refers to the kind of conflict between objective values and *Liebeswerte*, which can arise in some cases. We have seen how Husserl understands the conflicts among objective values and among subjective, individual, *Liebeswerte*. In the first case, one applies the law of absorption and in the second case

an *Opferung* is required. But the question of how to overcome an eventual conflict between an objective value and a *Liebeswert* remains, in my opinion, not thoroughly explained in Husserl's approach. He seems to maintain that the lack of a common denominator for objective values and for *Liebeswerte* makes impossible to apply the law of absorption. But, on the other hand, the 'call' of this last kind of values seems more appealing than the 'call' of the objective kind. Does this not imply that, in some way, the weight of the *Liebeswerte* can be compared to that of the objective values and that they therefore 'absorbed' the objective values?²³

A third group of questions, which would also deserve more attention, refers to the way in which the individual *Liebeswerte* and the intersubjective, objective values are united in a single life. How, for instance, do we make the intersubjective and universal requirements of our human condition compatible with the duties arising from our particular situations? A classical answer to this central ethical question consists in pointing out the importance of prudential reasoning as the capacity of the human agent to take into account universal principles and his or her particular circumstances.

Fourthly, and in close connection with the previous point, one can also ask: what determines the moral worth of the ends toward which these loves orient me? Could I absolutely love bad things and, consequently, be obligated to pursue those things? What in the account would preclude this? Are some ends morally worthy because I orient my love to them or do I orient my love to them because they are morally worthy? Here, in a certain sense, we encounter the same problem that Peucker identifies in Husserl's and Brentano's theory of the correctness of evaluations. The correctness of the acts of value-feeling "[...] depends upon whether or not the feelings are appropriate to their objects. An appropriate feeling is a feeling that fits its object; it is, as Husserl calls it, 'proper' (*konvinient*)" (2007, 318). How can we know whether a love is appropriate or not? It seems that we need a criterion additional to love by which to decide the moral worthiness or non-worthiness of an end.

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NOTES

1. As an anonymous reviewer of a first draft of this paper pointed out to me, Husserl himself does not use the term ‘normativity’ in his own account, but instead investigates either the *a priori* laws of the will (early account) or the personal and intersubjective motivational sources of values (late account). However, this does not mean, in my opinion, that this topic is entirely absent in Husserl’s philosophy. The recent book by Steven Crowell supports this point (*Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013]).

2. Husserl formulates the Kantian ‘true thought’ as follows: “Wenn es in der Sphäre der Sittlichkeit Normalität geben, wenn die sittliche Forderung nicht bloß individuelle Bedeutung, nicht bloß den Charakter einer an das zufällige Subjekt zufällig gestellten Forderung haben soll, sondern Geltung, d.i. Richtigkeit für dieses wie für jedes praktische Wesen, dann muss die Sittlichkeit unter Gesetzen stehen. Das Individuum soll hic et nunc so handeln, darin liegt, wenn das ‚soll‘ einen objektiven Sinn hat, dass jedes Individuum überhaupt unter gleichen Umständen derselben Forderung unterliegt; unter den und den Umständen so handeln, ist eben überhaupt richtig handeln“ (Hua XXVIII, 417).

3. “Unsere, wie wir wohl sagen dürfen, durchaus von apriorischen und einsichtigen Notwendigkeiten getragene Erwägung hat uns an das zentralste Problem der Ethik geführt, an das Problem des *kategorischen Imperativs*” (Hua XXVIII, 137).

4. “[...] Husserl’s critique of Kant’s IC does not rest on sound arguments” (Rinofner-Kreidl 2010, 197). This author points at at least three of Husserl’s misinterpretations of Kant’s categorical imperative. The first has to do with the way Husserl understands the maxims that can be suited for general laws. “Husserl starts with asserting that, according to Kant, every action is immoral whose maxim is not suited for general law” (2010, 191). However, Kant does not refer to every intention in general, but just to the moral relevant maxims. Therefore, “Husserl ignores the peculiar practical character when talking about maxims” (2010, 193). The second misinterpretation is related to Husserl’s charge to Kant of defending an ‘abstruse formalism’ (Hua XXVIII, 415) in his formulation of categorical imperative. However, Kant’s categorical imperative “[...] is not devoid of content by and large. It is devoid of any content that refers to arbitrary material objects or material purposes of acting, i.e., a content that differs from the act of volition enabling us to strive for whatever objects and purposes” (2010, 193). Lastly, Husserl’s third misinterpretation is related to his arguments on the application

or non-application of laws: “The main issue here is the difference between an actual non-application of a moral or juridical law and an application that is, as Kant argues, strictly speaking impossible because either the formation of my volition, which lies beneath the maxim in question, or its implementation is self-defeating. This difference, indeed, should be uncontroversial: whether a law lacks application due to contingent circumstances or whether it cannot be applied on principle; however circumstances may change in the future. With regard to the former the statement of non-application is of merely preliminary validity, since at any moment and opportunity or practical need to apply can occur. Moreover, Husserl’s reference to the penal law in this context actually eliminates the self-relating character of practical deliberation” (2010, 194). “Husserl is inclined to disregard the peculiar function of maxims. Consequently, he considers maxims to be totally arbitrary with regard to their specific phrasing” (2010, 196).

5. Cf. Rinofner-Kreidl (2010), Peucker (2007) and Crowell (2002).

6. I am referring to *Husserliana-Materialien*, IX.

7. An anonymous reviewer of a draft copy of this paper pointed out that it is not quite clear if values are merely grasped or not, in some way, actively constituted by the subject. I think that, in principle, there is no strict contradiction in claiming both things. The key point is what is understood by ‘constitution’. If one understands by it just the appearance of objects before consciousness, I think one can defend both, namely, that values are grasped and constituted.

8. Cf. Brentano 1952, 221) and Brentano 1955, 16).

9. Wenn nun auch der praktische Willensbereich eines jeden Subjekts ein anderer ist, wenn, allgemein zu reden, nicht in jeden solchen Bereich Güter derselben Artung eintreten, wenn somit das praktisch Beste für jedes Subjekt ein anderes ist, so muss doch jedes vernünftige Subjekt anerkennen, das, wo einer richtig so und so gut-wertet, jeder überhaupt, der dieselbe Materie in Erwägung zieht, ebenso werten musste; und ebenso muss jedes vernünftige Subjekt anerkennen, dass wenn ein Bereich die und die Güter als praktische Möglichkeiten enthält, für diesen Bereich das Beste *idealerweise* vorgezeichnet ist, das betreffende Subjekt dieses Bereichs also durch Idee und Gesetz gebunden ist (Hua XXVIII, 137-138).

10. Eine formale Regelung des Wertens und Wollens unter der Voraussetzung, dass die Materie des Wertens und Wollens, also die inhaltliche Besonderheit der Wert- und Willensobjekte außer Ansatz bleiben konnte, ist ein Widersinn. In dieser Beziehung müssen wir also unsere Wege von denen der Kantischen Lehre scharf sonders” (Hua XXVIII, 154).

11. “Die über die formale Axiologie und Praktik und ihren kategorischen Imperativ hinausgehende Materialisierung und Konkretisierung der Ethik vollzog sich in der Ethik der frühen Freiburger Jahre nicht in Form einer materialen Axiologie und Praktik; sie erfolgte vielmehr durch die nähere Bestimmung des handelnden Subjekts als konkrete vergemeinschaftete, geschichtliche Person und im Blick auf ihre durch sie selbst gestaltete und von ihr zu verantwortende Lebensganzheit. Diese Erweiterung der Thematik der Ethik führte Husserl zu Beginn der 1920 er Jahre unter Erweiterung seines frühen Vernunftbegriffs zu dem universalen ethischen Rationalismus der *Kaiço* -Artikel, in denen die individuelle, soziale und menschheitliche Erneuerung zum zentralen ethischen Thema wurde und in denen die zweite Phase der Entwicklung der Husserl’schen Ethik gipfelt“ (Sowa Hua XLII, xcvi).

12. Cf. also: “Es ist klar, dass eine nach dem bloßen kategorischen Imperativ, wie er hier im Anschluss an Brentano zugrunde gelegt worden ist, durchgeführte Ethik keine Ethik ist” (Husserliana Materialien IX, 146; note 1).

13. “Tue dein Bestes, als welches das Beste ist, das du im Sinn des absolut Besten tun kannst, auf das dein Lebenssinn mit hinzielen soll, wie der aller Menschen!”

14. Ferrer & Sánchez-Migallón (2011, 162) illustrate this point with two texts from *Ideas II*: “Wir unterscheiden also von der reinen Ichreflexion, der Reflexion auf das wesensmäßig zu jedem cogito gehörige reine Ich, die reflektive thematische Erfahrung auf Grund der erwachsenen Erfahrungssapperzeption, deren intentionaler Gegenstand dieses empirische Ich, das Ich der empirischen Intentionalität ist, als Selbsterfahrung des persönlichen Ich mit Beziehung auf die Erfahrungszusammenhänge, in denen sich dies persönliche Ich (also mit Beziehung auf die Akte, die es unter den zugehörigen motivierenden Umständen vollzieht) nach seinen ‘persönlichen Eigenheiten’ oder Charaktereigenschaften ausweist” (Hua IV, 249); “Ich bin geistig im Vorstellen normal [...] Ich habe ein normales Gedächtnis, ich habe eine normale Phantasie, ebenso eine normale Denktätigkeit; ich kann Schlüsse ziehen, ich kann vergleichen, unterscheiden, verknüpfen, zählen, rechnen; ich kann auch werten und Werte abwägen etc., normal wie ein ‚reifer Mensch‘. Andererseits habe ich meine Eigenart, mein Wie des Sichbewegens, des Tuns, meine individuellen Wertungen, meine Weise des Bevorzugens, meine Versuchungen, meine Kräfte des Überwindens gegenüber gewissen Gruppen von Versuchungen, gegen die ich gefeit bin, ein Anderer ist darin anders, hat andere Lieblingsmotive, andere ihm gefährliche Versuchungen, andere Sphären individueller Tatkraft, etc., aber innerhalb der Normalität, speziell der Normalität der Jugend, des Alters etc.” (Hua IV, 254).

15. “Realisierte Werte, die nicht nur für mich bleibende Werte sind, an denen ich mich immer wieder erfreuen und erheben kann, sondern solche, die es für alle anderen und für alle späteren Generationen sind, mindestens sofern immer wieder Möglichkeiten dafür bestehen, dass andere die Voraussetzungen der Bildung haben, um nachwerten zu können. Aufgrund meiner Menschenliebe, die ich als ethischer Mensch haben muss, gewinnt jeder Wert für mich dann allgemeinen menschlichen Wert, Wert für jedes Vernunftwesen, das ich nachverstehen kann; und das erhöht den Wert selbst und erhöht zugleich meine Freude, im Gedanken an all die Freuden, die er zu erwirken berufen ist. Das Ideal wäre, dass ich Werte schaffe, die ins Unendliche immer wieder fungieren könnten als Erhebung und Glücksquelle, also „Unsterblichkeit“ der Werte, nicht nur ihrer idealen Möglichkeit des Wirkenkönnens, sondern die unendliche Wirklichkeit des Wirkens der Werte *in infinitum* (Hua XLII, 324).

16. Hua XLII, 458.

17. An anonymous reviewer of a draft version of this paper pointed out that loving one’s own child is of course a very personal act, but the value ‘to love my child’ is something that is intersubjectively completely accepted and therefore in some sense ‘objective’. I should explain the sense in which this value is ‘subjective’ and in which it is not. Loving my pet (this would be a ‘love value’) is also ‘absolutely subjective’, but it would perhaps not be similarly accepted intersubjectively (Mariano Crespo, “Nota sobre la individualidad de la persona humana como fuente de su dignidad,” in *Realidad humana e ideal de humanidad. Perspectivas antropológico-éticas*, edited by Luis Mariano De la Maza and Andrés Covarrubias [Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile: Santiago

2013, 86-94]). Would this, therefore, be a better example for a subjective value? I do not think that loving my pet is a better example for a subjective value than loving my own child. In my opinion, the difference between these two examples does not consist in the fact that loving my pet would perhaps not be similarly accepted intersubjectively than loving my own child. Indeed, I think that the ‘absolutely subjective’ value of loving my child is, so to say, more ‘absolute’ than loving my pet. This difference resides, on the one hand, in the greater value for me of my own child than of my pet and, on the other, in the greater degree of individuality of personal beings in comparison with non-personal beings. Husserl seems to refer to this point when he writes: “Die Kinder sind Kinder dieser Mutter nicht als objektive Tatsachen, sondern sie sind für sie in ihrer Individualität Werte und zurückbezogen auf die Individualität der Mutter” (Hua XLII, 465). Here I cannot discuss this point in a more extended way. Cf. also Crosby (1996).

18. The first Husserlian formulation of the categorical imperative concerns itself with the aggregate good, and we are ‘absolutely obliged’ to perform that action that brings about the greatest aggregate good. Husserl’s law of absorption and the laws governing the summation of goods in his formal axiology make this clear. In its later formulation, however, this relationship has been turned on its head. What motivated this change in Husserl’s view? We know, of course, the personal motivations that might have been at work. The loss of his son Wolfgang and his favourite student (Adolf Reinach) in the Great War, as well as the serious injuries suffered by his other son Gerhard certainly alerted Husserl to the barrenness of abstract ethical formulations. But Husserl provides little philosophical justification for this shift apart from the example, pushed upon him by Moritz Geiger (cf. Hua XXVIII, 419-420), of how a mother’s love for her child could impose an obligation on her that overrode the ‘highest good’ produced by a consequentialist calculus when that ‘highest good’ sacrificed the good of her child. (No doubt this example resonated with Husserl, as did the love of a father for his son and the love of a teacher for his students.)

19. “*Jeder hat außer seinem besonderen Beruf noch den allgemeinen Beruf, Mensch zu sein - wenn er eben ein wahrer Mensch ist, dessen Wahrheit die ist, wahrer Mensch sein zu wollen*” (Hua XLII, 389).

20. “Ich bin ethisch in der ethischen ernsten Haltung, in der ich mich nie treiben lasse, sondern im ethischen „Selbstbewusstsein“ lebe, im ethischen Selbstwillen, in der Selbstentscheidung; und meine ethische Frage ist, was ich für mich zu tun habe. Aber diese Frage befasst auch, was ich für Andere tun kann und das ganz besonders. Das wieder führt dahin, die Universalität der menschlichen Daseinsverflochtenheit zu überdenken und die Möglichkeit eines allmenschlichen ethischen Seins oder zu ethischem Dasein zu kommen zu erwägen. Ohne ethische Selbstbesinnung kein ethischer Zusammenschluss, kein ethischer, d. i. universaler Lebenshorizont, als der eines sich selbst treuen Daseins” (Hua XLII, 456).

21. Cf. Pfänder (1916), Crespo (2009) and Ferrer (2002, 61-62).

22. Hua XLII, 359.

23. I thank an anonymous reviewer of a draft copy of this paper for calling my attention to this point.