



ARTICLES AND TREATISES / ARTYKUŁY I ROZPRAWY

On the divine in Husserl

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the ways in which Edmund Husserl develops the question of God. Six ways to reach God are shown as present in Husserl's writings, some of them seem to be very close to the traditional philosophical ways to go as far as God (the objective and the subjective ways) others are very original, in particular the way that starts from the analysis of the hyletic sphere of the human being, a sphere which is present in all the reality too. At last it is possible to notice Husserl's interest in the mystical approach to God.

KEYWORDS

epoche; lived experience; transcendental reduction; finality; interiority; monad; ethics; *hyle*; mystics; phenomenology of religion

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I am very glad to deal once again with the problem of God in Edmund Husserl, because it is a very important topic in itself and in Husserl's phenomenology. First of all I think that it is necessary to say something about his own phenomenological analyses gained through his method in order to understand his approach to God.

To perform this task I refer to the results of my research contained in my book *The divine in Husserl and other explorations* (Ales Bello, 2009) which consists of three parts. The first one is the philosophical-phenomenological approach to God. The second is the Husserlian, personal, religious approach. The third concerns, starting from Husserl, but going beyond him, the possibility of building a new discipline "phenomenology of religion", which, in my opinion, is halfway between history of religions and philosophy of religion. But on this occasion I want just to remain within the field of the philosophical-phenomenological approach to God.

My book begins with a description of phenomenology as a philosophy which I would call *sui generis*, that is, a new kind of philosophy. In fact, I think that it is necessary to say something about his own phenomenological analyses in order to understand his approach to God.

The novelty of Husserlian phenomenology resides in bracketing all one's prejudices through the *epoche*, but what is more important, through the *epoche* the thesis of the natural attitude is put aside, not in the sense that there is a negation of the world, on the contrary, to understand better what the meaning of the world is, and not only of the world, but the meaning of the I inside the world and also the meaning of God. This is done, according to Husserl, in an attempt to show what exists originary, and I should like to quote from Husserl:

If I do that as I can with complete freedom, then I am not negating the world as though I were a sophist. I do not doubt its factual being as though I were a skeptic. Rather I am exercising the phenomenological *epoche*, which also completely shuts me off from any judgments about the spatial, temporal, factual being (Husserl, 1982: 61).

The problem concerns factual being, in the sense that we cannot deny our beings. What we want to understand is its meaning, the meaning of the world, and so the meaning of what exists. And the *epoche* permits us to conquer through the pathway of the two reductions, the eidetic one and the transcendental one, "a new region of being, never before delimited in its own peculiarity" (Husserl, 1982: 63). This new territory can be understood through an image. I suggest to show Husserl's intention through a picture. This new territory can be understood through the image of a pane of glass, that is inside us and on which we fix that which we live inside in a continuous flow of inscriptions. I use the term glass pane to indicate that such a sphere exists, but is not easily individuated. In fact, because of its transparency, it always eludes our searching, even if it is

always present. On the surface of the glass pane the finished products are given. That is, one finds the lived experiences already configured and they are the way in which we live our experience. But they are the fruit of a genetic process that must be studied through an egological excavation.

We are aware of these lived experiences, when they are already configured and this justifies the term consciousness, which does not refer to a second degree consciousness, that is reflection, but rather just being conscious of oneself. To employ a beautiful expression from Edith Stein, who was one of Husserl's closest students, self-consciousness presents itself as a light that accompanies the flow of lived experiences and which illumines it in order to make it present.

Lived experiences (*Erlebnisse*) are human acts but on the glass pane they appear in their essential structure as lived experiences of the ego on diverse levels and various modalities, which can be examined in a structural and essential mode, as present in every concrete I. So we have two levels, the structure of the I which lives in ourselves and our concrete I; the glass pane however is a transcendental structure because it is the place that allows for the revelation of meaning from the view point of the understanding. It does not create anything. It registers and this recording has a universal value. It happens in all human beings. And that is very important because through the analysis of our lived experiences we can understand the world which surrounds us, we can understand ourselves, and we can understand God.

Husserl's position regarding God differs from other positions because it is by starting from the sphere of lived experiences that we can reach God. Further, in delineating a modality for the transcendence of God, one begins to understand the function carried out by these lived experiences. In fact, on such a foundation one sees that within lived experiences certain aspects are established that correspond to the factual concatenations of mental processes with distinct and regular orders which present to us an ordered world. The world is ordered; it is not determined by chance. We can say that the physical sciences also give us evidence of the established order of the world. In other words, it is possible to delineate exact natural laws because the world has a rational structure. Furthermore, this rationality is seen to have a scope. A concept emerges here that will be fundamental for the interpretation of many aspects of reality, including divine reality, namely, teleology.

THE OBJECTIVE WAY TO GOD

Teleology is a Greek word, which we can translate as finality. According to Husserl, some examples of teleology can be found in the natural world. We can understand this world through our lived experiences, as we have seen. One can find, in the natural world, the factual evolution of a series of organisms, including the human being. One also finds examples in the human world, as with

the growth of a culture with its spiritual treasures. So we have the possibility to understand that what we grasp regarding the world has a teleology — it is not without a scope, without an aim. In order to understand just what the ultimate sense of this development is, Husserl introduces the problem of God.

Rationality in the sense of the scope, the meaning of the world's rational structure brings us before an existence that is extra-worldly, that is divine, a divine being. I quote from *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy* where we find this argument in both § 58 and § 51. Husserl writes: "This being would obviously transcend not merely the world but absolute consciousness" (Husserl, 1982: 134). And this is very important. Our consciousness is absolute with respect to us, in the sense that we cannot escape our consciousness. Our consciousness is the starting point for us, for our knowledge of ourselves and of things. And Husserl goes on: "It would therefore be an absolute, in a sense totally different from that in which consciousness is absolute" (Husserl, 1982: 134). God is absolute but is absolute in another sense regarding the absolute of our consciousness. So there is a double use of the term "absolute", one regarding ourselves and the other regarding God. For this reason we have two levels of absoluteness. Just as we have two levels of transcendence: God would be something transcendent in a sense totally different from that in which the world is something transcendent regarding us.

So in order to justify reality and to justify the teleology, *i.e.*, finality in reality, we have to go, in a rational manner, through our minds and go as far as an absolute which is totally different from our consciousness, something that is transcendent but in a sense totally different from the transcendence of the world. We have two meanings, also in this case of transcendence. There is the transcendence of the world and the transcendence of the transcendence of the world, which is God. This way of reasoning is very close, I have found, to what Thomas Aquinas said regarding the way in which our mind can go as far as God and this is the fifth proof, the so-called teleology proof. St. Thomas presented this in his *Summa theologica*.

THE SUBJECTIVE WAY TO GOD

The second way to reach God is connected to medieval philosophy too — this is my idea, since Husserl never quoted Thomas in the sense of teleology that leads to theology (objective way) or Anselm in the sense of the subjective way. But if we compare what Husserl says, starting from our consciousness of God, we find really something very interesting also in connection with Anselm.

Anselm, in his book *Proslogion*, says that he wants us to concentrate upon God. And Husserl exhorts us to concentrate on our conscious lived experience. Anselm writes:

Enter into the chamber of your mind and shut out everything but God and whatever helps us to seek him and to seek him behind closed doors (Anselm of Aosta, 2005: 97).

And Husserl writes in *Ideas I*:

[...] there must be therefore within the absolute stream of consciousness and in its infinities, modes in which transcendences are made known other than the constituting of physical realities as unities of harmonious appearances (Husserl, 1982: 117).

These modes lead us not just as far as the world, but also as far as God, because there is something transcendent, within ourselves — and this “Something” is lived by ourselves. So we have another way through which we discover that we can speak about God and about teleology that leads to theology because we already know the meaning of Something that is greater than us, and that is the justification of all reality. The proof that among the transcendences there is the transcendence of God is contained in what Husserl adds:

[...] and ultimately there would also have to be intuitional manifestations to which a theoretical thinking might conform, so that, by following them rationally, it might make intelligible the unitary rule of the supposed theological principle (Husserl, 1982: 117).

Though Husserl never spoke about the two medieval philosophers we find in his analyses an extraordinary connection with their argumentations. And according to me, the second way is very important, because it pinpoints the presence of Something that transcends us and it registers itself on the sphere of our intimate experience. In this way we can understand what Husserl says about the announcement of an intuitive order that leads to God and that is at the same time felt as almighty Presence in us and realized by our minds. In fact Husserl says that, starting from this profound experience, we can, through reflection, enter into the field of philosophy. So it is not just a religious experience, though it could also be a religious experience, and we can see later that this is the case for Husserl, but for the moment we will use this experience just to understand the ultimate meaning of all things.

THE INTERSUBJECTIVE WAY TO GOD

The third way is the intersubjective way which Husserl explicitly links to one of the most interesting philosophers of the Modern Age, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Both Husserl and Leibniz are interested in the human being as a monad. Monad means something which is individual but not in the sense that it is closed. According to Husserl, we are not closed, we are open toward other people too. What is important in the human monad is the I. The I is the real

part of the human monad. If a coordination of monads is possible — and we have already seen there is an ordered world, and so a coordination is possible, and the correlation is already something in which monads find themselves — such a correlation can only be established by an I. But it requires another I, not only our I, others I like us, but an I which not only organizes and coordinates but also “creates”. We find some texts on this problem in *Phenomenology of intersubjectivity*, in Book II. I quote:

Is there an I that experiences nature and the world, constituted in common in all finite Is, with the eyes of these Is, which has in itself all their thoughts, that acts within all as an I, which “creates” nature and the world in the sense of “the idea of the good”? (Husserl, 1973a: 302)

If this great I creates, his creation is performed according to the criteria of the good, which allows us to have an optimistic vision of this world, or at least something basic to which we can aspire. Here we find the word “creation” and this word is important because we not only can but we must say that God is Something which, or better Who (for God is a person according to Husserl) transcends the world, He also creates the world. We can make note that Husserl always raises the question of God only at the end of a certain philosophical trajectory. That is, his aim is not to prove the existence of God, that is not necessary according to him, or, better, it is not his problem. The problem is another one. It is necessary to think about God if we want to understand the meaning of things. As such, we have to go through a coherent reflection as far as we are dealing with the principle of the whole. When Husserl raised the problem of God, sometimes he spoke about Absolute but he almost always use directly the word: God.

THE WAY THROUGH THE HYLETIC DIMENSION TO GOD

The fourth way is quite original in that it is the way through hyletics. First I should clarify what hyletics is for Husserl. The level of the transcendental sphere, that is our lived experiences of which we are conscious, is where facts become clarified. We have already seen that it is not enough to say that there are some facts — we want to understand their meanings. The fact of human existence is individuated through a reductive investigation and in it we find in an originary structure, a primal moment, which is the hyletic level. I wrote about the importance of it in my book *The sense of things: Towards a phenomenological realism* (Ales Bello, 2015a), here I give just a short account of this level.

Husserl says “originary *hyle* presents itself”. What is the meaning of the word *hyle*? *Hyle* is a Greek word that means “matter”. But in this case it is not

matter as in something heavy, rather, it is just the ground starting from which we can understand how we can know all the reality. I will provide some examples. Originary *hyle* presents itself linked up with the originary movements of our body to which do correspond originary sentiments and originary instincts.

It is not enough to speak about reason when we want to describe the human being, because he/she is a very complex being. Reason is one very important aspect of the human being, but the human being has a body, that is, he/she is embodied, has sensations and moves, further the human being has sentiments, instincts that is psyche. The two aspects, body and psyche, constituted the *living body*. All of this is originary “material” — and this is the meaning of *hyle* in Husserlian sense — that we can find at the bottom of what we call the world. In fact this sphere is not just a human sphere as we can find instincts, feelings and so on even in the animal world. But this “matter”, this whole hyletic sphere, has an essential grammar and essential grammar means that it has a meaning. Further, it has its essential alphabet in the lowest levels of the human being.

That which we are pointing to here is not only a passive, unconscious, and instinctual unifying structure, it is indeed so, but it also possesses a meaning and, according to Husserl, its own finality. Teleology is not just the teleology of our explicit aims, of our ethical attitude and of our culture. Rather, teleology manifests itself at that originary level. Teleology, then, has its origin in the facts of the *hyle* which are originary in the widest sense. Without these, no totally transcendental subjectivity would be possible. Here I refer to a manuscript *Teleologie. Die Implikation des Eidos transzendentale Intersubjectivität im Eidos transzendentales Ich* (November 1921), which we can find in the *Phenomenology of intersubjectivity*, Book III, in which Husserl writes:

Teleology manifests itself at the transcendental level, but it has its origin in the facts of the *hyle* that are “originary” (in the widest sense); without these no world and no total transcendental subjectivity would be possible (Husserl, 1973b: 385).

At this point an interesting question arises:

Things being what they are, can one say that this teleology, with its originary facticity, has its foundation in God? We came to the ultimate “questions of facts” — to the questions of originary fact, to the ultimate necessities, the originary necessity (Husserl, 1973b: 385).

With this, Husserl says that it is possible to go as far as God, starting from the hyletic sphere or better it is necessary to go to God to explain the teleology present in the hyletic sphere in so far as this hyletic sphere seems to be chaotic, but, on the contrary, it is ordered.

We remind ourselves of Aristotle and of the connection or correlation between the formal and the final causes and this is why teleology is defined as the “form of all forms” by Husserl. In Husserl I find something more than in Thomas Aquinas, in the sense that he speaks about the teleology starting from this passive, instinctual level and in this sense we can say that the teleology is the form of all forms, in fact it operates at all grades of reality. In Husserl one has to be aware of the hyletic sphere and has to start from the hyletic level, if one wants to understand in a deeper way the meaning of God.

THE ETHICAL WAY TO GOD

There is another possibility for understanding God, which is connected to ethics. We find this in particular in Husserl’s *Erste Philosophie*. In the Text *Versuch einer Scheidung der Stadien auf dem Weg zu einer Wissenschaft von der transzendentalen Subjektivität* he writes that if one considers value proposition, which divide into desiring and volitional propositions, concepts of truth are delineated. Insofar as they are practical truths, they can be placed next to theoretical truths (Husserl, 1956: 251–258).

Examining the human associations, Husserl had already emphasized the value of the community, which is based on the spiritual life and requires an ethical life which can be able to establish spiritual links among people (Husserl, 1989). Going on this path and analyzing the complexity of the human life, he maintained that the ethical life does not exclude sentiment, which we see in the way he distanced himself from Kant. Ethics must embrace sentiments. Husserl goes beyond Kant in the sense that there can be joy that is born from the value of beauty, which is accessed concretely by being in front of qualitative contents like ideas, in particular, the idea of a human being, individually considered. In this case, the I becomes a pure sort of value.

Here there is a sort of interior call towards an absolute beauty that arises on the basis of love. Love in this sense is a spiritual sentiment and it means that I love the world, I love other people, which in turn means that I want that they receive what is best for them. This call is delineated within the depths of each person and must be responded to, by adopting a rational position. Rational in this sense means that I understand that I have to do what is good.

The idea of a community of love is concomitant with the ethical ideal of a rational humanity, that is a humanity that is aware of its own ethical task. And in this sense the world is not left to itself, to its destiny. One has a glimpse into it, and sees it as a providential project. Husserl writes:

There is no blind fate; God “regulates” the world. The world “aspires to” absolute paths, to values; God prepares in the heart of human beings the way to such paths.

Humans could realize a divine world in the freedom that one finds in the world (Husserl, 1956: 16).

Here we have an openness towards religion. Human freedom needs divine support, namely, grace. Husserl speaks about grace when he writes: “Freely, and most properly, with divine grace humans must be motivated to strive towards this goal with the highest awareness and strength of will” (Husserl, 1956: 16). Ethics will refer them back to metaphysics, that is the problem of God. But in order to understand deeply the sense or meaning of the world, they both need religion. This is very interesting and we can find this idea of God in many of Husserl’s manuscripts.

A MYSTICAL WAY TO GOD?

The sixth way towards God is perhaps, I must say “perhaps”, a mystical way. In the critical literature on Husserl very few commentators have examined the question of God. Notable among these is James Hart. His edited volume *Essays in phenomenological theology* was published in 1986 (Hart, 1986), one year after my first book on *Husserl on the problem of God* (Ales Bello, 1985). Hart maintains that the notion of God in a broad sense, is present in one’s interiority and it is understood consciously. The I appropriates it, moving from exteriority to interiority, but living it in itself. He distinguishes two aspects. I propose to use the Latin expression, *quod nos*, to designate what is inside us, as opposed to what is *in se*, in itself, where “itself” here means God, who is present in consciousness but who also transcends it. We have already seen in the second way, the subjective way in connection with Anselm, how according to Husserl the world is transcendent with respect to the human being but so much more is God. The finite human being could never know God if he or she did not have the trace of God’s presence — this is also Prof. Hart’s position. Hart affirms that because of the influence of Plotinus and Saint Augustine, Husserl’s position is the same as that found in Western mysticism.

Here — he writes — “the divine is the center of all consciousness, of all conscious centers, the soul of the souls and at the same time the horizon for all utopian projects and for those focused on happiness” (Hart, 1986: 142).

Hart’s observation, which intends to establish an affinity of perspectives rather than affirm that Husserl is speaking about a mystical dimension, leads to an investigation of Husserl’s position on mysticism and whether or not Husserl had made a reference to it. My studies of the exponents of Husserl’s school of thought have led me to a particularly significant text. At this point a certain

premise is necessary. Edith Stein is well known as one of Husserl's disciples who became interested in mystics after her departure from Husserl. Indeed she later wrote an essay *The interior castle* as Appendix in *Finite and eternal being* (Stein, 2002a) and a book *The science of Cross*, about the mystics (Stein, 2002b), towards the end of her short life.

Another less known disciple, Gerda Walther, wrote, in 1923, a book entitled *Phänomenologie der Mystik* (Walther, 1976), which naturally came to her teacher's attention. She sent to Husserl her book on the problem of mystics and Husserl replied with a long letter that can be considered a short essay which contains a very interesting conclusion (Husserl, 1924: 7). He spoke about the possibility of an excavation of the depths of the human interiority. He says that the subject possesses its own particular world with its own particular depth. Husserl shows that there is a possibility to descend into the deep profundity of the human being — as we have already seen in the second way — and to ascend from the depths, from the profoundest profundities. A mystical experience is not just a religious experience; though it is also a religious experience, it is in particular the experience of a special contact with the presence of God himself inside the human being. Because it is a very particular experience, it is not even given to all people but it is possible to have it, if God wants to manifest himself through “a personal Revelation”, as Edith Stein said.

CONCLUSION

In Husserl we can find the possibility of a special encounter with God, that one of the mystical experience. In fact, one could rightly ask if this “profoundest profundity”, mentioned by Husserl, has something to do with it. Husserl wrote nothing about this point but Walther, in her introduction to the new edition of her book in 1955, records Husserl's opinion on her work, claiming that mysticism according to Husserl, concerns ideal possibilities. A mystical experience is possible, though the sole real thing is the experience of the mystical, as one cannot establish the reality of the object of which one had an experience. Husserl therefore could not cope with the subjective aspect of mystical experience, but still affirmed that it is possible that someone had this particular experience. What he doubts is the real relation with divinity but in this sense we can accept that, according to him, it is possible to be open towards God, that God lives in us and that God can manifest himself in us in a very particular way. This is a possibility. And Husserl observes that “possibility” means that it could become real.

I have found six ways to God and in these ways we have philosophy and religion coming together. That is religion in the sense of religious experience according to Husserl, who really was a very religious person. Religious

experience is, according to him, something present in the human being, but as a philosopher, he strives to understand better, to explain the meaning this religious experience through rational reflection.

The two-fold manner to arrive at God, *i.e.*, the philosophico-argumentative approach and the religious experiential one, do not contrast with one another. Husserl does not oppose them; rather, he sees them as complimentary. From this point of view, his analysis harmonizes the philosophical way and the religious one.

Furthermore, in his analyses there are innovations which can be underlined. First the recovery of the hyletic dimension with its potent structure is innovative, be it in relation to the philosophical theme of religion, discovered here operating at different levels of depth, including those that are apparently not reachable by rational means, be it in relation to the justification of sacro-religious experience. Concerning the latter, phenomenological analysis, by its making evident the structures present in the human being, allows us to recover the pathway that leads to the origin of such experience in the human subject.

It does so moving from the trace of the divine, rising up to the psychic processes of attraction and repulsion, that is, sensory feelings, and moving to spiritual dimension. The weight attributed to various moments, *i.e.*, the hyletic of sentiments brought on by the senses and noetic on of spiritual acts, permits us to understand the differences among the various expressions of the sacro-religious. In this innovative way, it is possible to configure a new “phenomenology of religion” that finds itself on a phenomenological archeology, as an analysis of the sacro-religious expressions. This topic is developed in the third part of my book *The divine in Husserl and other explorations* and in my last book *Il senso del sacro. Dall’arcaicità alla desacralizzazione* (Ales Bello, 2015b).

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