



Phenomenological method and contemporary ethics

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Abstract

Following a brief summation of the phenomenological method, the paper considers three metaethical positions adopted by phenomenologists and the implications of those positions for a normative ethics. The metaethical positions combine epistemological and ontological viewpoints. They are (1) non-intellectualism and strong value realism as represented by the axiological views of phenomenologists such as Scheler, Meinong, Reinach, Stein, Hartmann, von Hildebrand, and Steinbock; (2) non-intellectualism and anti-realism as represented by the freedom-centered phenomenologies of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty; and (3) weak intellectualism and weak value realism as represented by Husserl and Drummond. The paper argues that only the third metaethical view can support a normative ethics (1) that is consistent with the essential features of the phenomenological method, (2) that allows for freedom in an agent's choosing from a multiplicity of first-order goods, including vocational goods, practical identities, and life plans, available in the agent's factual circumstances, and (3) that provides norms governing the correctness of our actions and our obligations to others. The normative dimension is introduced, first, by the requirement that the fulfillment of first-order evaluations and choices be truthful, that is, that the (emotive) evaluations be appropriate and the actions right. Second, transcendental considerations revealed in the phenomenological analysis of intentional experience disclose a notion of second-order goods of agency that universally bind agents in their exercise of freedom and their dealings with others.

Keywords Phenomenology · Metaethics · Realism · Anti-realism · Normativity · Self-responsibility

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1 Introduction

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that seeks to provide a *descriptive* account of the *essential* structures of *transcendental* subjectivity, the latter being the subjectivity that experiences the world and its objects as always already there with their significance for us prior to the worldly subject's thinking and acting in response to the pre-given world. Put another way, phenomenology describes the universal structures of the intentionality at work in the different types of possible experience, structures that make experiences the type of experience they are. In the phenomenological tradition the term "ethics"—broadly construed—encompasses every form of moral and morally relevant experience, from recognizing and evaluating goods to be pursued and bads to be avoided to choosing what to do and to characterizing the "authentic" life. Hence, phenomenologists are concerned to clarify the intentional structures at work in (1) our varied experiences of valuing, choosing, planning, trying, striving, and acting in ways that have moral or ethical significance, whether that significance be in the form of goods desired and pursued or in the form of exercises of free, self-conscious choice or in the form of felt obligations; (2) our experiences of persons, actions, situations, and events as virtuous or non-virtuous, good or bad, or right or wrong; and (3) our experiences of institutions and social structures as beneficial or harmful, as liberating or oppressive.

This methodological program has clear implications for metaethics. Questions concerning the nature of evaluation, decision or choice, the will, freedom, practical reason, and the objectivity of our moral evaluations and moral judgments are widely addressed within the phenomenological tradition. But the situation is different when we consider the implications of the various metaethical positions adopted by phenomenologists for normative ethics. They encounter problems similar to those faced by anyone concerned to account for how our interests in and desires for particular goods or values—our motivations to act—can be reconciled with the obligations characteristic of moral life.

Early phenomenological thinkers often adopted an axiological approach, although significantly different views of the nature of value coexist within the phenomenological tradition.¹ For these thinkers, subjects apprehend in an intentional feeling objective values that ground our desires and the actions that seek to satisfy them. Other thinkers claimed that values are created in the exercise of the freedom definitive of human beings. But both positions invite a criticism. Even if, the critique goes, the description of the intentional structures can identify the essential structures of valuation and choice, they do so only in relation to the subject's feelings or freedom. The universality of these affective and volitional structures would ground only the universality of the *how* of evaluative and volitional intentionality. On the best-case scenario—so the argument runs—the phenomenological description can provide a norm for determining only whether a particular instance is a genuine instance of valuing or choosing. It cannot provide a norm for determining the correctness or

¹ For brief summaries of the development of ethics within the phenomenological tradition see Drummond (2020a) and Loidolt (2018).

incorrectness of the valuation or the rightness or wrongness of the choice of an action. We have no basis, the critique concludes, for judging the success or failure of the evaluation or choice with respect to its objective content. So, both phenomenological alternatives fall short of providing any normative content for a phenomenological ethics.

Moreover, each of the three italicized words in the first sentence of this paper poses a problem when approaching normative ethics from a phenomenological point of view. First, the *transcendental* subject must be distinguished from the *psychological* subject. The psychological is a region in the world, and the psychological subject is the subject *in* the world. The transcendental, however, insofar as it encompasses the intentional correlation between minded subjects and world, is not a region in the world, and the transcendental subject is the subject *of* the world, the subject that discloses the world as always already manifest and whose structure makes possible the experiences of the psychological subject in the world.² Transcendental subjectivity as a dimension of the psychological subject cannot simply be identified with psychological or human subjectivity. Yet ethics seems a specifically human—not transcendental—affair. Second, the *universalism* or *essentialism* of phenomenology suggests that phenomenology cannot address the particularity of ethical situations and the multiplicity of goods—and ways of pursuing those goods—that are consistent with living an ethical life. To put the matter another way, it seems that phenomenology is unable to account for the relevance of an agent's facticity for deliberating about choiceworthy ends and right actions. Third, the *descriptive* characteristic of phenomenology seems inapt for capturing the normativity of ethical experience.

This paper will consider three metaethical positions adopted by phenomenologists and the implications of those positions for a normative ethics. By way of preface, I begin with a brief account of the phenomenological method.

2 A minimalist account of the phenomenological method

The phenomenological method specifies the domain for philosophical reflection by means of a reflective turn that Edmund Husserl—but not all phenomenologists—calls the “phenomenological reduction.”³ Putting aside the debates about the possibility, extent, and significance of the reduction, I suggest that the minimal sense of the reduction shared by phenomenologists involves—to put it in Husserlian terms—suspending one's participation in the belief in the existence of the world (and the objects therein), a belief characteristic of our straightforward, everyday experience of the world. To perform this minimal reduction is to lead one's attention back (*reducere*) to the experience intending the object and to take the object intended in experience (whether or not it exists) simply as it is experienced, as having a particular significance for the subject. The reduction, in summary, thematizes the

² Drummond (2008).

³ Husserl (2014, p. 58).

inseparable correlation of experiencing subject and experienced object as meant.⁴ The turn to the experience with its correlate entails that the phenomenologist always takes into account the first-personal perspective of experiencing agents as an aspect of any experience with its object as experienced.

Having disclosed the intentional correlation as a field of study, the phenomenologist turns to its descriptive analysis. Description contrasts with explanation. Explanations identify causal relations and mechanisms, and applied to experience, they identify the physical and psychological causes of an experience. In this way, they look at the experience “sideways-on,” that is, from an external or third-person vantage point.⁵ Phenomenological descriptions, by contrast, *clarify* the nature of intentional experience; they reveal the constituents, structures, and categories operative in intentional experience and its objects as experienced, just as they are meant in experience. They reveal the meaning-categories that underlie judgments and logical principles, the ontological categories that govern the relations among objects, and the transcendental categories that shape subjective life.

Finally, although adopting a first-personal perspective, phenomenologists do not employ the first-personal perspective of psychological introspection, which yields insight only into the actual and particular experiences of the introspecting subject. Phenomenologists, focusing on the correlation between experiencing agent and experienced world, seek to reveal the essential, a priori structures of subjectivity itself and of objectivity just insofar as objects are disclosed by subjectivity. Phenomenology is, even in its minimal sense, what Husserl—to employ his terminology again—calls an “eidetic” science.⁶ Paradoxically, phenomenology takes a descriptive third-person stance toward the first-personal perspective essential to experiencing the world.⁷

While Husserl began articulating his understanding of an eidetic methodology as early as *Logical Investigations* and of the phenomenological reduction as early as 1907, by the 1920s he, along with Heidegger, recognized the need for a methodological approach that could take account of the historical development of the significance objects have for us and of the handing down of this significance in tradition. In addition to revealing the structures of dependence and interdependence among aspects of experience and of the senses disclosed in those experiences, the

⁴ This claim needs qualification, for some phenomenologists believe—wrongly, in my view—that there are experiences that are non-intentional. Husserl (1970b, p. 572), for example, distinguishes non-intentional feelings from what he calls (intentional) feeling-acts (e.g., taking pleasure in a melody, joy concerning some event) (1970b, pp. 569–70). Non-intentional feelings, such as pains, are feeling-sensations (*Gefühlsempfindungen*) or sensory states—a form of bodily self-awareness—rather than feeling-acts directed toward objects. I have suggested elsewhere (2020c) that intentional feelings are a Gestalt whose moments are the varied and distinct feeling-sensations that, taken together, constitute a bodily attitude toward an object. Non-intentional feelings can, for present purposes, be put aside. They do not in and of themselves possess moral content. They can be implicated in moral experiences, especially moral emotions, but in those contexts they are implicated in intentional feeling-acts, such as compassion, callousness, admiration, or contempt.

⁵ McDowell (1998a, pp. 207–212; 1998b, pp. 63–64).

⁶ Husserl (2014, p. 75).

⁷ Drummond (2007, p. 58).

phenomenologist explores the formation of meaning over time and how such meanings guide future experience. All these methodological features are found in the metaethical views taken by phenomenologists.

3 Non-intellectualism and strong value realism

A number of phenomenologists working roughly in the first third of the twentieth century adopted an axiological approach to ethics.⁸ These phenomenologists agree on three theses: (1) values and the significance that attaches to them are dependent for their disclosure on subjects capable of intentional feelings, (2) intentional feelings are the *essential* moment in the disclosure of value, (3) intentional feelings grasp value-objects (either ideal values or worldly goods) independent of those feelings, at least in the sense that a thing's being valuable is not reducible to its being felt valuable. Theses (1) and (2) suggest a non-intellectualism while a strong reading of thesis (3) asserts a strong realism with respect to values.⁹ Nicolai Hartmann, Alexius Meinong, Max Scheler, and Dietrich von Hildebrand offer variants of this view. The intentional feeling involved in experiencing value is indispensable to the experience of value, and the ideal value-properties apprehended are monadic properties that do not depend on the feeling-experience for their being, although they do depend on experience for the lived significance of these values in the lives of agents.¹⁰

Scheler is perhaps the starkest proponent of this position. He speaks of an order of intentional feelings through which a priori, monadic, mind-independent value-properties are directly apprehended.¹¹ These a priori values, rather than the valuable things (goods), are the primordial phenomenon. Value precedes its bearer, and our apprehension of something as valuable depends on a prior apprehension of the value, an apprehension that in no way depends upon any inductive or causal inferences from the experience of the bearers of that value. Values, in other words, are pure, essential qualities ontologically distinct from, ontologically prior to, and presented independently of both the goods that serve as their bearers—that is, of

⁸ Examples include Nicolai Hartmann (1963), Edmund Husserl (1988; 2004), Alexius Meinong (2020), Adolf Reinach (1989), Max Scheler (1973), Edith Stein (1986; 1989), and Dietrich von Hildebrand (1916; 1922; 1953). Martin Heidegger is the notable exception.

⁹ Strong realism regarding values is more often associated with strongly cognitivist or intellectualist positions regarding the apprehension of value. These positions view the emotions, in Martha Nussbaum's words, as "identical with the acceptance of a proposition that is both evaluative and eudaimonistic, that is, concerned with one or more of the person's important goals and ends" (2001, p. 41). See also Solomon (1980) and Neu (2000). These early phenomenologists, in opposition both to Kantian rationalism and the empiricistic feeling-theories of William James (1884) and Carl Lange (1887), stressed the capacity of intentional feelings to grasp objective values; see also Goldie (2000).

¹⁰ For a contemporary view of this sort, see Findlay (1961, 1970). Anthony Steinbock frequently invokes Scheler in his work on the emotions, although his analyses of particular emotions often appeal to beliefs that appear to be constituent parts of the emotion; see, e.g., Steinbock (2013, 2014).

¹¹ Scheler (1973, p. 68). See also Mulligan (1998, p. 161).

possible objects of desire—and of any willing or positing activity of the subject.¹² The prior apprehension of the value underlies the grasp of the object as a good, and the instantiated value is the good-making characteristic of the object valued as good.¹³

Non-intellectualist realism faces a challenge: Can the apprehension of ideal values provide sufficient guidance in making decisions about what one ought to do in particular situations? Scheler, for example, identifies an a priori hierarchy of values. From the lowest to the highest they are: (1) values of the pleasant and unpleasant; (2) the vital values (e.g., the fine and the vulgar); (3) the spiritual values (e.g., the beautiful and the ugly, correctness and incorrectness); and (4) the values of the holy and unholy. Noteworthy, however, is that the list does not include any moral values. Scheler views moral values as attaching to the actions that realize the values listed in the hierarchy. This view is rooted in Scheler's distinction between the purely ideal ought-to-be (the value) and the moral ought-to-do.¹⁴ Scheler claims that insight into the ideal ought-to-be serves as the basis for willing and for realizing a universally binding moral ought-to-do. However, since a feeling must grasp the value as desirable or lovable prior to the grasp of a moral ought-to-do, the ought-to-do appears as an imperative only to those who recognize the value as desirable or lovable. Scheler's imperatives are in the end only hypothetical imperatives.

This is the basis of von Hildebrand's criticism of Scheler. Von Hildebrand insists that moral obligation has categorical force. He speaks of the significance or "importance" (*Bedeutsamkeit*) of an object, where importance is understood as that "property of a being which gives it the character of a *bonum* or a *malum*."¹⁵ There are three "categories" of importance: the "subjectively satisfying" to or for a person; the "objective good for the person"; and the "important-in-itself."¹⁶ Since the second category presupposes the third, the three categories in practice collapse into two, and von Hildebrand concludes, "Only that which is important-in-itself is a value in the true sense."¹⁷ Von Hildebrand argues that any attempt to ground an imperative in the experience of the subjectively satisfying determines the will only contingently and heteronomously. Intrinsic values, by contrast, "challenge" (rather than "invite") the agent apart from any relation to subjective interests, emotions, desires, needs, and wants.¹⁸ While this view gains a ground for moral obligation, it is unclear that intrinsic value by itself can motivate moral action—can count as a moral norm for the agent—apart from the value having importance for the agent.

Hartmann seems to recognize the difficulty most clearly. He recognizes that the appeal to ideal values as normative cannot account for the role facticity—our experiential history, our interests, the situation, and the context in which we act—plays in

¹² Scheler (1973, p. 18).

¹³ Scheler (1973, p. 17). For a criticism of Scheler's axiology, see Drummond (2013; 2020c).

¹⁴ Scheler (1973, pp. 203ff.).

¹⁵ Von Hildebrand (1953, p. 24).

¹⁶ Von Hildebrand (2016, p. 14).

¹⁷ Von Hildebrand (2016, p. 16). See also von Hildebrand (1953, pp. 34–43, 53–59).

¹⁸ Von Hildebrand (1953, p. 42).

moral action. Although he stresses to a greater degree even than Scheler the universality of values, he recognizes that values can be of varying importance to different persons, that universal and personal values might not always align. In Hartmann's view, ideal values are experienced as universal demands. However, as he himself notes, to do what everyone should do in the same circumstances is, in effect, to say an agent is replaceable by anyone, and this is to deny the agent's individuality as a person.¹⁹ Appeals to universal principles depend upon a typicality among the situations in which we are called upon to act, but any maxim of action must be tied to a particular situation and to a particular agent in that situation. Hence, the universality of a principle undercuts its own applicability to the particular situation that, owing to the uniqueness of persons and their interests and commitments, is itself unique.²⁰ In a paradoxical way, universal principles, on Hartmann's view, just insofar as they fail to heed the individual personalities and situations of agents, do not—and cannot—offer moral guidance.

In summary, since different individuals have different affective responses to things and different desires, it appears that values can be binding only on agents having the relevant feelings and desires. For Scheler, von Hildebrand, and Hartmann, the phenomenologically disclosed metaethical principle that objective and universal values are directly apprehended in an intentional feeling fails to underwrite a normative ethical theory of the sort that could justify the categorical character that moral imperatives grounded in ideal values should have.

There is a more general phenomenological issue involving the relation between grasping a value and acting that is relevant to this discussion. We cannot assume, as I believe the strong realists do, that experiencing a value will directly incline us to act so as to realize that value.²¹ The relation between valuation and action is mediated by desire. Not every grasp of something as valuable motivates desire. There are, for example, feelings and emotions whose “performance dimension” terminates in the expression of the emotion. But this is different from motivating action for an end, much less moral action.²²

Nor does desire seem a component of emotion when we are “struck” by value, when, in fact, action seems arrested.²³ Such experiences are often expressed by an exclamation or interjection, such as “How sad that is” upon hearing of a colleague's serious illness, or “How vulgar” upon witnessing someone's behavior, or “Such generosity” upon hearing that someone has made a magnificent gift to an institution. These clearly involve emotions such as sadness, disgust, and admiration, but they do not arouse desire and motivate actions that arise from the emotion itself and its recognition of the value or disvalue of its object.

Moreover, even when an emotion does motivate a desire as, say, in fear, it is the desire that, in turn, motivates the action. The desire is grounded in the evaluation

¹⁹ Hartmann (1963, p. 357).

²⁰ Hartmann (1963, pp. 358–360).

²¹ See Drummond (2018).

²² See Drummond (2020b).

²³ Mulligan (2009, pp. 154).

of something as good, and in situations where I lack what is evaluated as good, that good can become the object of desire. The emotion discloses the good, and desire takes realizing or obtaining that good (or avoiding a bad) as the end of possible actions. But the different possibilities of action must also themselves be evaluated. It is not enough that the actions conduce to the end; the action too must be evaluated positively. Insofar as the emotion motivates a desire, it motivates a range of possible actions, and further evaluation must determine the particular action undertaken. There is no easy, direct road from emotion to action *from* emotion, although there might be a direct road from emotion to “acting” (to a physical performance) *in the grip* of an emotion. In brief, the phenomenology of the transition from *valuing* a good to *acting from the value-norm* is more complex than suggested by the strong value-realists.

4 Non-intellectualism and anti-realism

A later generation of “existential” phenomenologists appeal instead to freedom as the ground of value, providing a constructivist or “decisionist” account of the experience of value.²⁴ Examples include the early Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty, all of whom claim that choice—the exercise of the freedom that is constitutive of human beings—creates value.²⁵ Values come into being when agents freely transcend their own situation and grasp a non-existent possibility as the object of their desires and choices, of their projects.

Human autonomy, in this view, is the sole source of value, including the value of human existence itself, and values have no existence apart from the free choices of agents. Although there are factual obstacles to the agent’s exercise of freedom—obstacles that are to be overcome—freedom itself is unconstrained by objective values or principles. Indeed, this tension between the freedom of an agent and the factual obstacles faced in realizing one’s freely chosen projects is, as Beauvoir notes, the fundamental ambiguity of human existence. A human being, identical with its freedom and unconstrained by objective principle, chooses its own ends, including freedom itself, but the goal at which freedom aims “is not fixed once and for all” and “is defined all along the road which leads to it.”²⁶ Whereas Sartre thinks that both meaning and value are constituted in the free, even if unconscious and non-deliberated, choices of agents, Merleau-Ponty believes that persons are born into a world

²⁴ Heidegger is a difficult case. In the first place, he criticizes the notion of value in general, and, in the second place, it is disputed whether he commits himself to a “decisionism” (see, e.g., Tugendhat (1986) and Okrent (1999)) or a “deep deliberation” (see Burch (2010, p. 212) and Crowell (2007, pp. 55–56, 59–62; 2013, pp. 206–213)). We need note only that he develops neither an explicit theory of value beyond his discussions of *Befindlichkeit* nor of ethics beyond his discussions of conscience (*Gewissen*) and resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*). While the controversy makes clear that Heidegger is no decisionist in any simple sense, it is not clear to me that it has demonstrated that Heidegger is not a more nuanced and sophisticated decisionist, and my view is that he ultimately is just such a decisionist.

²⁵ See Sartre (1992), Beauvoir (1948), and Merleau-Ponty (2012).

²⁶ Beauvoir (1948, p. 153).

already permeated with meaning. Freedom, in Merleau-Ponty's view, is exercised in this context of meaning, creating and recreating values and thereby accomplishing the task of completing the world through the institution of values.²⁷

Can this non-intellectualist anti-realism ground universal moral norms? There is no problem here in connecting the value and action, since the claim is that moral norms are established in the choice itself, in choosing to act in a particular way. As Sartre puts it, one chooses for all.²⁸ However, this normativity is not morally normative in any significant sense, since no other agent is bound by such norms.²⁹ My choices are "binding" on you only from my perspective. If I adopt a bourgeois lifestyle, then your spitting on the sidewalk, lying, and thievery justify my condemnation of you.³⁰ But you, having made different choices, do not see the demands of my lifestyle as binding on you, and you instead judge me in relation to the values your exercise of freedom has established. Since we are always (at least somewhat) free to choose otherwise, it appears that values can bind us only insofar as we choose that value.

One response to this objection is to claim that these phenomenologists are more interested in giving a normative account of what it is to be a self rather than developing a normative ethics. In describing the exercise of freedom, the phenomenological anti-realist identifies the universal structures of freedom. The existential account sees the human agent as one who makes of herself who and what she is through her choices; she defines herself through self-conscious choice and is thereby responsible for herself. The self-conscious exercise of freedom is "authentic" existence. An authentic autonomous agent recognizes and values her existence as it is: free, gratuitous, and lacking transcendent values to justify it.³¹ Authenticity thus appears in the guise of a "virtue," the disposition to take control over one's life in self-conscious choices. The agent thus frees herself from the social and historical forces that threaten to make her a pawn of contingent circumstances. Non-intellectualist anti-realism norms only *how* the choice is made—in a full, self-conscious exercise of personal freedom—and not the content of the choice. While this does not undergird a normative moral theory, it does provide an account of what a "flourishing" or authentic human life would be, an account of the fullness of human existence.

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty (2012, pp. 464–473, 480–481).

²⁸ Sartre (2007, p. 24).

²⁹ The exception here is Simone de Beauvoir. An aspect of the non-intellectualist anti-realism rooted in freedom is to show that freedom is "concretely contextualized in terms of political struggles and historical reality"; see Crowell (2017, §3.2). Moving beyond Sartre's position, Beauvoir claims that the freedom of others is not merely an obstacle to the exercise of my own freedom. Rather, the realization of my freely chosen projects requires that others, not impeding my freedom, exercise their own freedom in ways that cooperate and support my projects. Moreover, in Beauvoir's view, evil is the denial of freedom. Consequently, we are obligated to protect the freedom of all agents and to guarantee the conditions of freedom for all agents, myself and others, and, in particular, to recognize and oppose oppressive forces within the situation. These two aspects of her thought establish the space in which a normative ethical theory can be developed.

³⁰ Crowell (2012, p. 216).

³¹ Sartre (1992, pp. 76–78).

The problem of making the transition from the experience of value as involving either feelings or choice to the experience of categorical moral norms—that is, of obligations—prompts some phenomenologists to ground the notion of obligation independently from value. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, claims that the experience of obligation is prior to all acts of evaluation, all choices, all projects, and all dictates of reason. Obligation arises for Levinas, as it does for Kant, from beyond all “inclinations.” Unlike Kant, however, Levinas turns his attention to intersubjectivity to find the ground of obligation. He adopts a “second-person perspective” in which moral demands are experienced in encountering the “face” of the Other.³²

Levinas’s ethics begins from the fact that intersubjective life commences when the other addresses me, summons me, and commands me. The “face” of the other, “exceeding the idea of the other in me” is pure expression and carries the summons and the command.³³ The other and I are in an asymmetrical relation wherein the other’s ethical superiority outweighs my egoism.³⁴ The other approaches, as Levinas puts it, from on high, disconcerting my conscious intentionality and contesting my freedom, calling both into question in such a way that I have no choice but to respond. The other’s command awakens in me a sense of responsibility such that my concerns must transcend the merely egoistic in the direction of the other.³⁵ Only insofar as I acknowledge this command do I live in a world with the other and become a person myself. Morality and responsibility begin, then, with neither my feelings nor my freedom but with the other’s challenge to my identity, a challenge that obligates me to give more of myself than I can expect from the other. The experience of the other is from the beginning an experience of obligation.

The question raised by this account is similar to the one raised by von Hildebrand’s account. I can encounter moral obligation as *my* obligation only insofar as what I encounter is referred back to *my* moral concerns. As Hartmann recognizes, obedience to the moral imperative apart from any reference to inclinations depersonalizes the action—whether in Kant, von Hildebrand, or Levinas—insofar as the action is divorced even from the agent’s will to flourish precisely as a moral agent through obedience to the moral imperative and in fulfilling her own moral commitments. The will to flourish is entirely displaced in Kant by obedience to law, in von Hildebrand by obedience to the call of the important-in-itself (value), and in Levinas by the presence of the Other. The question arises whether this is satisfactory as an account of moral motivation and, by extension, of moral normativity for individual agents.

³² Cf. Darwall (2006).

³³ Levinas (1969, p. 66).

³⁴ Levinas (1969, p. 215).

³⁵ Levinas (1969, pp. 43, 50–51).

5 Weak intellectualism and weak value realism

A third metaethical alternative, best exemplified by Husserl, is found in the phenomenological tradition. It agrees with the three theses previously laid out in §2, but it understands thesis (3) differently from the thinkers mentioned there. I characterize this as a weak intellectualism because, although feelings remain indispensable to the disclosure of value, the basic experience of value—that is, of a valued object, of a good—is a value-perception (*Wertnehmung*) that encompasses the cognition of a set of underlying non-axiological properties that serve to motivate the feeling (or emotion) apprehending the object as valued, as good or bad.³⁶ These non-axiological properties, relative to the physiological constitution, experiential history, interests, concerns, and commitments of the subject, motivate an intentional feeling that takes the object as valuable in the current experiential context.³⁷ The object, in other words, presents itself as having an axiological or affective sense over and above its purely cognitive sense, but that axiological sense is intertwined with, motivated by, and (presumably) justified by the non-axiological sense of the object.³⁸ This value-perception underlies both value-judgments and the identification of the a priori “values as objects themselves” (*Wertgegenstände* or *Wertobjektitäten*).³⁹ This is a “weak” value realism insofar as the value attribute is understood not as a monadic property (as for Hartmann, Meinong, Scheler, and von Hildebrand) but as a dyadic attribute dependent upon both features of the object and the subjective structures at work in the subject’s evaluatively intending the object.⁴⁰

³⁶ See Husserl (1989, p. 12). The term *Wertnehmung* is a modification of *Wahrnehmung* and invites an analogy with perception. Just as to perceive (*wahrnehmen*) is to take as true, to perceive a value (*wertnehmen*) is to take as valuable.

³⁷ Husserl (1988, p. 255).

³⁸ This formulation modifies Husserl’s position in the fifth investigation in *Logical Investigations*, §15. Husserl claimed that an intentional *feeling-act* was founded on what he called an *objectifying act* (a perception or judgment). I claim that the founding moment is not the perceiving or judging act, but the perceptual or propositional sense of the presentation of the non-axiological properties. This sense, in relation to the subject’s circumstances detailed above, *motivates* the intentional feeling and, when the feeling is appropriate, justifies the axiological sense presenting the object as valued; cf. Drummond (2002; 2013; 2017). Husserl later (2014, §117) changed his view and recognized that intentional feelings and emotions are objectifying, although he did not abandon his view of the founding relation. Husserl viewed emotions, in effect, as an addition to perception, whereas I am claiming that perception is an abstractive modification of a complex original experience having cognitive, affective, and practical dimensions and senses.

³⁹ Husserl (2014, pp. 190–91).

⁴⁰ This view is similar, but not identical, to John McDowell’s claim that value-attributes are analogous to perceived secondary qualities. McDowell (1998b, p. 143) says, “To press the analogy is to stress that evaluative ‘attitudes,’ or states of will, are like (say) colour experience in being unintelligible except as modifications of a sensibility like ours. The idea of value experience involves taking admiration, say, to represent its object as having a property that (although there in the object) is essentially subjective in much the same way as the property that an object is represented as having by an experience of redness—that is, understood adequately only in terms of the appropriate modification of human (or similar) sensibility. The disanalogy, now, is that a virtue (say) is conceived to be not merely such as to elicit the appropriate ‘attitude’ (as a colour is merely such as to cause the appropriate experiences), but rather such as to *merit* it.” The point of the analogy is to stress that the relation to the subject does not entail that the secondary qualities or values do not inhere as objective properties, and the point of the disanalogy is that

The reference to the experiencing agent preserves the first-personal perspective characteristic of phenomenology, for it ensures that the value-attributes of experienced things do not have their sense and being entirely independent of any reference to (a possible) mind. This entails that values are disclosed only in relation to minds that are characterized by certain interests in things, by certain desires, cares, and commitments and to agents acting in particular situations and historical contexts. Values are subject-related, dyadic attributes of things; nevertheless, the objectivity of values is preserved insofar as any possible subject having or entertaining similar interests, desires, cares, or commitments would recognize the thing as having the value-attribute.

Can this combination of weak intellectualism and weak value-realism allow for the development of a normative ethics? I believe so. Establishing this, however, requires a consideration of a different aspect of intentional relatedness, namely, the teleological directedness of an empty intention to a full intention. An empty intention is one that makes present (as in imagination or language) an object that is absent to consciousness. Full intentions, by contrast, present an object intuitively by virtue of their involving either (1) a sensuous dimension or (2) a phantasm (that is, with the aid of the retention of a previous experience involving a sensuous dimension, as in a distinct memory). A full intention is called “fulfilling” when, in the dynamic interplay of intentions, it sensuously or phantasmally presents the object as it has been emptily intended and thereby “satisfies” or “fulfills” the empty intention. In a broader context, reason is then understood as the striving for evidence, that is, the experience of the agreement between what is meant in an empty intention and what is sensuously or phantasmally given in a fulfilling intention.⁴¹

An agent is rational in the full sense when in an evidential experience she determines for herself what is true, adopts the appropriate evaluative attitudes, or decides what is rightly done.⁴² The fully rational agent takes responsibility for her convictions and for disclosing the evidence that warrants those convictions. This self-responsible pursuit of what is truthful in all the spheres of reason makes up the eudaimonistic character of a phenomenological axiology. The agent who is rational in the full sense—the agent who lives the flourishing life for rational agents—is “authentic” or self-responsible.⁴³ This notion of authenticity differs from that of the “existential” phenomenologists in three significant ways: (1) it connects authenticity to truthfulness rather than freedom; (2) it connects authenticity to self-realization as a truthful and responsible agent rather than to self-determination through self-conscious choice; and (3) it is the end of rational agency rather than the manner of self-conscious choice. This view by no means precludes freedom in matters of cognition,

Footnote 40 (continued)

causality is not the category in which to describe the relation between the valuable thing and the value-experience.

⁴¹ See, e.g., (Husserl, 1970a, pp. 57–58).

⁴² For a discussion of the appropriateness of feelings and emotions as well as the valuations accomplished therein, see Drummond, (2017), and for a discussion of the justification of action, see Drummond (2010).

⁴³ Husserl (1989, pp. 281–282).

feeling, or acting. Our judgments are not caused by the things we experience, but they are normed—at least to some degree—by what the things truly are even as our interests, cares, and commitments necessarily contribute to our sense of the world and of the goods found, or to be realized, in it. Because this notion of authenticity is connected to truthfulness, it cannot have the same content-neutrality that authenticity on the existential view does.

This notion of authenticity entails a bifurcated sense of the good.⁴⁴ There are the first-order goods that are the objects of our everyday evaluations and choices, and there are the second-order goods of evidential fulfillment and self-responsibility, the goods proper to intentional life itself. Our being as rational agents is inherently ordered toward what we can consider the transcendental good of self-responsibility in all the spheres of reason, the goods of truthfully disclosing what is the case, what is genuinely valuable, and what is right to do. But this good is realized only in the truthful pursuit of first-order goods. Conversely, the flourishing agent, acting truthfully in the pursuit of genuine first-order and contingent goods *for* herself and others, superveniently and necessarily realizes the goods of thinking well, feeling well, and acting well—what we might call the goods *of* rational agency.

The goods of thinking truly, feeling appropriately, and choosing and acting rightly are goods properly realized only in interpersonal contexts when others also realize them. The apprehension of what is the case, the evaluation of goods (including moral goods), the decision about how best to realize those goods, and evaluative judgments about our own actions, the actions of others, and social practices and institutions all arise against the background of a common knowledge embodied in our collective determinations of empirical, evaluative, and moral concepts, of choiceworthy goods, and of praiseworthy actions. This common knowledge—our notions, for example, of politeness, kindness, or generosity—is passed from one generation to the next, and it continues to be examined, criticized, reappropriated, and modified within successive generations in our encounters with those whose opinions or reasoning might differ from our own. Only in coming to grips with differing opinions and beliefs and only if our own opinions and beliefs have been self-responsibly formed and asserted can we truly be said to be a person holding convictions that have withstood a thoroughgoing critique. In order to be self-responsible and to realize the goods of agency, in other words, one must think *for* oneself but not *by* oneself. For this reason, these goods of agency must be effectively—even if only implicitly—sought for others as well as for oneself.⁴⁵

Securing the goods of agency for ourselves and others does not foreclose the pursuit of different first-order, contingent goods. The universality and necessity of the second-order goods of agency is, in other words, consistent with the pluralism of first-order goods pursuable in free societies. However, insofar as the self-responsible pursuit of first-order goods requires that one secure the goods of agency as such, the pursuit of some first-order goods is morally wrong on universalist grounds if that

⁴⁴ Drummond (2010, p. 420).

⁴⁵ See Drummond (2010, pp. 423–424). This move to intersubjectivity and the moral order has a similar structure to what we have seen in Beauvoir; cf. *supra*, n. 29.

pursuit blocks the realization of the goods of agency for oneself or others.⁴⁶ Hence, first-order goods are now apprehended both as necessarily transformed by and as yielding to the second-order goods of agency. This is the framework in which a phenomenological normative ethics is to be developed.

6 Conclusion

Four elements of the phenomenological method were identified at the outset. Phenomenology is a transcendental, descriptive, and eidetic science that explores the intentional correlation with its irreducible first-person perspective and its inescapable (essential) facticity, the details of which are, of course, contingent and non-essential. This methodology is consistent with different metaethical views, but the question about the possibility of a phenomenological normative ethics remained. I have claimed that only the combination of a weak intellectualism and weak value realism can establish a normative ethics consistent with these four features of the phenomenological method.

The position outlined is transcendental, descriptive, and eidetic. It describes how the experiences involved in our moral and ethical lives disclose the importance and significance of the things, situations, events, actions, and persons we encounter. It identifies the universal and necessary intentional structures of evaluation, choice, and fulfillment.⁴⁷ Its transcendental character is visible in its identification of the second-order goods of rational agency. These goods are formal goods; they are neutral among competing first-order goods. The first-person perspective with its facticity is evident in the subject-relatedness of our experience of value as informed and shaped by our physiological constitution, our experiential history, our interests, concerns, and commitments. Actions in pursuit of first-order goods will be moral just insofar as our valuations are appropriate and our actions are right. Both appropriateness and rightness are determined against the background of the common concepts and traditions that characterize the communities in which we live and act. But both our individual experience and those shared concepts are morally circumscribed by the second-order goods whose realization requires that we respect the autonomy of others and sympathetically seek their flourishing as well as our own.

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⁴⁶ Cf. Drummond (2010).

⁴⁷ For more details, see Drummond (2006, 2010, 2013, 2017, 2018, 2020b, 2020c).

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