Engaged Eco-phenomenology. An Eco-socialist stance based upon a phenomenological account of narrative identity

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Dedicated to the memory of Erazim Kohák (1933-2020)

Introduction

 "Narrative identity", "eco-phenomenology", "ecological socialism" or "eco-socialism" – At first sight these topics seem to be along quite different themes, which could be somewhat troublesome to unite. In my presentation, I will attempt to show how one topic could lead to the other in a logical way. In particular, the main idea of this paper will be that a phenomenologically consequent interpretation of narrative identity will necessarily lead to ecological, eco-ethical and eco-political consequences. The ideal, which I would like to present, is the universal – universally open – community of every living being; as the beat poet, Gary Snyder put it: 'A Village Council of All Beings'; an ultimately *egalitarian community* of everything that lives. I would like to show that this picture could be interpreted as a logical outcome of Husserl's own theory of transcendental intersubjectivity and philosophy of life. The experience of this original community confronts us with our fundamental moral obligations, our inevitable responsibility towards nature and non-human beings. The understanding of our moral obligations and essential responsibility concerning nature and every living being is rooted in the axiological character of constituting transcendental subjectivity (cf. Kohák 2003).

This presentation has two main parts. In the first one I will treat the emergence and conceptual transformations of narrative identity from Husserl and Heidegger, through Ricœur and Lévinas, to Tengelyi. I will try to show, that we can already identify certain ecologically and eco-ethically relevant – even crucial – elements in Husserl. But at the heart of the first section will be the ethical consequences of narrative identity; and the question, how *our relationship to the other* influences, shapes and deepens *our own personal identity*. In the second part of the paper I will attempt to show the details of these ethical consequences. On the one hand I would like to demonstrate how such ideas originate from Husserl's own philosophical considerations, from his conception of transcendental intersubjectivity. On the other hand, I want to analyse some of the characteristic features of certain, contemporary mainstream eco-philosophical, eco-ethical and eco-political positions, especially eco-socialism which; are particularly relevant for our present paper. I will attempt to show the explicit

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connection between certain eco-socialist ideas and such a reformulation of narrative identity, which is essentially based upon the Husserlian phenomenology.

I. Transformations of the Narrative Self and its Ethical Implications

Around 1906/07 Husserl "discovered" the methodology of phenomenological reductions, which helped him to disclose the unlimited realm of constituting transcendental subjectivity, which constitutes every objective appearance as phenomenon. For a short time (at least in 1907/08) Husserl conceived this pure, transcendental consciousness as "egoless", lacking any "egoic" ("ichliche") structure.[1] Ego appeared in that period as a transcendent, constituted, objective phenomenon. In 1911/12 he came to the conclusion that the pure, transcendental consciousness had a pure, formal ego, as its necessary, apriori structural moment; as a self-identical pole of experiences and actions. This was Husserl's position in *Ideas* (1912 [1976a]), and he kept this opinion for the rest of his life; only he deepened the notion of transcendental ego, made it more and more sophisticated, but he never abandoned it.

According to the standpoint of *Ideas*, there is no experienced phenomenon and no accomplished act, without an experiencing and acting ego. This ego-centre is completely formal and empty. Husserl emphasizes that the pure ego has no content whatsoever, no inner structure (cf. 1976a, p. 179, 1952, p. 105). It is only a logical pole of experiences and acts. It is always identical to itself; its self-identity is never problematic. From this absolutely pure and self-identical ego he distinguishes the *"personal ego"* (also: "monadic ego") which is an objective, transcendent, constituted entity (cf. e.g. 1952, pp. 247-253). After he started to unfold the principles of *apriori genesis*, so, when he commenced to elaborate his "genetic phenomenology", he also managed to find such a conception of this personal or monadic ego, which is not only a constituted, objective entity, but also a transcendentally functioning, constituting subjective agent (cf. Luft 2011). In his *Cartesian Meditations* (1929 [1960]) Husserl defined the "monad" as the "full concretion of the ego"; and made his famous addition to this definition: "The ego constitutes himself for himself in, so to speak, the unity of a 'history'." (1960, p. 75). In Husserl's late conception we can find an explicit theory of narrative identity; he even used the term life-history ("Lebensgeschichte") – that he probably borrowed from Dilthey – in this context, (1973b, p. 419; cf. also: Tengelyi 1997, 1998).

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[1] In "Idea of Phenomenology" (1907 [1950]) consciousness appears as a pure, transcendental field, which has no ego at all – as immanent structural moment. In manuscripts from 1908 he speaks about "absolute I" (2003, p. 33). In "The Basic Problems of Phenomenology" (1911/12 [1973a]) he wrote about "phenomenological ego" in a hypothetical manner. Husserl committed himself to the idea of "transcendental ego" – in a clear, unambiguous way –, when he was working on the *Ideas* in 1912.

Heidegger, in his *Being and Time* (1927 [2010]) approached the problem of self-identity from a different angle. He claimed that the classical formulation of self-identity is just an expression of traditional metaphysics, and it presupposes a "substantialized" conception of the subject (cf. 2010, pp. 302-309 [§63]); which he considered a fundamentally mistaken and misleading concept. The real question, according to Heidegger, is not whether I'm identical to myself, but whether I live in an authentic or inauthentic way; whether it is really me who makes my decisions, or rather, do such decisions belong to the "others" (die Anderen, "das Man"), and in fact are they made by them. One interesting point in this regard is that we can already find the problem of authenticity in Husserl, long before the publication of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. It can be found – amongst others – in the second book of *Ideas*, where Husserl raises the question concerning the autonomy of the person, her dependency and independency, and thus the authenticity and inauthenticity of subjective existence (Husserl 1952, pp. 268-270; cf. also: 2014, pp. 340-343). In Husserl's view the self-critical and morally responsible acts of theoretical and practical reason are true expressions of autonomy of the person. If we follow in our decisions and actions the guidance of self-critical rationality, Husserl says, then we really live an autonomous and authentic life. My narrative, personal identity takes form in the flow of my experiences, in the series of my authentic and inauthentic decisions.

Ricœur, in his theory of narrative identity, explained personal identity on the basis of our capacity to narrate our life-history as a continuous, coherent narrative, whose protagonist is our very self (1990). László Tengelyi, partly motivated by Lévinas (1961) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), modified this conception of narrative identity, most importantly, by introducing his concept of "event of fate" ("Schicksalereignis", 1998). According to Tengelyi, we are not the exclusive authors of our life-history, only its co-authors ("Miturheber", 2007b, p. 73). We don't have complete control over our life; there are unexpected turns in it; from time to time there are events, which, so to say "derail" our life, or change it drastically, ultimately and irrevocably. Our life will never be the same as it was before. Those events are the "events of fate". Tengelyi's main contribution to the conception of narrative identity is that he interpreted it in *a radically discontinuous way*. In Tengelyi's view our life-history is characterized by a "passive genesis of sense" – which means that we cannot have full control over the formation of the sense of events in our life-time – and the radically unforeseeable and essentially open character of future. These two moments fundamentally belong together.

Tengelyi further connected this conception of event of fate – and passive genesis of sense and the radical openness of future[2] – with certain *ethical considerations* and with our inevitably *intersubjective* nature. Namely, these events of fate in most cases take place in a social, intersubjective space, and they are mostly related to other people – to what we do to others (intentionally or unintentionally), or what others do to us. Our life-history and our narrative identity, which crystallizes in this story is substantially intersubjective and attached to others. The meaning of our life and the core of this narrative identity formed through our thoughts, words, decisions and acts concerning other people. The way we treat others, the things we do to them, say more than just a word about *who we really are*. In fact, these things – decisions and acts – define our narrative identity.

Tengelyi combines his theory of narrative identity with the ethical conception of Emmanuel Lévinas and Bernhard Waldenfels. According to this, we are always exposed to the Other and indispensably responsible for Her. We live in a permanent state of being compelled to answer Her.[3] Tengelyi interprets "guilt" ("Schuld") as the neglecting or explicitly rejecting of our original responsibility towards the Other or our being compelled to answer the call (Ruf) of the Other. We are guilty when we refuse to hear this call and don't want to answer it. The ethical life here indicates an *authentic* way of life, which means, living in a perpetual and radical openness towards the Other. *Inauthenticity* would mean the forgetting or intentionally neglecting or rejecting of our being compelled to answer the call of the Other.

At this point we can open the ecological, eco-ethical and eco-political issue of this presentation. Namely, the Other need not necessarily be a human person; she also could be a non-human being, or even our natural environment. With this consideration we must move beyond the focus of Levinas' main thoughts, but – I think – in a legitimately Levinasian manner. According to Levinas, the face of the Other confronts us with our irrevocable responsibility to the Other and this experience (seeing the face of the Other) enables us to hear Her silent call, a call without words. The Other's face tells us: "Don't kill me!", "Don't hurt me!". But not only humans have a face. The genuine experience of meeting an animal or any living being in general, in my interpretation, proves that they have a face too, which expresses the above-mentioned messages: "Don't kill me!", "Don't hurt me!".[4]

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[2] This latter motif is especially emphatic in his second main work: *Erfahrung und Ausdruck* (2007a).

[3] "Antwortungszwang" – a term, he borrowed from Waldenself (1994).

[4] Dermot Moran, in his analyses to Levinas, explicitly raises this question: "Levinas agrees that we cannot actually refuse to acknowledge the faces of animals; nevertheless, at the same time, he has no adequate discussion concerning the attribution of faces, no criterion for 'facehood' as it were. Does a fish have a face, or an amoeba? Does a human embryo in the womb have a face?" (2002, p. 350).

Now we can proceed to the second part of our presentation: the ecological consequences of this interpretation of narrative identity.

II. Narrative identity and eco-socialism

The main consequences of the previous part of this paper were, that our narrative identity has a fundamentally intersubjective nature and it has inevitable ethical implications. The question "who are we?" is essentially connected to the way we deal and treat others, and also to the problem of whether we live an authentic or an inauthentic life; (who is the "protagonist" of our life: an authentic or an inauthentic person). Following the ethical considerations of László Tengelyi, we interpret authenticity as being fundamentally open to Other, and bearing our original, indispensable responsibility towards Her. The last crucial remark on this topic, which was supposed to prepare the thoughts of the second part, is that this Other need not necessarily be a human person, she could also be an animal, or anything that lives. At this point we should return to Edmund Husserl.

In his 2003 essay, "An Understanding Heart", the Czech philosopher, Erazim Kohák placed Husserl's notions of transcendental subjectivity and life-world (Lebenswelt) in the centre, to lay down the foundations of an eco-phenomenology. According to Kohák, Husserl criticized the *modern* notion of rationality, which is "heartless"; which restricted the domain of rational to the sphere of measurable things, and labelled "irrational" everything that couldn't be measured. It's a narrow, limited concept of rationality, that excludes emotions, values and everything qualitative and which cannot be quantified exactly. From the viewpoint of such a rationality, we must eliminate all these things – emotions, values, qualitative matters – from scientific investigations, as essentially irrational. This rationality, Kohák says, is truly "heartless"; and one of the most important merits of Husserl's notion of transcendental subjectivity, is to offer an alternate to this modern conception of rationality. "Transcendental subjectivity", in Kohák's opinion, is "qualitative reason"; that is to say: such a conception of reason which is sensitive to the qualitative features and moments of the world, and which is deeply connected to emotions, affections and also values.

For Husserl, in the second book of *Ideas* (1912), the practical, emotional, value-constitutive (axiological) character of constituting transcendental subjectivity is already as important, as its theoretical character and achievements. The practical, axiological and theoretical moments of transcendental subjectivity are inseparably interdependent. The correlate of this constituting subjectivity, according to Husserl, is the *life-world*; a subjective world, of everything and everybody that lives, filled with emotions, values and qualitative moments; and which is also

rational in its own way (e.g. 1976b). This peculiar – and in Husserl's view much deeper – rationality is forgotten and deeply buried by the narrow, reifying and superficial rationality of the modernity. These Husserlian considerations serve as the corner-stones of Kohák's own theory of eco-phenomenology.

A further important point in connecting Husserl's thought with eco-phenomenology and particularly eco-socialism, is his theory of non-human subjectivity and subjects. According to Husserl, non-human living beings also have their own peculiar subjectivity, and they also constitute the world in their own non-human way. As I mentioned, Husserl uses the Leibnizian term "monad" to define the "full concretion of the ego" (cf. Husserl 1973c, pp. 102f). However, he also speaks about non-human monads of plants and animals (cf. Lee 1993, pp. 225ff), and even unicellular organisms (cf. Husserl 2006, pp. 174f). According to at least some manuscripts of Husserl everything that lives is subjective to a certain degree, in a certain manner; every living being as monad is a member of the universally open community of transcendental intersubjectivity, of transcendental subjects, and each contributes to the constitution of the entire world in her own peculiar way. Every monad, human or non-human, is valuable. Within the context of Husserlian phenomenology everything that lives bears a certain value, and realizes values in the world, through her subjective life and achievements. A phenomenologically consequent ethic must take this fact into consideration.

Our particular life-story is part of the never ending story of life in general; and the answer to the question "who are we in reality?" is partly answered by our own deeds and decisions, by the manner in which we treat other living beings.

Now, if we have a look at the main positions of eco-ethics, we find that they could be placed in a coordinate system that has two axes: ecocentric-anthropocentric (whether one prefers rather, nature or humans), holistic-individualistic (whether one emphasizes larger wholes or individuals); and thus we have four characteristic standing points: holistic ecocentrism (e.g. Arne Næss and his followers: deep ecology), individualistic ecocentrism (Paul Taylor), individualistic anthropocentrism (David Pepper's humanistic eco-socialism) and holistic anthropocentrism (eco-fascism). The standard political currents also integrated certain ecological motifs. For conservatives, the preservation of the integrity and beauty of the particular nation' bioregion acquired crucial importance (eco-conservativism, e.g. Roger Scruton). For liberals, the rights of animals (Robert Nozick) and future generations (John Rawls) became relevant (eco-liberalism). Finally, since the late '80s *eco-socialism* has been an existing and far-reaching movement, whose followers emphasize that capitalism perpetually leads not only to economic, but also to ecological crises, (David Pepper, James O'Connor, etc.).

Eco-socialism has anthropocentric (Pepper) and ecocentric (Ted Benton, David Orton, Kamran Nayeri, etc.) versions too.

We would like to join this last standpoint, eco-socialism, that we would like to ground phenomenologically. This phenomenologically interpreted version of eco-socialism count in the above-mentioned Matrix of eco-ethical positions as a moderately ecocentric (biocentric) and slightly holistic standpoint (holistic, to be able to claim rights not only for individuals, but also for populations and larger wholes). In my interpretation it is a logical consequence of Husserl's own theory of life. If every single form of life is constituted as valuable, then we act authentically, morally and rationally only, if we treat every living being accordingly, as bearer of intrinsic value; that is to say: as a goal, and never merely as an instrument of our actions. The ecological position that follows from these Husserlian thoughts is moderately egalitarian; which means, that it never treats a living being in an entirely instrumentalist manner. We, furthermore, linked this position to eco-socialism, because it is one of the main goals of biocentric eco-socialism or biocentric socialism to find ways to maximize the potentialities of every living being and every ecosystem. This principle of maximizing the potentialities of living beings could be regarded as a consequence of the biocentric and moderately egalitarian implications of Husserlian phenomenology.

The ethical and political consequence of such a biocentric and eco-socialist position is the principle of *maximizing the potentialities*, which contains three subprinciples. *Firstly*, mankind should harmonize its relationship to nature on the whole. This harmonization, regarding the non-domesticated nature, the wilderness, simply means the imperative of "let it go", of non-interference. It means that we allow the wilderness to regulate its own processes, and grant it the maximum latitude to grow and evolve; and not to expand beyond our limits too much. *Secondly*, to *minimize the suffering* that humans potentially and actually cause to other human and non-human beings. *Lastly*, to strive after such a social system, which could grant maximum freedom and maximal chances of a happy, creative and meaningful life for every human being. Altogether it's about maximising the potentialities of every living being and life in general.

A consequent phenomenology of life implies such an engaged, activist eco-phenomenology, which represents the rights of living beings and enables them to maximize their potentialities.

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