FROM LOGIC TO THE PERSON:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO EDMUND HUSSERL’S ETHICS

HENNING PEUCKER

Many popular introductions to ethics attempt to systematize ethical theories by distinguishing three different types of normative ethics: virtue ethics, which can be traced back to Aristotle, deontological ethics of a Kantian type, and consequentialist theories, including, most importantly, utilitarianism. While such a classification is too broad to tell us anything of much use about the details of most ethical theories, it can be helpful for looking at the guiding but perhaps hidden principles in an ethical theory. However, if we confront the Husserlian ethics with this classification, we will find that it does not fit. Instead, Husserl’s ethics includes elements of all three of these types of ethical theories and combines them in a way that is both historically and systematically fruitful. Husserl’s mature ethical theory, in particular, combines a modern, Kantian or Fichtean approach based on a strong concept of a free and active ego capable of shaping its life autonomously through its own will with a more Aristotelian theory of the virtues that help us to shape our lives in order to reach happiness or eu-daimonia.

Before entering into this theory I will begin this introduction to Husserl’s ethics with a historical overview of the development of his ethical theory. Since there are different periods in this development we cannot speak about the Husserlian ethics as such. At least two different positions and periods must be distinguished from one another.¹


There is first Husserl’s early ethics, which is strongly influenced by his mentor Franz Brentano, whose lecture courses on ethics Husserl attended when he was a student in Vienna from 1884 to 1886. This early ethical theory is characterized by a strong parallel between logic and ethics, each of which is part of a comprehensive theory of reason that also comprises a theory of science and an ontology. Husserl himself did not publish his early ethical theory, but his lecture courses on ethics and some manuscripts from this period, which are preserved in his Nachlass, are available in the series of his collected writings, the Husserliana (hereafter “Hua.”). Most of this material can be found in Hua. 28 (“Lectures on Ethics and Value Theory”), which contains the lecture course on ethics and axiology from 1908/09 that Husserl repeated in a slightly changed version in 1911 and 1914. This volume also includes the remaining fragments of Husserl’s first lecture courses on ethics from 1897 (“Ethics and Philosophy of Law”) and 1902 (“Elementary Questions of Ethics”). Additional texts on Husserl’s early ethics are published in the first book of the Ideas to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy from 1913, and in Husserl’s lecture course on “Logic and General Theory of Science” from 1917/18, which is published in Hua. 30.

In Husserl’s second ethical theory the parallelism between logic and ethics no longer plays an important role. Instead, the background

---


3 Edmund Husserl, Vorlesungen über Ethik und Wertlehre (1908–1914), Husserliana 28, ed. Ullrich Melle (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988); henceforth: Hua. 28, Wertlehre. Citations from this and other writings by Husserl will list the Husserliana volume number and the page number in Arabic numerals. All translations from Husserl’s collected writings (Husserliana) used in this article are my own, but I quote the German text in the footnotes as well.

4 Hua. 28, Wertlehre, 381–419.

5 Edmund Husserl, Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, bk. 1, Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie, Hua. 3, part 1, ed. Karl Schuhmann (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1976), see especially §37, §95, §116, §121, §139, §147, §148.

of this later ethics is a refined phenomenological theory of the subject as a person who finally strives toward happiness or blessedness. Husserl developed this theory beginning around 1917 under the influence of his readings of Fichte and Kant. He published his basic ideas in a series of articles on the topic of “renewal” (Erneuerung)—a crucial term in this ethics—in the Japanese journal “The Kaizo” in 1922 to 1924.\(^7\) Other important documents of this theory are the extensive lecture course on ethics from 1920 (“Introduction to Ethics”) which he repeated in 1924,\(^8\) parts of his lecture course “Introduction to Philosophy”\(^9\) from 1922/23, a short text on “The value of life,”\(^10\) and some smaller manuscripts.

Almost all of the aforementioned texts have been published in the last few years, and they now provide the basis for a discussion of Husserl’s ethics that has only recently begun.\(^11\) There may yet appear one more volume in the series of the Husserliana that would contain Husserl’s latest ideas on ethics from the 1930s, which are embedded in a broader metaphysical conception. However, in this paper I will not take these late manuscripts into consideration, but will rather focus on the two periods of Husserl’s ethics, which are available in his

---


already published writings. Accordingly, the paper consists of two sections; the first is about Husserl’s early ethical theory and its parallelism between logic and ethics, the second presents Husserl’s theory of the ethical person from the 1920s.

I

In 1906, Husserl sketched, in very existentialist-sounding personal notes, his main aims as a philosopher. In these notes he mentions that his primary task is to write a general critique of reason. This task can be broken down into three major parts, since reason (Vernunft) comprises for Husserl three different subspecies: theoretical, practical, and axiological or evaluating (wertende) reason. Accordingly, the elaboration of the critique of reason comprises three philosophical disciplines, namely, logic, ethics, and, axiology. Husserl’s early ethical theory has to be understood against the background of this comprehensive conception of reason, in which ethics is conceived on a strict parallel with logic.

According to Husserl, logic and ethics are, in their final stage, practical, or applied theories, for he understands both as theories of art, as Kunstlehren, that is, as the art of producing true statements (or knowledge) and practical goods, respectively. In this sense, logic and ethics obviously have a practical orientation; they should help us to find the truth and obtain goods. Husserl stresses this practical orientation of ethics in all of his lecture courses on this subject. Already in his lecture course “Ethics and Philosophy of Law” from 1897 he conceives of ethics as a “theory of art [Kunstlehre] which discovers the highest ends of life [and] sets rules which should help the acting person to build a reasonable order in living and acting with regard to these ends.” The same idea of ethics as a practical discipline serves also as a starting point in the lecture course on ethics from the 1920s.

---

13 Ibid., 445–6.
14 “Die Ethik ist . . . jene Kunstlehre, welche die höchsten Lebenszwecke erforscht, andererseits aber auch Regeln aufzustellen sucht, welche dem einzelnen Handeln einen vernünftige Ordnung des Lebens und Tuns in Hinblick auf diese Zwecke erleichtern sollen.” (Hua. 28, Wertlehre, 384).
Here Husserl presents ethics as a universal theory that investigates the sensible relations between means and ends, and asks for the final ends that are worth striving for. Ethics is in this respect both a normative and a practical discipline, since it aims to tell us which ends are valuable enough for us to try to obtain them and also provides us with rules for doing just this. It thus stands parallel to logic, which aims to provide us with rules in order to realize a good, namely, the truth. Consequently, logic has to be regarded as a universal theory of science (Wissenschaftslehre) since the sciences are the means to finding the truth.

With this understanding of ethics and logic, Husserl stands in the tradition of Aristotle, Bolzano, and Brentano. In fact, he drew his early conception of ethics from Brentano, who already conceived of ethics and logic as practically oriented theories of art or Kunstlehren. Brentano himself was deeply influenced by the Aristotelian conception of logic as a comprehensive theory of science (Organon) and ethics as a theory which reveals the final ends of our lives and gives us the means to realize them.

The closeness of Husserl’s theory to Brentano becomes even more obvious when one compares how both philosophers combine reason with the accomplishments of our consciousness. Both think that the three disciplines of reason have their subjective origin in certain acts of consciousness, which can be clarified through an investigation of these acts: logic by going back to acts of presenting and judging, ethics through the acts of willing and acting, and axiology through the acts of feeling and evaluating. According to Brentano and Husserl, in all three types of acts we can also raise the question of their correctness or validity, since all three can be either right or wrong, correct or incorrect. Because of that, these acts stand in a very close and intricate relation to the normative distinctions that we make in the sphere of reason when we, for example, claim something as being true or good.

---

15 See Hua. 37, Einleitung Ethik, 3–7.
Despite Husserl's general agreement with Brentano's conception of ethics, however, he strongly opposes his teacher when it comes to the question of a philosophical foundation of this practical discipline. Logic and ethics as theories of arts are supposed to set rules in order to recognize the truth or to realize the good, but the philosophically relevant question in this context is how we can justify these rules. Husserl vigorously claims that any applied science must be based on a theoretical science, and that this foundation can only be provided by a pure theoretical science that deals with ideal concepts and laws that do not have any empirical status or background. Thus, in order to provide a philosophical foundation for ethics as a practical discipline, Husserl fights against any attempt to provide an empirical foundation for ethics. His foundation of ethics, instead, consists of the same systematic steps known through the foundation of logic he outlines in the Logical Investigations: first, a refutation of empiricism, especially psychologism, second, an exposition of some fundamental a priori laws for the sphere of axiology and practice (Praktik), and finally, the phenomenological investigation of the givenness of those laws. Let us look more closely at all three parts of Husserl's foundation of ethics and its problems.

The refutation of logical psychologism in the Prolegomena, the first volume of the Logical Investigations from 1900, is one of Husserl's most famous philosophical accomplishments. Psychologism, a species of empiricism, attempts to ground logic on psychology as a natural science. Husserl shows the failures and the absurdity of such an attempt by revealing its presuppositions and its skeptical consequences. To ground logic on psychology would reduce logical laws to those empirical laws which govern the activities of our brains; it would reduce the validity of logical laws to that of the merely factual results of the empirical sciences, which are only valid under certain specific conditions in space and time. According to Husserl, such an approach would not only misinterpret the meaning of logic and its laws as unconditionally valid ideal laws but also lead to relativistic consequences, since it would make it impossible to speak about truth in an absolute sense. Husserl sees analogous skeptical-relativistic

---

18 For volume 1, see fn. 16; volume 2, Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis, Hua. 19, ed. Ursula Panzer (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1984).
consequences in any attempt to ground ethics on a psychology of acts of feeling and willing. Thus, in strict parallelism with his struggle against logical psychologism, he also attacks an empiricist position that he calls “ethical psychologism.” Ethical psychologism tries to find a foundation for ethics as a practical discipline through a psychological investigation of our factual mental processes or behavior. Husserl claims that such an approach ruins the sense of ethics and morals, since its relativistic consequences must distort the absolute meaning of ethical laws and obligations into merely psychologically, historically, or culturally valid facts. According to Husserl, such relativism—which results from the attempt to ground normative ethics on natural science—would undermine the possibility of ethics and pervert the meaning of ethical terms like “good” and “bad,” since they would refer to certain conditioned usages in a particular group or society. Husserl’s critique of psychologism and relativism in ethics is based on his strong conviction that we do have ethical laws that are absolutely valid, not merely factual or empirical rules. These a priori ethical laws are to be provided by a pure theoretical discipline that serves as the philosophical basis of Husserl’s early ethics, namely, axiology and practice.

Husserl regards his discovery of a sphere of fundamental a priori valid laws for ethics as one of his most important contributions to ethics. Here again his ethical theory is influenced by the example of logic. Just as logic as a theory of art is in the end based on the laws of a purely formal logic, which are valid a priori, so, too, is ethics grounded on purely theoretical laws with an analogous validity status. And just as formal logical laws provide us with rules which we must obey in order to form meaningful and possibly true sentences, so, too, do the laws of formal axiology and practice provide us with rules for formally correct evaluations and acts of will. Thus, according to Husserl, thinking, evaluating, and willing are governed by particular a priori laws having an ideal character that cannot be traced back to psychological or any other empirical facts. In Husserl’s foundation of ethics, these axiological laws are the most basic laws since they govern our acts of evaluating something, and evaluating always stands

---

prior to willing, for we can never want something that we have not first evaluated in a positive manner.

These fundamental axiological laws govern the realm of values and constitute a particular field of reason. Values, the relations between them, and the corresponding acts of evaluation are therefore the subject matter of a specific discipline of reason, that is, axiology. Husserl investigates this field of reason and the axiological laws in his early ethics. There is, for example, the law of the excluded fourth, which claims that everything is either valuable, worthless or neutral with regard to its value-property. This law has a parallel function to the logical law of the excluded middle from the theoretical sphere. There are also the mereological laws of value-summation (Summationsgesetze) and value absorption, which say that the sum of certain values always has a higher value than each of its single values, and that a relatively high value will always be absorbed by the realization of an even higher value. Like formal logical laws, all of these axiological laws are uninformative in that they only determine the conditions of formally correct acts of valuing. Just as the formal logical laws cannot predict the factual validity of the content of a given sentence, the axiological laws cannot determine the truth of any concrete material evaluation. They only set the rules for all formally well-formed evaluations.

Formal axiology, or value theory, serves as the basis of Husserl’s early ethics. Its laws are also crucial for our acts of volition since these are founded in acts of evaluating, namely in the approval of something as being good. The sphere of the will and the realm of praxis are, however, also ruled by certain particular formal laws of the will. According to Husserl, there are formal laws that regulate, for example, the relation between means and ends. There is also the law that the best will is always the one that tries to realize the best among the attainable ends. These formal laws for the sphere of the will are disclosed by a discipline that Husserl calls formal practice.

---

20 Husserl’s theory of basic axiological laws is also strongly influenced by Brentano. In §31 of Franz Brentano’s The Origin of the Knowledge of Right and Wrong, trans. Roderick M. Chisholm and Elisabeth Schneewind (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), he briefly sketches most of the axiological laws that Husserl unfolds in his axiology much more extensively. Compare with Hua. 28, Wertlehre, 74–101.

The highest law in this sphere is a “categorical imperative” that Husserl took over from Brentano: “Do the best that is attainable.” This categorical imperative is in Husserl’s ethical theory a fundamental law for the entire practical sphere. It informs us about the formal condition of a correct, and in this respect true and good, will.

Husserl’s philosophical foundation of ethics as a theory of art cannot be completed without one more decisive systematic step that must follow the critique of psychologism and the disclosure of a priori laws for the practical sphere. This final step has to be carried out by phenomenology itself. Phenomenology is the discipline that discovers the essential structures of our consciousness, or, to be more precise, the ways in which something is given to us in certain acts of this consciousness. This discipline is originally motivated by the epistemological question about the basis of our knowledge. Phenomenology is charged with the task of clarifying our knowledge and the meaning of its objects through a descriptive investigation of the subjective acts in which these objects are given to us. Husserl developed this method in his *Logical Investigations*, where he investigates the epistemological foundation of logic and ultimately claims that the subjective basis for the givenness of logical terms and laws rests on categorial intuition and certain acts of categorial abstraction. When Husserl conceives ethics on analogy to logic, he also needs to incorporate a phenomenology of the acts of evaluating and willing into his ethics. These acts are the subjective basis for axiology and ethics, and in order to complete his all-embracing critique of reason, they must be investigated in a reflexive analysis.

It is one of the most striking features of Husserl’s ethical theory that it combines a strong conviction of the existence of absolute ethical laws with a demand for a phenomenological analysis of our emotive and volitional consciousness. According to Husserl, our evaluations are not primarily performed by the intellectual consciousness but rather by our feeling consciousness. In feelings we originally react to the things in the world positively or negatively, which means with approval or disapproval. Thus feelings give things specific value.

---


properties, which a pure intellectual or theoretical act could never grasp. Consequently, the givenness of values or value-properties can only be clarified through a phenomenological investigation of the emotive or affective consciousness. This investigation must reveal the forms and structures which allow us to have the experience of a world with objects having different values. For this task, phenomenology must describe the processes of our feeling consciousness that constitute the givenness of values or value-properties. In addition to such a phenomenology of our feeling consciousness, Husserl’s ethics must be completed through a phenomenology of our acts of volition. Both the phenomenology of willing and that of our feelings play the most decisive role in the foundation of Husserlian ethics. However, in his early manuscripts, the investigations of emotive and volitional consciousness are much less well developed than his phenomenological investigations of logical or theoretical consciousness.

In his analysis of the subjective foundation of ethics, Husserl became aware of several difficult problems with which he still had to struggle in his later ethics. Before I enter into this later ethical theory, I will briefly sketch some of the most difficult problems for Husserl’s early ethics, which emerged in all three systematic tasks of his foundation of ethics, namely, in his critique of psychologism, his axiology, and the phenomenology of feeling consciousness.

The critique of ethical psychologism is for Husserl much more difficult than his refutation of logical psychologism, which is based on the problem of the pragmatic or performative self-contradiction of the skeptic. The skeptical denial of the validity of the most elementary logical laws runs into this self-contradiction when it claims its own skeptical position as being valid and simultaneously denies the general logical conditions for the validity of sentences. It tries to criticise the logical conditions of truth while implicitly using these logical presuppositions of any true expression. However, such a performative self-contradiction is no problem for the ethical skeptic, who claims that there are no absolute ethical norms and obligations. Husserl was aware of this difference and he knew that he needed other tools to refute the ethical skepticism.24 His demonstration of the obvious validity of the formal axiological laws is one such tool, but this leads directly to problems which are connected with the axiological laws as such.

24 Husserl explicitly criticises Hugo Münsterberg, a contemporary philosopher who claimed that the ethical skepticism would lead to contradictory consequences analogous to those of logical skepticism. See Hua. 28, Wertlehre, 23–31.
Axiology, or value-theory, has to be confronted with several general concerns. One can first raise the question of the ontological status of values and their relation to other things in the world. One can also ask which specific kinds of objects are ruled by these axiological laws. Moreover, Husserl had to struggle with the question of the relation in which the values stand to one another. Are different values at all comparable to one another? This question is of particular importance with respect to the categorical demand that we should always realize the best that is attainable, since it presupposes that the values are somehow arranged or set in a certain hierarchical order. Otherwise there would be no way to decide which of the different values is the best. But how can a person—in a situation of choice—decide, for example, whether supplying a baby with new diapers is “better” than playing a piano sonata instead? The pure axiological laws give us no criteria to make any decisions here. They cannot help in answering the question of which of two values from different classes—ethical and aesthetic values in the example—is better than the other and should be preferred. Thus, merely on the basis of the axiological laws we cannot apply the Brentanian and Husserlian categorical imperative, since we would need to have more than just formal criteria about the ranks of certain values in order to do so. Values from different classes could only be compared if we also had material criteria with which to consider the specific quality of values.\(^\text{25}\) However, Husserl did not develop a material value-theory which could solve this problem by classifying different values in a ranking with several qualitative levels.\(^\text{26}\) I think that Husserl did not develop a material value ethics because he was aware of the epistemological problem of justifying ethical statements with a material value-content. These epistemological problems had already arisen in the phenomenological foundation of his early ethical theory.

Husserl’s phenomenological investigation of feeling consciousness should clarify the subjective processes that enable us to

\(^{25}\) The Munich phenomenologist Moritz Geiger raised the objection to Husserl that values from different areas are not comparable with one another. Husserl dealt with this problem which would have forced him to come up with more than a purely formal axiology even if he had never developed a material value-theory. See Hua. 28, Wertlehre, 419–20. Concerning this issue, see also Janet Donohoe, Husserl on Ethics and Intersubjectivity (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2004), 157–60 and James Hart, The Person and the Common Life, 297–303, 324–5.

experience something with a certain value-property. According to Husserl, feelings are the subjective basis for the experiences that the objectifying acts from the sphere of the theoretical or intellective acts cannot accomplish. The early Husserl distinguishes emotions or feelings from theoretical acts by stating that the latter are objectifying acts whereas the former are non-objectifying acts, since they do not present objects in the manner in which the theoretical acts do. This distinction between objectifying and non-objectifying acts is quite important, since it enables Husserl to separate the reason of feeling consciousness from the usual theoretical reason.\textsuperscript{27} This differentiation, however, runs into trouble if Husserl also claims that feelings or emotions give us a certain access to specific properties which the theoretical acts cannot reveal, namely value-properties. Here the question arises as to how feelings can do this if they are not objectifying acts. How can they open up something from the world when they are not acts that make something objective? How is the givenness of values in feeling consciousness understandable if it is not carried out by objectifying acts? Husserl raised these crucial questions\textsuperscript{28} but admitted that he could not answer them with his early ethical theory. In the final part of his lecture course on ethics and value theory from 1908/09, he writes: “I could not manage the problems with the feeling consciousness, the entire essence of its foundation, and its relation to the objectifying acts.”\textsuperscript{29} Thus, Husserl’s foundation of ethics as a theory of art remains in his early ethical theory incomplete, since it has no

\textsuperscript{27} Husserl developed this distinction between these types of acts already in the \textit{Logical Investigations} where he criticizes Brentano’s claim that every intentional act is either a presentation or based upon it. Husserl replaces the function of Brentano’s concept of presentation with his refined theory of the objectifying acts that he understands as our most elementary way to get aware of something. For more details on this issue compare also, Ullrich Melle, “Objektivierende und nicht-objektivierende Akte,” in \textit{Husserl-Ausgabe und Husserl-Forschung}, ed. Samuel Ijsseling (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), 35–49.

\textsuperscript{28} See \textit{Hua}. 28, \textit{Wertlehre}, 260–9 and 332–44.

\textsuperscript{29} “[I]ch konnte mit den Gemütsakten und mit dem ganzen Wesen der Fundierung bei ihnen und ihrer Stellung zu den objektivierenden Akten nicht fertig werden” (\textit{Hua}. 28, \textit{Wertlehre}, 337). Husserl’s dilemma is that he distinguishes the valuing acts of our emotive sphere from the intellectual acts by claiming that the former are not objectifying acts, but simultaneously claims that the emotive acts are giving access to a specific field of objects, namely values. By doing so he distinguishes emotive and valuing act from objectifying act but also ascribes an objectifying, namely value-giving function to them. This problem has been clearly pointed out by Karl Schulmann, “Probleme der Husserlschen Wertlehre,” \textit{Philosophisches Jahrbuch} 98 (1991): 106–13.
adequate solution to the epistemological problems that are perhaps the most difficult for any value-ethics.

II

In Husserl’s phenomenology of the 1920s, we find a new conception of ethics in which the ethical life is conceived as thoroughly shaped by reason. The basis of this conception is no longer logic but rather the phenomenology of the person. Husserl developed this new ethical theory not so much in order to overcome the unsolved problems of his early ethics but rather as a consequence of the extensive phenomenological analyses he carried out in these years. After the *Logical Investigations* (1900/01), Husserl widened his focus from the narrow questions concerning the foundations of logic and mathematics to more general problems, such as time-consciousness, the original associative genesis of meaning, the constitution of space, the differences between imagination, perception, and memory, the theory of noetic-noematic correlations, and the structures of consciousness in general, including especially the analyses of the consciousness of the ego at the center of all intentional life. However, for Husserl’s ethics the concept of the transcendental ego is not as important as his phenomenologically much richer concept of the personal ego, or personal I.

The ego as a person is characterized by the variety of its lived-experiences and the dynamic processes among them. According to Husserl, personal life includes many affective tendencies and instincts on its lowest level, but also, on a higher level, strivings, wishes, volitions, and body-consciousness. All of this stands in a dynamic process of arising and changing; lived-experiences with their meaningful correlates rise from the background of consciousness into the center of attention and sink back, yet they do not totally disappear, since they are kept as habitual acquisitions (*habituelle Erwerbe*). Thus, the person has an individual history in which previous accomplishments always influence the upcoming lived-experiences. Husserl viewed this dynamic of the personal life as a meaningful connection in which single experiences and episodes are intertwined by laws of motivation into a meaningful history. He strictly separates these laws from the
causal laws that rule events in nature. Consequently, it is one of the striking features of the personal life and its history that it cannot be explained by the natural sciences, since they cannot grasp the meaningful internal and motivational connections that are crucial to it. For Husserl, these processes can only be understood through a phenomenological analysis. The sphere of the person has, in other words, an entirely different ontology than that of natural things.

On several occasions Husserl emphasizes how the personal life is determined by striving tendencies. “To the essence of the human life,” Husserl says, “belongs continuous striving.” This moment of striving can be found already in the involuntary, affective levels of personal life, on which the meaningful and emotional strivings affect the tendencies of the “higher-ordered” I and find their way into conscious egoic expressions. Husserl describes this completely elementary field of personal life as pre-egoic. On top of this, the explicitly conscious and egoic sphere of the person has a character of striving which expresses itself in knowledge–intentions as a striving for clarity and fullness; of course this striving occurs most articulately in the actions of will and their tendency to obtain what is desired. “All life,” Husserl says, “completes itself in the widest sense in the striving.” The ultimate end of our strivings is, according to Husserl, a state of fulfilled happiness that he once even called “eudaimonia.”

Husserl speaks about eudaimonia in an Aristotelian sense and not in the sense of a mere satisfaction of sensuous-bodily strivings. Eudaimonia is the ultimate end of our strivings in our common life. Its satisfaction is the “best possible” or “perfect” life. Husserl also calls the ideal end of such striving “happiness,” “bliss” (Glückseligkeit), and “salvation” (Seligkeit). He relates the idea of “genuine”

---


31 “Zum Wesen des Menschenlebens gehört . . . daß es sich beständig in der Form des Strebens abspielt” (Hua. 27, Kaizo, 25).

32 “Alles Leben vollzieht sich im weitesten Sinn im Streben” (Hua. 37, *Einleitung Ethik*, 248).

33 Hua. 27, Kaizo, 11.

34 Hua. 37, *Einleitung Ethik*, 252.

35 “Vollkommen”, Hua. 27, Kaizo, 30.

(echt)\textsuperscript{37} or “true” (wahr)\textsuperscript{38} man with the ideal fulfillment of our strivings for such happiness. What human beings essentially or truly are shows itself in the fulfillment of their particular strivings. This relation of fulfillment of our strivings and the idea of a true human being is important for the practical orientation of ethics. For ethics as a practical discipline has a task to discover the aims of our strivings and the means to realize them, so that the idea of the fulfilled human life can be determined. Husserl writes,

> ethics always wanted to be a theory and a practical discipline of the perfect human life and human being, a theory and practical discipline of the methods of the self-shaping of the subject and its life to perfection or to happiness.\textsuperscript{39}

Happiness or bliss is, according to Husserl, the perfect limit-state consisting of a fulfillment of all of our intentions; it would be “a consistent life which in all intentions and strivings would proceed permanently in the form of pure fulfillment.”\textsuperscript{40} Such a state is not at all achievable for human beings, since our life is characterized by disappointments, errors, and inhibitions in our strivings. According to Husserl, we fail to attain the ends of our strivings, and moreover, we posit aims which do not survive a critical examination, that is, which ultimately cannot satisfy us. Without illusions and with an existentialist tone—and perhaps under the influence of his experience of World War I—Husserl speaks about experiencing the doubts, negations, and devaluations that go along with our striving. Thus, he concludes, “man generally lives an unhappy life.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{37} Hua. 27, Kaizo, 22, 29, 33.
\textsuperscript{38} Hua. 37, Einleitung Ethik, 164; Hua. 27, Kaizo 27, 33, 36. Thomas Nenon, “Husserl’s Conception of Reason as Authenticity,” Philosophy Today 47 (2003): 63–70 explains in a comparison of Husserl’s Kaizo lectures and his Crisis work the idea of a genuine and true life by referring to the concept of living an authentically human life.
\textsuperscript{39} “[I]mmer wollte Ethik die Theorie und Kunstlehre vom vollkommenen Menschenleben und Menschsein sein, Theorie und praktische Lehre <von> den Methoden der Selbstgestaltung des Subjekts und seines Lebens zur Vollkommenheit bzw. zur ‘Glückseligkeit’.” (Hua. 35, Einleitung Philosophie, 46)
\textsuperscript{40} “[E]in einheitliches Leben, das nach allen seinen Intentionen, nach allem seinem Streben, immerfort in der Form reiner Erfüllung verliefe” (Hua. 35, Einleitung Philosophie, 44).
\textsuperscript{41} “So lebt der Mensch alles in allem ein unseliges Leben,” (Hua. 35, Einleitung Philosophie, 44). In a manuscript Husserl describes in moving words the human life as something that is always embedded in a “dark horizon”, and accompanied by disappointments and hostile fate. See Husserl, “Wert des Lebens, Wert der Welt, Sittlichkeit (Tugend) und Glückseligkeit,” Husserl Studies 13 (1997), 215–25.
All these disappointments are in various degrees painful, but they are also the starting point of deliberations about how they can be avoided, that is, how life can be improved in the future. Thus, the experience of inhibition in our strivings and of destructions of that which we have already achieved serves as a motivation for avoiding vain striving. It motivates an attitude of critique, and makes one focus on that which can resist critique:

It is this motivation, which comes from the awkward cancellations and disappointments, which motivates the need for such a critique and the particular striving toward truth [Wahrheitsstreben], or alternatively, the striving toward confirmation, toward ultimate insightful justification.42

Such critique affects not only the theoretical sphere of knowledge, but also the sphere of praxis and will. Critique of knowledge and, first of all, critique of the will serves as a protection against the experience of errors, disappointments, and cancellations, but is motivated by these experiences. If such a critique should be successful, it must encompass all of our egoic acts. Then, life "would be fully justifiable in all of its activities and a pure, continuing satisfaction would be warranted."43 The type of critique that would be a necessary condition for such a life is a radical self-critique that would challenge the entire egoic life. The result of it would be a complete re-organization of one’s whole life that Husserl calls renewal, “Erneuerung.” Persons are capable of such a radical criticism, because they stand in a relation to themselves that takes place in several different forms: self-consciousness (Selbstbewusstsein), “personal self-contemplation” (personale Selbstbetrachtung), “self-evaluation” (Selbstbewertung), and “practical self-determination” (praktische Selbstbestimmung).44 According to Husserl, these capacities are essential to persons, and distinguish them from other living beings. Regardless of all their affective and passive tendencies, persons are capable of free activity which arises from the ego-pole, the Ich-Zentrum.45 Thus, Husserl

42 “Die von [den] peinlichen Entwertungen und Enttäuschungen ausgehende Motivation ist es, die . . . das Bedürfnis nach solcher Kritik und somit das spezifische Wahrheitsstreben bzw. das Streben nach Bewährung, nach ‘endgültiger’ Rechtfertigung durch einsichtige Begründung motiviert” (Hua. 27, Kaizo, 30).
43 “[Leben, dass] in allen seinen Betätigungen voll zu rechtfertigen wäre und eine reine, standhaltende Befriedigung gewährleistete” (Hua. 27, Kaizo, 30).
44 Hua. 27, Kaizo, 23.
conceives of the essence of persons fully in the tradition of modern philosophy, or, more precisely, in the tradition of Kantian and Fichteian theories of subjectivity. Persons are free and autonomous beings and are therefore able to shape and determine their own lives.

Husserl illustrates our capacity to shape our lives by reference to situations in which we choose our professions or careers. Our professions are one of most influential factors in our lives. They occupy many hours of our everyday life and determine much of the course of our lifetime. Thus, by deciding for or against a certain profession we also govern our lives in accordance with the ideas that we connect with this profession. This means that, in choosing a profession we also choose a certain “form of life” (Lebensform)\(^46\) which determines our own personal future. Such life-forms are structured by our professions and also by the things we are striving for. In his *Kaizo* articles Husserl lists examples of such aims in life, including goods such as power, richness, or fame, but also the goods of artists and scientists, which are the beauty and knowledge.\(^47\) All these life-forms are the results of a deliberate orientation and an active shaping of our own life, through which we hope ultimately to reach happiness.

If we ask which kind of self-shaping or life-form is most qualified for avoiding errors and disappointments in our life, or, in other words, which is most justified, we come to a surprising result. Even though each professional-life (Berufsleben) is based on an active, egoic self-determination of our own life, it does not make up our whole life, since it leaves some areas of our life untouched by that regulation. The same is true for the life of the artist or the scientist, since their lives are also not completely regulated but include some space or leeway of unregulated activities, namely, simple, ordinary activities that are not justified. In contrast to these life-forms, Husserl conceives of the idea of life that would be not only partly but wholly guided by reason and free acts of volition. Such a life of universal self-regulation would be a life that would be “fully justifiable in all of its activities;”\(^48\) it would be a thoroughly rational and will-guided life. According to Husserl, this life-form is the ethical life. The ethical life is a life which would be guided as far as possible by a rational and volitional


self-determination. Husserl gains this conception of the ethical life by an extension or universalization of the self-determination that already takes place in our professional life. The ethical life would be a life that we achieve when we live our life completely in accordance with rationality.

One consequence of Husserl’s understanding of the ethical life is that it cannot be reached through mere passive habituation of certain manners of virtuous actions. A person is not ethically good if he or she simply adopts normally accepted rules of virtuous behavior, even when they shape their own character in a positive way. Although Husserl, like Aristotle, claims that virtuous acting becomes almost automatically a kind of “second nature” of the person, he primarily stresses that the real ethical life has its origin in the activity of the acting ego and not in a passive and naïve process of habituation. According to Husserl, the constitution of the ethical person has its origin in a radical decision of the will of the self-determining ego. The ego becomes through these decisions or resolutions of the will (Wilensentschlüsse) the “causa sui of its own morality”. Consequently, ethical life has its only origin in the free and active foundation (Urstellung) of the ego.

Despite Husserl’s emphasis on the voluntaristic origin of ethical life, his analyses are also useful for a better understanding of the traditional concept of virtue. Virtues are relatively stable dispositions to act in a certain manner, and Husserl’s analysis can show how they arise precisely from the original experiences and the concrete history of persons. Persons are, for Husserl, striving beings with individual histories in which previous lived-experiences influence future experiences and actions. The activities of the ego leave marks, as it were, and constitute in this manner the individual history of a person and his or her habits. This history and these habits will later passively influence the thinking and acting of the person. Against the background of this analysis, virtues are to be understood as individually acquired passivities of a person. Virtues need to be distinguished from the original passive tendencies in the personal life, such as drives and strivings on a very low personal level.

However, in his ethics lecture course of the twenties, Husserl discussed the concept of virtue and distinguishes between the “authentically virtuous acts” (eigentliche Tugendakte) and the acts that

49 Hua. 37, Einleitung Ethik, 165.
50 Ibid.
originally found morality (Moralität ursprünglich stiftende Akte). The latter acts originally create the ethical ego. The “authentically virtuous acts” are usually acts executed without reflection, though performed by a person who has already developed an ethical character. They display the ethical character of a person and can be compared with the virtues of the Aristotelian ethics. More important for Husserl’s theory of the ethical person, however, are the acts of self-determination through which the ego freely decides to live an ethical life. In a systematic respect these morality-founding-acts establish the foundation for the ethical person. Husserl’s emphasis on these acts cannot only be understood in terms of Aristotelian virtue ethics but must rather be understood in reference to the Kantian and Fichtean idealistic theory of subjectivity, which deeply influenced Husserl in his post-war period. Thus, on the one hand Husserl’s theory of the ethical person clarifies the origin of the virtues in the free activity of the subject, and on the other it extends the voluntaristic conception of subjectivity to encompass the passively constituted habits. In this way, Husserl combines and Aristotelian-style virtue ethics with modern theories of subjectivity. It is this combination of modern and Aristotelian elements in Husserl’s ethics that makes it a systematically fruitful and promising contribution to ethical theory.

University of Paderborn

---

51 See Hua. 37, Einleitung Ethik, 162–5. In this passage Husserl stresses the importance of a critical self-reflection for the constitution of the ethical life against the idea of a virtuous life without such a reflection. Husserl’s ethical person no longer has the innocence of paradise, since it is originally founded in its own reflective and critical activity.

52 The importance of Fichte’s popular ethical writings for Husserl’s ethics of the 1920s has been investigated by James Hart in “Husserl and Fichte, with special regard to Husserl’s Lectures on Fichte’s Ideal of Humanity,” Husserl Studies 12 (1995): 135–63.

53 I am very grateful to Moira Hill, Mirja Hartimo, and especially Thane Naberhaus for correcting and improving this article. I would also like to thank the “Center for the Study of Mind in Nature” at the University of Oslo in Norway and the Department of Philosophy at the University of Tampere in Finland. Both institutions gave me the opportunity to present a previous version of this paper in September 2007. My stay in Finland was supported by the Finnish Academy of Science, Helsinki.