



## Andrea Staiti: *Etica naturalistica e fenomenologia*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2020, 158 pp., ISBN: 9788815287502

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### Abstract

This review discusses Andrea Staiti's book *Etica naturalistica e fenomenologia*. In this concise, excellent book, Andrea Staiti develops an original phenomenological approach to meta-ethical questions, such as whether or not there are moral facts; if so, how do they relate to natural facts; and how we gain knowledge of them. Staiti's claim is that Husserlian phenomenology has key insights to offer to the current debate about moral facts mostly taking place in the analytic tradition. Staiti also argues that Husserlian phenomenology can provide middle ground between ethical naturalism and non-naturalism, and that Husserl's phenomenology offers a solution to G. E. Moore's open question argument about the notion of "good." The book presents some of Husserl's key concept in a clear and jargon-free way, and it offers original solutions to meta-ethical problems. It has the potential for attracting attention to Husserl's phenomenology outside the small circle of its supporters.

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In this concise, excellent book, Andrea Staiti develops an original phenomenological approach to meta-ethical questions, such as whether or not there are moral facts; if so, how do they relate to natural facts; and how we gain knowledge of them. Staiti's claim is that Husserlian phenomenology has key insights to offer to the current debate about moral facts mostly taking place in the analytic tradition.

The book is in Italian, and it is particularly relevant for Italians. Staiti belongs to the important tradition of the so-called "Milan School of Phenomenology," which includes figures such as Antonio Banfi, Enzo Paci, Giovanni Piana and Elio Franzini. He also engages with Roberta De Monticelli's seminal work in phenomenological ethics. Here, Staiti introduces his Italian readers to the contemporary meta-ethical debate, a topic which has not received adequate attention among Italian philosophers.

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The relevance of the book, however, exceeds the national boundaries of the “fair land where ‘sì’ is heard” (Dante). Staiti does pioneering bridge-building work in bringing into dialogue Husserl’s phenomenology with meta-ethics. The book presents some of Husserl’s key concept in a clear and jargon-free way, and it offers original solutions to meta-ethical problems. It has the potential for attracting attention to Husserl’s phenomenology outside the small circle of its supporters.

Given that most of my readers cannot read Italian, I will offer an overview of each chapter and limit my critical remarks to a minimum.

In chapter 1, Staiti argues that Husserlian phenomenology can provide middle ground between ethical naturalism and non-naturalism. The chapter serves as introduction to some of the meta-ethical approaches discussed throughout the book.

“Liberal naturalism,” as De Caro has named it, is the type of naturalism which does not admit of entities violating natural laws (that is, supernatural entities), but admits of everyday entities such as tables and trees. Being a “Liberal naturalist” in ethics entails believing that entities in our pre-scientific experience of the world are bearers of axiological properties so that we can experience these properties as we do with natural properties. On the contrary, being a non-naturalist in ethics entails believing that the truths of ethics are a priori and gained through insight, rather than through experience (think of Kant’s moral imperative).

Unlike the debate between ethical naturalism and non-naturalism, the phenomenological tradition does not construct such an “either-or” dichotomy between experience and a priori intuition. Rather it starts from a richer and more dynamic understanding of both experience and a prior intuition so that the dichotomy between ethical naturalism and non-naturalism is closed.

On the side of experience, phenomenology advocates for the primacy of direct experience, while it dispels the naturalistic prejudice that experience is only sensible and immediate. Think of eidetic variation: going through examples, I can genuinely experience the idea, the *eidos*, of red or triangle. The same is true with axiological properties. Phenomenology shows that, in a legitimate sense, I can “see” something as good or bad, although these properties have no immediate sensible counterpart.

On the side of the notion of a priori, phenomenology introduces material a priori as a type of a priori which does require experience. Think of the eidetic law that there is no color without surface and vice versa: this is a legitimate a priori, which, however, would be inaccessible without the experience of vision. Thus, non-naturalists could accept the fact that moral properties and laws might behave in a similar way so that we would not have to postulate an ad hoc type of moral insight.

In chapter 2, Staiti argues that naturalists would profit from Husserl’s phenomenology of perception, while non-naturalists would profit from his phenomenology of intuition.

Staiti engages with Robert Audi’s account of perception, which he considers the most sophisticated one in the naturalistic field. Audi understands perception as experiential (the “what is like” component), representational (it represents an object) and causal (it is caused by the object). It is hard, however, to understand how we represent axiological properties because there are no phenomenal properties corresponding to them. How do I “represent” that helping an old person cross the road is good, for instance?

Husserl's phenomenology, on the contrary, understands perception as lived-through, direct and intentional. We do not experience contents of consciousness (qualia etc.), but rather we experience objects through our contents of consciousness (within an intentional relationship). Hence, there is no need of introducing a problematic mediator between consciousness and its object. According to phenomenology, we can grasp the axiological properties where they abide, which is, in the object itself.

Staiti turns then to intuition, which has always played a key role in non-naturalist theories of ethics. He also remarks that the recourse to moral intuition has grown in popularity in ethics in recent decades, as the infamous trolley problem, with its countless variations, shows. To such notion of intuition as insight, Staiti opposes Husserl's notion of intuition as identification. Objects we think about are experienced in intuition when we experience being "in front of the object itself," and we recognize the object as the same as the one manifested in empty intentions. Husserl's account is particularly helpful in explaining what moral intuitions of self-evident propositions (such as "choose good, avoid evil") are. They can be understood as extremely elementary judgments, whose presence to the mind is enough to bring about its own fulfillment in intuition. Staiti also claims that "moral intuitions," such as the musings on the trolley problem, cannot replace actual intuitions in Husserl's sense.

In chapter 3, Staiti argues that the phenomenological notion of foundation (*Fundierung*) has advantages over the naturalistic notion of "grounding" in accounting for the supervenience of axiological properties onto non-axiological properties.

Both naturalists and non-naturalists in ethics define supervenience as follows: properties A supervene on properties B if it is impossible that properties B change without properties A changing. Supervenience is understood to be non-reflexive, but Staiti considers this view problematic.

Before tackling the issue, Staiti delves into a debate within phenomenology about the founding relationship between emotional/volitional acts and objectifying acts. Staiti's discussion is rich and nuanced, and I must limit myself to its main outcomes. Staiti convincingly argues that emotional/volitional acts do contribute to the constitution of objects in our experience because they allow axiological properties to be manifested. He also shows that Husserl offers a reliable criterion for differentiating between subvenient non-axiological properties (the "logical properties" which preserve the unity and identity of the object) and supervenient axiological properties. Finally, he defends Husserl from the charge of intellectualism leveled at him, among others, by Heidegger and Scheler: do we really experience axiological properties of entities as founded upon, that is, "piled up" upon their non-axiological features? Don't we see, for instance, that a face is beautiful even before noticing all its features? For Staiti, who relies in part on Rinfner-Kreidl's work, the solution lies in the difference between direct experience and reflective experience. In direct experience we grasp together axiological and non-axiological properties within a global perception, and it is only through reflection that we discover how axiological properties are founded on non-axiological properties.

Back to the discussion of supervenience, Staiti argues that the Husserlian notion of foundation allows us to make sense of it in mereological rather than in causal terms. If supervenience is understood as a type of quasi-causal determination, we end up with

thinking of axiological properties as juxtaposed to and piled on top of natural properties. Husserl's notion of foundation offers an effective way to avoid such risk.

In chapter 4, Staiti argues that Husserl's phenomenology offers a solution to G.E. Moore's open question argument about the notion of "good," in that it draws a parallel between the notion of "good" and the notion of "existing."

Moore's argument is that "good" is a simple property directly grasped by insight. Any time we try to translate "good" into another notion, we can still validly ask if that notion is good. For example: "good = pleasant," but "is pleasant good?" This constant possibility shows that "good" is a primitive notion, which cannot be analyzed into more basic ones. The puzzling fact about "good" is that it does not seem to add any specific property to the entity it is predicated of, as opposed, say, of "useful," "pleasant," "generous" etc.

Staiti draws our attention to the fact that, for post-Kantian philosophy, "existing" seems to behave in the same way. When we say that something exists, we don't take "existence" to be a real predicate as opposed to qualities such as long, fast, yellow, heavy etc. Staiti, then, presents Husserl's treatment of "existing" and applies it analogically to "good."

Husserl's important claim is that existence is not predicated of objects or states of affairs, but rather of *posita* (singular: *positum*). *Posita* are correlates of positional intentional acts. When we predicate that a certain *positum* "exists," we are saying that such *positum* can become the object of an intuitive fulfillment. For instance: "black swans exists" means that a certain *positum* (black swans) can be experienced in intuition.

According to Staiti, something similar holds true with "good." "Good" is predicated of *posita*, not of objects or states of affairs. When we ask if something is good, we are asking if it really has the axiological properties we attribute to it. For instance: "Sebastiano is meek, kind, and generous... is he good?" If and only if Sebastiano turns out to actually display the moral qualities we attribute to him, we can call him "good". This interpretation would explain why "good" does not seem to add any specific quality to the entity it is predicated of, and why it is always possible to ask an "open question" about it.

My criticism of the book has mostly to do with what the book does not cover: I would have appreciated a more sustained treatment of *Wertnehmung* (value-apperception), and I miss a discussion of the role of teleology in Husserl's late ethics. Staiti's proposal about "good" is intriguing but, to me, problematic: the notion of "moral" properties seems to me to imply a reference to the "good," while Staiti seems to understand it the other way round. But these remarks do not subtract from the value of the book, which is an important step in a very promising line of research, hopefully accessible to the Anglophone reader.

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