

Habilitation Thesis

Horizons for the interpretation of morality.

Normativity, intersubjectivity, life world

Abstract

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The subject of my habilitation thesis is a summary of the research I have carried out and results I have achieved since defending my doctoral thesis. Since the vast majority of my research has focused on philosophical methodology and the different areas of moral philosophy, the title of my thesis is *Horizons of the Interpretation of Morality. Normativity, intersubjectivity and life-world*. The present excerpt presents the way this central idea came to the forefront of my concerns, and the stages of its realization, respectively the forms this central idea took.

From transcendental normativity to the phenomenology of the lifeworld

The central question of my PhD thesis was the validity of the thought and the limits of the approach of neo-Kantian normative (axiological) transcendentalism. Theoretically, I felt a sense of incompleteness in that the acts of knowledge and evaluative actions in the neo-Kantian theory of transcendental normativity are thematized only at the general, principial level, with no attention paid to the empirical, intersubjective, linguistic and communicative forms of their realization. I considered that, in order to develop the theoretical framework for my research in the field of the general and applied ethics, I needed to replace the transcendental normativity of neo-Kantian origin with a different, more nuanced and effective approach.

In search of new perspectives, my interest turned to Gadamer's hermeneutics, in which I was initially attracted by the practice of dialogical exploration of meaning beyond transcendentalism. My interest was heightened by the fact that, in this new approach, the study of interpretive interaction involves the problem of constituting ethical bonds between the parties involved in interpretation. Finitude and temporality, the understanding that mediates between

interpretive horizons, and the interpretation of the role of the philosophical approach in the history of the tradition, were elements that reinforced in me the idea of the necessity of this turn, which promised a deeper understanding of ethical and moral philosophical issues, since it genuinely involved an exploration of the historical forms of dialogical interactions and modes of moral cooperation.

Within my recurring research theme, along the lines of general ethics studies, I have investigated attitudinal and communitarian-relational forms of moral thought and moral behaviour, looking for possible forms of transition between the Kantian and hermeneutic approaches. I have studied topics such as *virtue*, *sin*, *friendship*, *conscience*, all of which have proved capable of expressing, in forms of the dialogical address and the self-addressed speech, the moral quality of the person and the community's expectations of the person. In the dialogical formations thus constructed, I was able to follow the development of the dynamic self-identity of the moral person, the forms of authenticity of character and the interweaving of these forms with the various patterns of social relations. All the while I sought the perspective demanded by the issues under discussion, seeking, in fact, to clarify various aspects of my own philosophical vision as a way of making sense of ethical and moral philosophical questions, and I have increasingly turned to the Gadamerian and Heideggerian aspects of philosophical hermeneutics, to the phenomenology of intersubjectivity (Husserl, Schütz, Tengelyi) and towards the communal and life-history perspective (Taylor, MacIntyre), which employ both approaches.

My analyses, devoted to a thematic and philosophical-historical overview of basic ethical concepts, have also dealt with such overarching problems of the subject as *freedom* as a condition of moral relations, and *justice*. The study of these concepts, which are foundational in a broader sense and also have implications in the field of political philosophy, represented a methodological and theoretical advance in my case, because it directed my attention to the conditions of the interrelatedness of the earlier basic categories. From a moral point of view, action or behaviour is understood in terms of its freedom and the generality (justice) of its moral objectives, and therefore both freedom and justice, although from different points of view, can be understood as horizons of the realisation of moral possibilities and discernment. These fundamental aspects of individual and communal belonging, from Plato and Kant (and Husserl) to Arendt, Rawls and Taylor, clearly

show the dimensions of moral life that are in the same direction but which give rise to different interpretations.

In the course of my general ethical research, a specific methodological problem was constituted by the fact that the basic moral categories (character, utility, autonomy, authenticity) were formulated by concepts based on different philosophical methodologies, although they all represent a "substantive view" of the sphere of morality, belonging, so to speak, to the same *thematic domain*. I therefore considered that ethical reflection must start from a moral perspective that is receptive to heterogeneous aspects, even though, in such circumstances, the idea of the unity of the moral subject in its vision and conative acts seemed to be an almost insoluble problem. I have tried to solve this methodological problem with my idea of the formal principles of the life of the moral subject.

I realised that the topic of becoming a moral being, including the issues of the general theory of subject and that of identity, was a recurring topic in the background of my various ethical studies. I formulated the question, therefore, as follows: *by what principles and under what circumstances can the subject of its own thought and actions become a moral being*, or more precisely, by what principles and under what circumstances can the subject of thought and action become the moral being as *himself* or *herself* that he or she must become, namely as a consequence of his or her own life history and moral relations. I have synthesized my analyses of moral philosophy into a thematic structure of thought, complemented by a thematic exposition of this framework-aspect (see my paper on *The Formative Principles of Our Lives in the Process of Becoming Ourselves*¹). In this way, in my ethical reflection, by highlighting the personal possibilities (such as freedom, will, conscience, friendship, etc.) that govern the moral becoming of the person in the form of "life principles", I wanted to move towards an exploration of the moral meaning of "life phenomena".

The presentation of the principles of life as possibilities of the personal existence represented a new approach in the sense that I did not present the principles as requirements and commandments, nor as values, but rather as "meaningful needs interwoven with our being". This

¹ Ungvári Zrínyi Imre: *Életünk formaelvei. Erkölcs a gondolkodásban és a mindennapokban*, Egyetemi Műhely Kiadó-Bolyai Társaság, Kolozsvár, 2014., 11–24. (Imre Zrínyi Ungvári: *The formative principles of our lifes. Morality in Thought and Everyday Life*, University Workshop Publishing House-Bolyai Society, Cluj-Napoca, 2014., 11-24.)

line of thought, based on Husserl, Gadamer and Charles Taylor (but also, to a lesser extent, on Lévinas, Sartre and Michel Foucault), was at once flexibly situationalist, personalist, and oriented towards principles of form, yet ethically general in its claims. I believe, and my view has been confirmed by others, that my suggestion of principles of life could be considered an 'exciting' and 'original' thought-experiment in that its analysis of the interdependence of principles of form and the uniqueness of the individual allows for the delineation of a *moral entirety of human life* that is dynamically evolving and embedded in a community of relations.

The line of thought thus formulated interprets normativity as an internally and actively constituted and not merely interiorized form of intellectual and experiential expectations, not only as a theoretical construct, but also as a defining aspect of selfhood, which is capable of taking responsibility for itself and for the others in these very forms. This description was made possible for me by a deeper acquirement of the phenomenological approach. I am not only referring to the increasingly thorough use of Husserl's ethical thought, but also to the growing knowledge and use of more and more aspects of phenomenological interpretation.

The basic point of view for the development of my phenomenological vision, which gradually came to the fore from the position of a subordinate mode of analysis, was the Husserlian idea that phenomenological analysis requires the description of those subjective experiences which make intensionally specific substantial contents evidentially accessible to us. For me, one of the most difficult aspects of the phenomenological shift of perspective to learn was the Husserlian requirement that in the transition from a psychological-experiential-scientific to a phenomenological-ideatic-scientific stance, "we turn off all empirical scientific apperception and all acts of positing being, taking into account only the internally experienced or otherwise (e.g., in mere fantasy) internally contemplated momentums (...) ... We ideatively extract from these 'general essences and contexts of essences', the ideal experiential species and ideally valid knowledge of essences of various degrees of generality"². Nevertheless, in the wake of Husserl's research, it has also become clear to me over time that the complex process of interpretation

² Edmund Husserl: *Logikai vizsgálódások*. V. Vizsgálódás. Az intencionális élményekről és azok „tartalmairól”, In: Varga Péter András – Zuh Deodáth (szerk.): Husserl és a Logikai vizsgálódások. Ismeretfilozófia és fenomenológiai filozófia, L'Harmattan – Magyar Daseinanalitikai Egyesület, Budapest, 2009, 38. (Edmund Husserl: *Logical Investigations*. V. Investigation. On intensional experiences and their "contents" , In: Husserl and the Logical Investigations. Philosophy of Knowledge and Phenomenological Philosophy, L'Harmattan - Hungarian Daseinanalytic Association, Budapest, 2009, 38.)

involves a transition from a static-egological and genetic exploration of meaning to an intersubjectively interpreted experience, which can be seen as in some ways a correction or verification of subjective reason. The comprehension of experience in its complexity and diversity requires the mastery of all three phenomenological approaches mentioned above. Despite its transcendental starting point, this approach does not exclude communality from the process of comprehension. According to Husserl's position in *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, the constant process of perceiving the world is informed by our relations with other people, and in this way even the "mere perceptual content" becomes communal, and always contains "a kind of change of validity based on mutual correction"³. However, this also allows individuals, as subjects of possible experiences, to have their own experiences and shifts of validity, while at the same time being aware of their interconnectedness with their peers and their different perspectives on each other.

Phenomenological descriptions of basic human experience have confirmed for me that the subject of moral socialization is not an extra-temporal "subject of reason", but is contingent precisely because of its finitude and temporality, although it has also been pointed towards "experiencing the world" and "living with others" in addition to its "self-experience". In his research manuscripts for *the Crisis Study*, Husserl, in enumerating the conditions for the development of *empathy, love, purposefulness* and a *sense of duty*, explores, step by step, the degrees of social embeddedness of the subject, from spontaneous "instinctive" human relations to peer-relations and social relations guided by love and shared conviction⁴. All these processes, however, can only be understood as stages of moral socialisation if the consciousness of belonging

³ Edmund Husserl: *Az európai tudományok válsága és a transzcendentális fenomenológia I*. Atlantisz, Budapest 1998. 206. (Edmund Husserl: *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology I*. Atlantisz, Budapest 1998. 206.)

⁴ see in particular Working Note 9, entitled Common Spirit I. Person, Person-Composite, which survives from the period when the Crisis Study was being prepared. Personal communities of action. Community - Society (Freyburg, 1921), in Edmund Husserl: *Sur L'intersubjectivité (I-II)* [[Edmund Husserl: *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlaß: Erster Teil: «1905–1920»; Zweiter Teil: «1921–1928»; Dritter Teil: «1929–1935»*. Husserliana XIII., XIV., XV. (Edmund Husserl: *On the Phenomenology of Intersubjectivity, texts from the estate: Part I: "1905-1920"; Part II: "1921-1928"; Part III: "1929-1935"*. Partial translation of Husserliana XIII, XIV, XV)], II, trans. Natalie Depraz, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2001, 264-284.

to a community includes the development of concrete, normatively grounded behaviours on the part of the subject⁵.

The meaning of morality in specific domains and contexts

The general theoretical elaboration of the questions of practical philosophy raised in ethics always entails a perspective of reference and application to specific domains and contexts, which can be achieved partly by exploration of the practical, moral-philosophical aspects of the problem, and partly by identifying and elaborating the problems of the domains of activity that need to be interpreted, which are rooted in everyday life and which link aspects of people's quality of life and life expectancy with the everyday problems of the major areas of professional life (human and natural life processes, economy, public service, public sphere). Without such an examination of problematic situations rooted in social ethics and sectoral morality, ethical and moral philosophy would lack a concrete purpose and would remain incomplete. The areas of sectoral morality that I have been investigating are mainly related to the fields of economic ethics, political and public service ethics, and media ethics.

The actions or activities involved in economic ethics, including their human-social and ecological consequences, inherently require a way of thinking that is able to problematise these levels of action and relations, which poses a new methodological challenge to ethics. These include the capacity of thinking the dimensions of temporality and historicity and the ability to take account of systemic conditions and consequences, in short, complex thinking.

The interpretation of the horizons of morality made me aware that the study of practical ethical problems has methodological conditions and practical implications. Applied ethics is not merely an extension or appendix to general ethics, but an attempt to grasp the way in which moral life actually works, for it is nothing less than a problematisation of the moral aspects of certain fields of practical life (for example, in the large systems of activity in society and in the world of the professions). If we take into account that the forms of individualisation are not abstract possibilities, nor are they merely 'pure constructions' of the moral subject, but are socially

⁵ Ungvári-Zrínyi, Imre: Exceptionalism, community, individuality. In: The scientific publications of Eszterházy Károly University - *Acta Universitatis de Carolo Eszterházy Nominatae. Sectio Philosophica* - Studies in Philosophy, 2019 (Vol. 42), 34.

foregrounded forms systematically reinforced and foregrounded by tradition and sometimes by the power structures of the day, we must carefully examine the consistency of these forms with what we consider to be morally desirable or undesirable goals.

My future professional plans

Among my professional plans, the priority is to deepen the methodological unity of my thinking and research, which includes both the rethinking of the results achieved so far in a more methodologically coherent form and the identification and implementation of new research directions. Among the possible and necessary directions for further development of my approach, I would like to mention the following set of objectives:

1. to elaborate more thoroughly the dimensions of my *phenomenology of temporality* (its basic relations to the past and history). In my related research, I would like to examine the relationship between subjective and intersubjective temporality and the forms of time-representations intertwined with life-world processes.

2. to deepen my *life-world* and *social phenomenological* approach, including by exploring ways and systems of relations of "embeddedness in the world around" and "embeddedness in the community". One possible direction for this is a more coherent phenomenological (Merleau-Pontyan) methodology, and its complementarity with other contemporary philosophical trends, such as critical social theory (e.g. Axel Honneth, Foucault, Agamben, Byung-Chul Han).

3. an extension of my research on *the phenomenology of life* (following Renaud Barbaras), which would be intended to prepare me for the continuation of my general and sectoral ethical research in the context of a more comprehensive philosophical synthesis. The aim of this synthesis is to develop a coherent bio- and eco-ethical approach.