

A broader concept of experience? Reflections on Anthony J. Steinbock's concept of "vertical experience"

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Part of the very interesting work of Anthony J. Steinbock on emotions—particularly moral emotions—and on religious experience is closely related to a methodological claim. This claim is that the concepts of “experience” and “manifestation” should be understood in a broader manner than that of classical phenomenology, particularly Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. In this paper, I will examine the way in which Steinbock understands and conceptualizes the kind of givenness to which he refers with the notion of “vertical experience”. I will thus focus on his claim that vertical experiences are irreducible to the kind of experiences that can be described in terms of what he calls “provocation”, “presentation” and the “noesis-noema structure”. I will also discuss his assertion that the latter implies that they should not be understood as forms of givenness founded on the above-mentioned structure. While I will take some distance from this stance, I find his descriptions regarding religious and moral emotional experiences very acute, and I agree with some of the implications he draws from them. Consequently, I will follow his suggestion that the Husserlian conceptualization of emotional givenness should be revised to set forward their structure in terms of what he calls “evocation” and try to give additional reasons, drawn from Husserl himself, to support this claim.

I. Different kinds of experiences: the foundational account

Husserl’s concept of experience or evidence plays a crucial role in his conception of phenomenological analysis. One of his key insights is that a radical clarification of the being of the world can only be achieved by constitutive analysis. This means that after describing the essential traits of the world and of mundane objects, we can go on to ask about the living experiences and the syntheses in which they can be given and that bestow them their noematic sense, i.e., their sense as objects (*Gegenstand*). The latter is a clarification of an ontological analysis from a phenomenological perspective (see *Hua III/1* 198, 358).

What does it mean to experience something as given in itself? Intentional living experiences can be described not only in terms of their synthetic structures, but also in terms of the relative presence or absence of the noema or object perceived, understood, imagined, remembered, valued, done, etc.

There are different forms of givenness that correspond to different kinds of objects and properties. However, for any genre of object or property there is a kind of living experience that can be characterized as evidence, i.e., as an original givenness of the corresponding thing itself. By contrast, all other kinds of living experience directed to such an object or property can be described as modalizations of the evident living experiences. Thus, memory can be described as the evocation or presentification [*Vergegenwärtigung*] of an object or a situation perceived in the past; anticipation, as a presentification of an object that it is assumed as going to be perceived in the future; and imagination as that of something that could in principle be perceived if the world was different (see *Hua III/1* 314-359).

Real [*real*] objects are given in sensuous or categorical perception, while idealities are given in intellection. It is possible to intend complex objects and states of affairs without perceiving or evoking them in memory or imagination, and the way we constantly speak or think about objects and states of affairs through symbolic or signitive consciousness is an example of this possibility that is familiar to anyone. However, there are several intermediate possibilities between this way of being conscious of absent objects and the evident living experiences of having them given as present in perceptions, intellections, value receptions [*Wertnehmungen*], or deeds understood as fulfilled actions (see *Hua III/1* 141-143, 217-222, and *Hua XXVIII* 58-137).

Husserl considers three interwoven domains of consciousness and three corresponding dimensions of the world: the doxical, axiological and practical. I already mentioned that in the doxical domain, real objects are originally given in sensuous or categorical perception, and idealities are given in intellection. By “originally given” I mean intended in an evident, not modalized, manner (see Melle “Objektivierende”; *Hua III/1* 220-222, *Hua XXVIII* and *Hua XXXVII*).

Value properties are originally given in “value receptions” or “value perceptions”, *Wertnehmungen*, which are intentional acts that can be described as feelings. In *Ideas II*, Husserl characterizes this value reception as a “pre-theoretical (in a broad sense) savoring abandon [*geniessende Hingabe*] on the part of the feeling Ego-subject” (Husserl, *Ideas II* 11).¹ And he adds: “Thus in the sphere of feelings what is meant by this talk of savoring is precisely that feeling in which the Ego lives with the consciousness of being in the presence of the Object ‘itself’ in the manner of feelings” (11). Similarly to what happens in the doxical domain, it is possible to have intentional consciousness of the value property of something while not having it given in itself. I can speak of the value of something, or evoke it in memory or in imagination without being fully in its presence in the manner of feelings.

According to Husserl, while real or ideal objects can be considered in an abstract manner independently of axiological and practical considerations, intentional acts of valuing are necessarily intertwined with beliefs, and the corresponding value properties are inseparable from real, possible or ideal objects or states of affairs. In short: the dimension of value is dependent on the dimension of being. Of course, value reception

¹ I have altered the translation by rendering *geniessende Hingabe* as “savoring abandon” instead of “delighting abandon” because it is more consistent with Husserl’s view that we can also have evident living experiences of negative values (see *Hua IV* 9).

can take place with respect to a relative absent object, but it is necessarily related to an object at least evoked (presentified) in living experiences such as anticipation, memory or imagination. For Husserl, there are no such things as values, but only objects or states of affairs with value properties (see *Hua III/1* 220-222, *Hua IV* 9-10, 186, *Hua XXVIII* 70-157, and *Hua XXXVII* 277-283, 315-316).

Finally, there are also practical living experiences. These experiences are fulfilled through actions [*Handlungen*] that can be contrasted with empty intentional acts of willing. An example of the latter is a resolve [*Vorsatz*], which is understood by Husserl as a practical positing of a future action (see *Hua XXVIII* 111). If I am resolved to take a trip to Paris next year, this resolution is not a mere representation, but precisely a practical positing that will be fulfilled in the future through the action or set of actions that can be characterized as the trip itself (see *Hua XXVIII* 108-109). Intentional acts of willing are in turn founded on value receptions because they always imply desire (see *Hua XXVIII* 104-106).

Thus, Husserl thinks that acts of willing are founded in acts of valuing, and that value reception can only be given on the basis of the perception or at least the evocation [*Vergegenwärtigung*] of the valuable object or state of affairs. This is an important point because the way one understands this founding relationship is decisive for the verdict of whether this scheme is faithful to the way things are given in the emotional and practical domains.

II. Steinbock and Husserl on the particularities of phenomena that are given through emotions: evocation

I will state briefly where I disagree with Steinbock and then move on to what I consider his greater contribution to the debate regarding whether Husserl's concept of experience should be revised and amplified. Steinbock rejects Husserl's foundational account of the different domains of consciousness because the consideration that the emotional sphere of consciousness is founded in a more basic epistemic (or doxic) intentionality means "that the emotions are to be understood as having the same kind of intentional structure, the same kind of rational import, the same kind of givenness, evidence, and so on, as the purely judicative or perceptual sort" (Steinbock, *Moral Emotions* 10). However, I think that this alleged reductionism is not really an implication of Husserl's foundational account of the different kinds of evidence.

On the one hand, Husserl explicitly claims that the rationalities concerning the axiological and practical spheres are irreducible to that of the doxical, epistemic domain. This was further elaborated in his formal theories on how axiological and practical syllogisms entail their own principles and their own apriori formal laws. The same can be said of his descriptions of the intentional structure of emotional living experiences, which is intertwined with that of doxical acts, but entails its own particularities (see *Hua XXVIII* and *Hua XXXVII*). Moreover, I do not think that to claim that acts of the sphere of emotions are necessarily intertwined with doxical acts means that the givenness of phenomena through emotions is of the same kind as that of the purely judicative or perceptual sort. Husserl acknowledges that emotions and feelings exhibit properties of

the world that could not be constituted by way of perception or judgment. For instance, we cannot become aware of the value of something by way of merely perceiving it or judging it (see *Hua XXXVII* 223). In other words, without emotional living experiences we would be blind to these kinds of phenomena: to perceive, imagine, judge, etc., a state of affairs is not yet to ponder it or to savour its value properties, nor to perform an action to realize or preserve it.

In this way the objects of the surrounding world assume from the side of emotion an ever new meaning, which remains appropriated by them, more or less fixated, and they are immediately apprehended with it. The experiential acts through which the objects are immediately apprehended as that which is [*das Seiende*] have already with them this growing of meaning [*Sinnzuwüchse*] ready to be made explicit at any moment. And this is especially true of the powerful plenitude [*gewältige Fülle*] of the characters of signification that come out of the givenness of meaning of the volitive functions (*Hua XXXVII* 293).

Nevertheless, even when Husserl stresses the irreducibility of the doxical, axiological and practical components of experience and their meaning formations, Steinbock has a point when he accuses him of stressing too much the analogy between the givenness of value properties and perception (see Steinbock, *Mysticism* 7-12, and Husserl, *Hua XXXVII* 232). And I think that this is the reason why the German philosopher does not touch upon an important aspect of the kind of givenness of the emotional sphere that has deep reaching implications.

Thus, Steinbock is right when he points out that there is something in the givenness of certain phenomena through emotions that has no analogy to what is given doxically. He uses the term “vertical experience” to conceptualize this distinctive structural character of emotional experiences and claims that it is different from the “noesis/noema structure” that characterizes the doxical ones (see Steinbock, *Moral Emotions* 7-11). According to him, the noesis/noema structure corresponds to the consciousness of objects that are given in the mode of presentation. Moreover, the noematic presentation of something would be correlated with a noetic-subjective ability to induce or produce an experience, which he calls “provocation”.

Objects that are “presented” are given ... through functions and acts peculiar to this very order of givenness, namely, through perception, moving, thinking, imagining, believing, remembering, anticipating. In each instance the object or situation is presented in conjunction with the perceiver or thinker who prompts a schema of possible presentations that are, in turn, concordant with these aspects or those objects already presented. ... The objective sense is understood as my accomplishment, a *Leistung* (Steinbock, *Mysticism* 8).

I think that to identify the subjective ability to induce or produce an experience with the term “noesis-noema structure” is misleading because experiences that do not have this structure can still be described as noetic living experiences in which noematic states of affairs are given. This is precisely the case with the wide range of noeses and noetic components that fall under what Husserl calls feelings or affects, which according to him should not be confused with those noematic layers constituted through them, such as values themselves. Thus, a central aspect of his axiology is that values are not feelings,

but the noematic correlates of certain living experiences that entail feelings (see *Hua IV* 9; *Hua XXVIII* 58-64, and *Hua XXXVII* 70-76, 223). However, this distinction alone between the experience, on the one hand, and the object or state of affairs that is given in it, on the other, does not necessarily entail any position on the question of the subject's ability to produce or induce the givenness.

However, Steinbock's main point is that there are intentional experiences that do not entail noetic provocation and noematic presentation. He calls them "vertical" experiences to avoid the more traditionally charged term of "transcendence" and to suggest that they are not within reach, graspable, or controllable (see Steinbock, *Mysticism* 13-14).

By contrast to the power of provocation entailed by the givenness of phenomena in the form presentation, vertical phenomena entail a process of "evocation". With this term, Steinbock understands the process of letting the experience come of its own accord or letting someone else experience this givenness in its own terms (7-8). He does not further characterize this process in general, but his descriptions of religious and moral experiences suggest that it has to do with avoiding some attitudes or habits that lead to the foreclosure of vertical experiences. I will come back to this point later.

Apart from not sharing the structure of noetic provocation and noematic presentation, Steinbock characterizes vertical experiences as having three important traits: they incite awe, they take us beyond ourselves, and they are related to "absolutes" understood as referents that are unique in a radical sense because they have a presence that cannot be predicated either of singularity or of plurality (14-15). According to him, there are different kinds of "vertical experiences" that correspond to different kinds of domains: thus, the vertical givenness of the holy is called epiphany; that of other persons, revelation; that of icons, manifestation; and that of Earth as ground, disclosure (15-16).

It is not possible to comment here on the details of the very acute phenomenological analyses that Steinbock makes of these different kinds of vertical experiences. It suffices to say that some of the traits of epiphanic experience described by him are of philosophical interest regardless of the assumption of the existence of God because they relate to possible emotional dimensions of human life. However, in my opinion his greater contribution in this respect is the set of phenomenological descriptions of several experiences of revelation in *Moral Emotions*, such as trust, hope, shame and love, for they can be considered important contributions to social and political philosophy.

At this point I want to call attention to the fact that Steinbock's claim regarding the structural difference between doxical and emotional phenomena is drawn precisely from his concrete analyses. Therefore, I think it is not a coincidence that they fit very well with an observation that Husserl makes based on his own phenomenological research on the same topics: namely, that the givenness of values through feelings depends on the subjects' personalities and circumstances in a stronger sense than mere doxical properties and states of affairs (see *Hua XXVIII* 80-89). This means that not only the appearances of value properties, but also the very consistency or validity of these value properties, are dependent on the concerned subjects and their circumstances. Something that has a positive value for someone can have a negative value for someone

else. Also, something that can be valuable for someone under some circumstances can be worthless under others (see Marín Ávila, “Axiological and Practical Objectivity”). This is why the phenomenologist writes:

Naturally, the act of valuing can be referred to the person, to her deeds, to that which is good or bad under the presuppositions that are especially applicable for her. But then it is precisely determined in itself what is useful and good for this person in her situation, as well as what is not. Here the person belongs to the state of affairs that is susceptible of being valued [*zur wertbaren Sachlage*], the matter of the act of valuing refers to her (*Hua XXVIII 89*).

It clearly also follows from Husserl’s analyses that to experience the givenness of some phenomena that manifest through feelings or emotions [*Gefühlen*], such as values, some conditions must be met in addition to the ones that are necessary for the givenness of doxical phenomena. For if it can be said that something is good or useful only for a certain person and only in a certain situation, then these value properties can only be corroborated in evident emotional living experiences by this person and under these circumstances—even when they can be acknowledged indirectly by third parties through axiological syllogisms that make reference to the concerned person. And more importantly, these additional conditions do not fall entirely under the control of the experiencing subject: she must have a certain personality, in part innate, in part the result of acquired habits, and she has to find herself under certain particular circumstances, including practical ones. To my knowledge, this position was not explicitly adopted by Husserl, although it clearly follows from his analyses regarding axiology and his theory of action, and it can be elaborated with complementary descriptions and insights of other thinkers, such as Luis Villoro (see Villoro, *Poder y valor* and Marín Ávila, “Axiological and Practical Objectivity”). Therefore, the attempt to meet the additional conditions that are necessary to have some phenomena such as values given through emotions fits Steinbock’s concept of “evocation”.

In sum, I have tried to show that Steinbock’s characterization of the structure of emotional experience as being different from that of doxical experience can be assumed independently from his objections to Husserl’s foundational account. Regarding this point, it does not matter if emotional experiences are necessarily founded upon, and thus intermingled with, doxical ones. All the same, for emotional phenomena to be given, some particular conditions have to be met that cannot be properly characterized as capabilities because they do not fall entirely under the subject’s control. Moreover, I do think that a thematization of emotional experiences that takes into consideration their peculiar structure in terms of evocation has interesting implications for phenomenological discussions regarding ethics and axiology, as well as for social and political philosophy.

III. Emotional blindness: the problem of idolatry

Let me conclude by stressing an important aspect of Steinbock’s analyses regarding vertical experiences. The relevant aspect appears in his work *Phenomenology and Mysticism* as the problem of “idolatry,” and it is related with the possibility of being blind to phenomena that are given through emotions or in relation with them. As such, it points

to a trait of emotional phenomena that does not have any parallel with the way things are presented in perception or intellection because it is related to the structural peculiarities of emotional experience. Even though it was more thoroughly elaborated in his approach to the religious experience, it has far-reaching implications that go beyond what can be analyzed under the topic of epiphany or the givenness of the holy.

“Idolatry” is an attitude that negates the vertical dimension of experiences. Steinbock describes three interrelated forms of idolatry in the religious domain. The first one is an emotional attitude, which he characterizes as pride, which forecloses the possibility of experiencing what is given as a gift. According to him, this emotional attitude “impoverishes the world since it fails to recognize the value of things unless they relate to me or serve me” (Steinbock, *Mysticism* 216). Moreover, pride implies feeling that one deserves everything and this excludes the possibility of experiencing the holy, which can be characterized as necessarily given as a gift (see Steinbock, *Mysticism* 216 and “La sorpresa”).

The two other forms of idolatry described by Steinbock entail pride, but it could be said that they are emotional attitudes that are intermingled with beliefs, or in Husserlian terms, with doxical attitudes. Thus, “secularism” is characterized as a form of idolatry that negates verticality by taking worldly or mundane things, i.e., that which can be given through presentation, as being absolute in the above-mentioned sense of having a radically unique (quasi personal) way of being given (see Steinbock, *Mysticism* 227). This has the axiological implication that the value of all spiritual things, including of course that of the holy, is reduced to the kind of value that corresponds to the mundane: use value (see Steinbock, *Mysticism* 220, 241).

On the other hand, “fundamentalism” is a form of idolatry that relates to the ritualistic and traditional character of the religious experience. According to Steinbock, traditions and habits make it possible to experience the holy, i.e., epiphany, in different ways. However, in fundamentalism, the experience of the holy is reduced to and confused with the rituals and habits that give access to it. This kind of fixation in traditional habits and rituals is thus also a way of foreclosing the emotional experience of the holy (see Steinbock, *Mysticism* 229, 233-237).

As I already mentioned, Steinbock coins the concept of idolatry in his phenomenological analyses of the religious experience, and even in *Moral Emotions* he writes pre-eminently of this problem when he touches upon topics that relate to the experience of the holy (see Steinbock, *Moral Emotions* 170, 253). However, he does acknowledge that it can be broadened and applied to emotional experiences that do not involve the religious dimension (see Steinbock, *Moral Emotions* 238).

Precisely one of the strongest claims of *Phenomenology and Mysticism* is that “the difficulties we face today as persons are most profoundly to be characterized, not in terms of a crisis of understanding, a forgetfulness of Being, ideology, or drives, but as despiritualization understood as idolatry” (Steinbock, *Mysticism* 241). I think that indeed the concept of “idolatry” is particularly fit to address the phenomenological problem of the leveling of existence, or more precisely, of becoming blind to experiences that incite awe, that take us beyond ourselves in the sense of pointing to things that are greater, and that confront us to states of affairs that are deeply misinterpreted when their value is

reduced to the kind of value that corresponds to mere things: use value. This reduction of all kinds of value to use value raises problems in the religious and moral domains, but I want to suggest here that it can also explain the impoverishment of our social and cultural environments under conditions in which practical rationality is predominantly understood in terms of the kind of cost and benefit logic of modern capitalism. In this context it is an important task to describe and analyze the attitudes that can foreclose the possibility of having the emotional experiences that are necessary to understand and appreciate things and states of affairs that cannot be reduced to commodities, such as philosophical questions, art, and non-practical knowledge.

Furthermore, the foreclosure of the vertical dimension of the world can imply more than the mere loss of phenomena that incite awe and that consequently have the character of the holy. For instance, if it is only possible to raise or further elaborate fundamental questions in emotional states such as wonder (see Aristotle 982b), existential boredom or angst (see Heidegger, “Was ist Metaphysik”), or hope (see Bloch, *Principle of Hope* 86-128), then the collective habits and the institutional frameworks that prevent these emotional experiences are also to be considered threats to the possibility of raising these questions, and, consequently, also threats to the very possibility of making a truly radical critique of these habits and institutions.

Something similar can be said of the possibility of acting ethically. If emotions and feelings are a necessary condition for the givenness of values and for corresponding practical dispositions, as Husserl claims, then the inhibition of emotions and feelings goes together with the foreclosure of the practical reason, at least in those states of affairs that would otherwise awaken the emotions and feelings. If it is not rational to perform actions without valuing their goals, i.e., without valuing the states of affairs that the volitive intentions aim to bring about, then the incapability of grasping certain values would lead to the incapability of performing certain rational actions. This could be particularly dangerous in the case of emotions that play a crucial role in the social domain and that greatly enrich the life-world with positive depth, such as love or sympathy, trust or hope.

Another reason why I find the problem of idolatry particularly interesting is because it can give place to a deeper elaboration of important insights of thinkers such as Hannah Arendt. The lack of thought that, according to Arendt, is at the root of the banality of radical evil is different from stupidity in as far as it is precisely not the result of miscarried trains of thought, but of their deliberate inhibition by virtue of language tricks (Arendt, *Eichmann* 105-106, 252). It would be interesting to inquire if this inhibition of thoughts also precludes the possibility of having certain emotions—some of them perhaps necessary to assume responsibility, such as guilt and shame (Steinbock, *Moral Emotions* 67-136), certain forms of anxiety (Butler, “Precarious Life” 135-140), or if it could be characterized as a form of fundamentalism.

As we have seen, Steinbock characterizes the problem of idolatry as something that is to be distinguished from ideology. Indeed, if ideology is understood as an epistemological and sociological concept that refers to a doctrine or a set of doctrines that are false and that serve a social function of domination (Villoro, “Ideología”), then not all the attitudes that can be considered as idolatry can be identified as ideological. To begin with, not all forms of idolatry imply beliefs, but even for the forms of idolatry that

entail a component of belief, such as secularism and fundamentalism in the religious domain, it would be excessive to claim that they all serve a social function of domination.

Nevertheless, the concept of idolatry and the corresponding concrete phenomenological analyses can contribute to our understanding of how ideology might work in some cases, as well as to our awareness of other forms of domination that are not strictly speaking ideological. The crucial point is that induced attitudes can foreclose important aspects of the way we experience the world. In this sense, the discursive or nondiscursive mechanisms that inhibit certain emotions can have a very important impact in the lives of those who fall victim to them. They can perpetuate forms of domination by making more difficult the very possibility of assuming profound critical or responsible stances toward other persons, collective habits, institutions and our own behaviors.

The recourse to emotions with the purpose of manipulation is not a new topic in philosophy and social psychology. It has been examined in a vast number of works, and particularly in many written after the rise and fall of fascism, Nazism and several of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. However, it is common to consider that, necessary as they might be, emotions are a dangerous factor of distortion in what would otherwise be rational beliefs and actions (see for example Cassirer, *Myth of the State*). Therefore, a phenomenological approach to these questions that focuses on the problems of evocation and idolatry can make an important contribution to such debates by calling attention to the positive relationships between emotions, valid beliefs and responsible actions. In this sense, it can be shown that it would be a great mistake to think that the realm of reason is to be conquered at the expense of the inhibition of emotions, for as I have argued, in some respects the opposite can be the case.

Let me close by underlining some of the greater questions that remain at the bottom of the topic of idolatry: How do emotions contribute to the meaning of the world and of our existence in it? How are we to emotionally inhabit this world if we are willing to intervene responsibly in it, as well as to do whatever is in our hands as individual, social or even religious beings to let it be the best possible world? A first step to approach these questions is to look carefully into the structure of emotional experiences and their possible or necessary relationships to doxical and practical ones. This can only be done through direct phenomenological description. Anthony Steinbock's later works are of great value in this respect.

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