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From experience to gift¹. Reflections on life as disclosed to consciousness Part 1

“We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness.”

(T. S. Eliot, selection from *Dry Savages*, from *Four Quartets*)

There is hardly a more mysterious phenomenon than life. Any philosophical *prise de conscience* that tries to avoid reducing life to the natural sphere has to avoid the common mistake of objectifying it, that is, of taking life as something, as a property of being. A more justified phenomenological approach that remains open to the supernatural character of life would focus rather on how life is given to consciousness. The starting

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point for my analysis is the observation that before life is thematically given as such it is somehow always already disclosed in any conscious experience. Life gives itself in a tacit and discreet way. Not only are we already alive before we turn to life, but we also understand life before we look at it as a meaningful phenomenon.

In this meditation I offer an itinerary: from the point of a deepened understanding of the silent disclosure of life, towards a reflected recognition of life as divine gift.

Before any philosophical investigation begins, the first impediment itself present in the drama of life that one must overcome is evil. The phenomenon of life is overshadowed by evil and its meaning is fragmented.

Life remains unperceived in those experiences that are not thematically concerned with life as such. It is an explicitly phenomenological task to discover those formal aspects that reveal the nature of life in all conscious events prior to any 'experience' in the full sense. Investigating the process of transforming a 'conscious flux' as an immediate and yet unreflected experience to a reflected one with an already clarified specific meaning is indispensable to see how life that is originally given remains unnoticed until it is manifested in experiences through which it is thematically given. These latter experiences – given that they only show some aspect of life, and that also only in a specific context – need to be carefully reflected about in order to encounter in them life as such and not just some reduced sense of life.

In what follows I will establish three types or modes of explicitly experiencing life that are relevant in this sense. I shall also investigate the different modes of reduction of the originally given life to experience.

These preparatory reflections are to be continued as a more profound philosophical and existential endeavor. In the second part of this essay (that is going to be published as a separate article) I argue that the main content of these three modes of how life "gives itself from itself"² has to

² See especially to this question the introductory chapter *C. Der Vorbegriff der Phänomenologie of Being and time* in which Heidegger offers the following definition of phenomenology: "Das was sich zeigt, so wie es sich von ihm selbst her zeigt, von ihm selbst her sehen lassen." In

be traced back to the original encounter with life, i.e. in the divine person that calls himself Life.

1. The overwhelming presence of evil as an impediment to consider life as such

How may one talk about *life as gift* in what Hölderlin calls a hollow age (in *dürftiger Zeit*³)? Images of all kinds of evil, far beyond mere eschatological fantasies, truly permeate our everyday life. Recovering not just the idea but also the existential approach to life as gift becomes extremely problematic. Can one still contemplate more than just single events, *life as such* in terms of gift when overwhelmed with representations of evil that vindicate the right to be the ultimate word on nature and the supernatural? Through the media, in addition to our individual suffering caused by failure, fault and sin, sickness and death, we are confronted with an immense amount of examples announcing the tragic aspects of life. Evil is reported, documented and explored in all details and the images of a suffering mankind add up to a hopeless eschatological vision of life. Even for somebody who rejects a Theo-centric thinking and thus sustains that man is the measure of all, this vision of a final catastrophe cannot be considered any more in terms of a possible scenario, avoidable through human effort and science; the false optimism of modernity is confuted by our daily experience. Beyond a mere fearful future-projection of the human mind *the tragic end of all* is rather depicted as something that is dormant in the womb of the world unceasingly threatening and corrupting nature by making it irrational and inhuman: radical evil is predicted to exist.

And yet the contemporary representation of evil does not silence or abolish philosophy as a careful, imaginative and yet systematic reflection

this very sense the present reflection tries to realize the maxim of phenomenology formulated by Husserl: "going back to things in themselves." See: *Martin Heidegger: Sein und Zeit*, Hrsg. T. Rentsch, [Berlin] 2015 (Klassiker Auslegen, 25).

³ See F. Hölderlin: "Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?" (*Brot und Wein* [1800–1801]); see further K. Löwith, *Heidegger – Denker in dürftiger Zeit*, Stuttgart 1983.

on the nature of life. One reason for it is that no image is able to give an exhaustive account of its content; rather it refers to something entirely transcendent to itself. Can a manifestation of evil refer then to life as such?

Evil as concrete givenness is part of life and the event by which it comes to the fore is undoubtedly real, and yet its meaning resists any attempt to be equaled to the *meaning of life as such*. Some events of life can rightly appear as bearing some character of evil, but there is no logical or ontological justification for saying that life *is* evil in itself, for no 'evil event' can truly represent the essence of life, the full meaning of what life really is. Rather, evil as such *contradicts* life in its full sense; or to be more precise: *evil is privatio vitae*. Evil, experienced in whatever form, as sin, failure, error, natural catastrophe, or death is a final datum, a givenness in and by which life as a 'continuous self-giving of being'⁴ comes to a dead-end; it becomes merely factual (*factum*) and lifeless, like the shed skin of a serpent.

What we perceive as evil namely, we do so, precisely because it does not fulfill our expectations towards a *full life*.⁵ Between – on the one hand – our natural desire to fully realize the meaning of life and – on the other hand – life as it is given in events over and against our concrete expectations, there is always a tension that sometimes becomes abysmal. Events considered to be *tragic* rather than just *dramatic*, however, do not stop to refer to the full meaning of life; on the contrary, they give testimony of *the telling presence of its absence*. An event is considered to be *tragic* or it is qualified as suffering or evil exactly because it does not express in all clarity the full fletched meaning of life which is still recalled, precisely because it is overshadowed and obfuscated.

⁴ It would be more appropriate to say: life as a renewed gift, but I'd like to introduce this notion later.

⁵ St. Bonaventure makes a similar point when noting that the finite cannot be recognized as finite without knowledge of the infinite. See: *De myst. Trinit.*, 1. 1, 10–20 (in: *Opera omnia*, vol. 5, Quaracchi, 1891, p. 46f.); in *Hexaem.*, vv. 30 and 32 (in: *Opera omnia*, vol. 5, Quaracchi, 1891, collatio 5, p. 359). See other citations and more exact references in E. Gilson, *Die Philosophie des hl. Bonaventura*, Köln–Olten 1960², chap. 3, p. 137ff.; p. 586–587 (nn. 15–17).

The 'omnipresent' evil as a data – as far as it invokes the full meaning of life – thus prompts us to 'deepening reflection'. Moreover, just as the 'sublime beauty' calls for reflection that by transcending the aesthetical sphere is of *metaphysical* concern and even of *theological* relevance, the 'negative sublime'⁶ provoked by the immensity of evil, requires more than a mere scientific, or even a mere philosophical approach to life. It gives rise to questions that encompass the entire sphere of reality both, in its *natural* and *supernatural* aspects. Philosophy confronted with the overwhelming presence of evil would be unfaithful to its own vocation by excluding theological considerations on eschatology and redemption for it would restrict itself to a mere analyses of the data *within life* instead of *life as such*. All evil and suffering would be thereby banished to the natural sphere deprived of all supernatural relevance. It is reasonable to concentrate on the mere givenness of life in order to circumscribe the *datum* of the phenomenon (what it is); but this certainly leaves open the more profound question concerning the way of its givenness, without which it is impossible to give a full account of life.

The point of this reflection is to offer an authentic testimony to a life imbued with (true and transcendent) wisdom. It could be described as an intellectual journey from the mere consciousness regarding the *datum* of life to a full *donum* of life. In what follows I intend to identify the roadmarks of this journey and to describe the main stations of this *itinerarium* by arguing that life in its fullness gives itself to us in and through 'Erlebnis,' i.e. the immediate vital experience. It is clear that life as such discloses itself in conscious experiences. What remains hidden perhaps is that it is not the specific content of experience that informs about life but rather the form of the encounter: the fact that experiences are received and given to us with and through *vitality*. Before there is experience of life (Erfahrung) life is already always there in the vital-giving-itself: Erlebnis.

⁶ See on this notion, P. McCormick, *The negative sublime*, Heidelberg 2003.

2. The fugitive phenomenon of life as data of ‘Experience’ (Erlebnis⁷)

Concerning the way of its givenness to consciousness life strikes us as a very specific phenomenon. Before being a philosophically relevant and elaborated term life is always already a lived life; and it is in this way that its original givenness is accounted for in consciousness. Any data, i.e. any comprehended givenness concerning *life as such* that could reveal its nature is always embedded in what the German term designates as ‘*Erlebnis*,’ i.e. *vital experience*. ‘*Erlebnis*’ means here the most general form of conscious awareness of any object. In this sense life, prior to having been reflectively understood and conceptualized, is always a conscious awareness of passing events; it is a consciously lived occurrence (Ereignis⁸).

Life as it is entailed in any ‘vital experience,’ is certainly very fleeting for it is difficult to get hold of it as a discreet phenomenon. Let us consider

⁷ It is a well known fact that the German term ‘*Erlebnis*’ cannot be properly translated into English. It means experience, yet in another sense than ‘*Erfahrung*.’ The difference that is especially pertinent for the phenomenological tradition has been elaborated by many. One aspect of this difference is of essential importance form y whole paper: the kind of experience I refer here to as ‘*Erlebnis*’ has an immediate connection to how life (in German ‘*Leben*’) gives itself from itself. This relation that escapes for the English language is evident for German speakers and is highly relevant for understanding God as Life giving oneself through and in every single experience of the living being’s consciousness.

On the difference between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* see further, B. Beckmann, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Erlebnisses. Religionsphilosophische Überlegungen im Anschluss an Adolf Reinach und Edith Stein*, Würzburg 2003, cap. 1.3. Bedeutungsanalyse des “religiösen Erlebnisses”, p. 23–27; see further: R. Schaeffer, *Erfahrung als Dialog mit der Wirklichkeit. Eine Untersuchung zur Logik der Erfahrung*, Freiburg 1995, p. 414–481, see especially p. 425 and p. 432.

⁸ ‘Ereignis’ or event is one of the key-expressions in the philosophy of the later Heidegger. See further: M. Heidegger, *Das Ereignis* (1941/42), Hrsg. F.-W. v. Herrmann, Frankfurt am Main 2009 (Gesamtausgabe, 71); M. Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie. Vom Ereignis*, Frankfurt am Main 1989 (Gesamtausgabe, 65); see further: on the notion of ‘événement’ in: J. Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène. Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, Paris 1967 (Collection Épiméthée); see further: T. Khurana, “...besser, dass etwas geschieht”. *Zum Ereignis bei Derrida*, [in:] *Ereignis auf Französisch: von Bergson bis Deleuze*, Hrsg. M. Rölli, München 2004, p. 235–257.

then the complex structure of the stream of consciousness by which one becomes aware of something! The specific content of an 'Erlebnis' is clarified along the lines of several acts with their corresponding intentional objects. However talking about an 'Erlebnis' in general terms, life does not (necessarily) coincide with the intentional object of the 'Erlebnis.' Unless, we contemplate *life as such*, we have rather a *lateral consciousness*⁹ (as opposed to 'Vollzugsbewusstsein') of it. In this respect life appears as an *indirect reference* in contrast to the *direct presence* of the intentional object that one thematically focuses on.

In what follows I offer an introductory phenomenological analysis of the specific basic forms life as such becomes given to consciousness. However distinct these forms might be, there is an underlying unity: Life as an original gift. The very giving-of-life-itself has been profoundly

⁹ Von Hildebrand uses this expression in the *Die Umgestaltung in Christus* (Regensburg 1971) mentioning that one gets aware of a mental act and an object in radically different ways. Only in the latter case may one properly speak about a conscious awareness of something. Our mental activity enfolds in two different dimensions: first as object-intentionality, that is grasped in as much as one is confronted with the object and perceives its specific features and characteristics as they are revealed from and by the object. Secondly, the awareness of mental and emotional acts. These are essentially distinct for they are not objects for the consciousness but rather inner processes of us through which we manifest ourselves. See further to the notion of 'Vollzugsbewußtsein': D. von Hildebrand, *Die Idee der sittlichen Handlung*, 2. Auflage (unveränderter reprographischer Nachdruck, zusammen mit der Habilitationsschrift "Sittlichkeit und ethische Werterkenntnis"), Darmstadt 1969, p. 1–126, especially p. 8ff.; D. von Hildebrand, *Moralia. Nachgelassenes Werk*, Regensburg 1980, p. 208ff. (Gesammelte Werke, 9); and D. von Hildebrand, *Ästhetik*, 1. Teil, Stuttgart 1977, p. 32–40, 49–57 (Gesammelte Werke, 5). Further D. von Hildebrand, *Ethik*, Stuttgart 1971, p. 202ff., 212, 242; D. von Hildebrand, *Ethics*, Chicago 1978², p. 191ff., and D. von Hildebrand, *Das Cogito und die Erkenntnis der realen Welt. Teilveröffentlichung der Salzburger Vorlesungen Hildebrands* (Salzburg, Herbst 1964): "Wesen und Wert menschlicher Erkenntnis": (7. und 8. Vorlesung), "Aletheia" 6/1993–1994 (1994), p. 2–27; D. von Hildebrand, *Transformation in Christ. Our path to holiness*, reprint of 1948, New Hampshire 1989, ch. 4; D. von Hildebrand, *Die Umgestaltung in Christus. Über christliche Grundhaltung*, Regensburg 1971⁵, ch. 4 (Gesammelte Werke, 10). C.f. also Part I of K. Wojtyła, *The acting person*, Boston 1979; the corrected English text of *The acting person*, Library of the International Academy of Philosophy in the Principality Liechtenstein, *Internationale Akademie für Philosophie im Fürstentum Liechtenstein*, Campus Gaflei. See further J. Seifert, *Karol Cardinal Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II) as philosopher and the Cracow/Lublin School of Philosophy*, "Aletheia" 2 (1981); J. Seifert, *Back to "things in themselves". A phenomenological foundation for classical realism*, London 1987, 144ff., 176ff., 181–198, 249ff., 286ff.

investigated by Michel Henry. These rather introductory reflections supposed to both, pave the way for higher philosophical considerations on the nature of life and give a perhaps more thorough image on the relationship between conscious living and life as *archdatum*. While Henry rather focuses on affectivity and the flesh,¹⁰ my main concern is the unity of life as *logos* that is donated. The original meaning of life gets fragmented and thus obfuscated precisely because it appears to consciousness in a differentiated way and without being thematized as such. That is why a certain phenomenology of life, i.e. the tracing back of the different appearances to its source, is more than a philosophical method: it is an existential concern of the living human who has to work himself – as Dilthey¹¹ stated it – from the elementary understanding of life to a higher, or better to say from immediate and savage ‘vital experience’ to sphere of contemplation on life as radically higher and more original than himself.

Let us then recall the forms of how life is given in the vital experiences (Erlebnis)!

2.1. Life-world¹² as the first reference of ‘vital experience’ (Erlebnis)

Within this *lateral presence* of life we can distinguish different aspects of life’s primordial givenness. By disentangling the meaning of life as it is communicated by ‘Erlebnis’ the first distinguishable sense is that of a background of the phenomenon in question. By life as background

¹⁰ M. Henry, *Voir l’invisible*, [Paris] 1988; M. Henry, *Incarnation*, Paris 2000.

¹¹ W. Dilthey, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, Göttingen 1992 (Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7). Dilthey is not only important in this context for this distinction but also and especially for discovering the philosophical relevance of ‘Erlebnis’. It is in this context that his observations concerning the degrees and modes of understanding (Verstehen) are especially pertinent.

¹² On the notion of Lebenswelt (life-world) was first elaborated as early as 1917 by E. Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, Hrsg. W. Biemel, Nachdruck der 2. verb. Auflage, Haag 1976; see further: D. Carr, *Husserl’s problematic concept of life-world*, [in:] *Husserl: expositions and appraisals*, eds. F. A. Elliston, P. J. McCormick, Notre Dame 1977.

I refer here to the meaning-context in which the specific sense of the given phenomenon gets articulated. Life, prior to getting manifested in any specific phenomena, is thus present in all 'Erlebnis' as "life-world" (Lebenswelt). In agreement with Husserl¹³ we can affirm that life-world as a *horizon* is always already pre-given and presupposed for any knowledge. It is important to highlight here the difference between 'reality' as an abstract philosophical concept on the one hand, and – on the other hand – 'life-world' in its existential sense which is concretized by and is the fruit of the basic relations of a lived life, i.e.; a life that extends itself between the inner world of the self and the external reality. In other words we do not grasp the external or worldly phenomena neither in form of separate, autonomous and neutral units, nor as embedded in a supposedly neutral reality, but rather as they appear within the *natural life-world*. The *natural life-world* is a correlation of unconstituted meaning-units. It is therefore, endowed with values and thus requires responses (rather than that one should artificially attribute meaning to the neutral external reality).

This *logos* of the natural life-world is a *vital logos*, i.e. a *logos* that is fully permeated by life in both senses. Concerning its accessibility and concerning its impact: the relations among meaning-units are revealed by life and, whenever experimented as truth, engender life in the soul.

¹³ "In whatever way we may be conscious of the world as universal horizon, as coherent universe of existing objects, we, each 'I-the-man' and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this 'living together'. We, as living in wakeful world-consciousness, are constantly active on the basis of our passive having of the world... Obviously this is true not only for me, the individual ego; rather we, in living together, have the world pre-given in this together, belong, the world as world for all, pre-given with this ontic meaning... The we-subjectivity... [is] constantly functioning" (E. Husserl, *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: an introduction to phenomenological philosophy*, [Evanston] 1970, p. 108–109). Husserl later (p. 133) explains that this collective inter-subjective pool of perceiving, is both universally present and, for humanity's purposes, capable of arriving at 'objective truth,' or at least as close to objectivity as possible. The notion of life-world plays an essential role in the theory of communication proposed by Habermas. See: J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Bd. 1: *Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, Bd. 2: *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt am Main 1981.

Thus, I mean by *life-world* not only ‘reality’ in the ontological sense as it is always pre-given for any experience, but, by the same token, I also mean to designate a *dynamic reality*.¹⁴ From the perceptive of the subject’s perception reality as the actual meaning-horizon (*Sinnhorizont*) of one’s receptivity unfolds itself dynamically. There is a specific pulsation of revealing and veiling of Truth. This ‘becoming explicitly present’ and ‘fading away to the background’ (without being denied or destroyed) of the essential aspects of reality is a *par excellence* manifestation of life.

One can most clearly observe this phenomenon concerning the way reality is represented or better to say, *becomes present for the ego* through the constant shift of the limits of language on a wide scope from *ineffability* in front of a radically new phenomenon, up to the banality of words that dilute any original givenness. For language does not only represent life by making reference to its events and manifestations but it is itself – as organic and vivid reality – an expression of life that both, reveals and veils eternal truth within temporality.

The first implication of ‘Erlebnis’ is therefore this dynamic alteration of reality (of the world); the analysis of ‘Erlebnis’ explores the forgotten aspect of life: despite the changes, there is a reality that is permanent,¹⁵ it is a *renewed givenness*.¹⁶ Analogous to a living ocean, underneath the waves there is a ceaseless waving that moves the depth to the surface and

¹⁴ Due to the fact that any knowing act is directed to a transcendent and objective reality, life-world does not merely refer to a context of any perception in the sense of static givenness.

¹⁵ Do we have a good reason to believe that it is ever-lasting? See on this Thomas Aquinas’ critique of Aristotle: *De aeternitate mundi (On the eternity of the world)*. “Let us assume, in accordance with the Catholic faith, that the world had a beginning in time. The question still arises whether the world could have always existed, and to explain the truth of this matter, we should first distinguish where we agree with our opponents from where we disagree with them. If someone holds that something besides God could have always existed, in the sense that there could be something always existing and yet not made by God, then we differ with him: such an abominable error is contrary not only to the faith but also to the teachings of the philosophers, who confess and prove that everything that in any way exists cannot exist unless it be caused by him who supremely and most truly has existence” (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/aquinas-eternity.html>, trans. by 1991, 1997 by Robert T. Miller).

¹⁶ For G. K. Chesterton it is not less of a miracle that the cucumber does not cease to be cucumber than an event that apparently contradicts to the laws of nature.

covers it again. Since one naturally focuses on what exactly the change, the new revelation *through and in* being consists in (as it is reported by the 'Erlebnis') *Life* that actually gives rise to this change, that allows for it and that provides a certain shift of the horizon, remains unnoticed. Life (Leben) that is revealed in and through the 'Erlebnis' is thus not the change itself but rather its *logical* foundation: the world as it is full of *logos*. *This fundamental logos*, however, bursts its banks, its present determinations (datum) and overwhelms us by revealing a surplus of meaning. This 'basic sense of life,' this '*a priori* structure of the world' is thus not opposed to alteration and does not exist despite it, but rather *gives rise to it*; it is vivid. – Is it not so that the beauty of the seasons reveal in a more perfect way, eternity, than any false phantasm of deadish 'deep-frozen time'?

2.2. The inner life of the soul

Let us take a further step by drawing attention to the following fact: in order that there be any 'Erlebnis,' life is not only presupposed in relation to external reality but it is also required that it exist as *personal life*, as the life of my own self. For to know anything, there must be a being endowed with life. Moreover, whatever is meaningful for this being, is such within the context of its *own life*. However, it is not sufficient to be merely alive with regular life functions to have a 'vital experience;' what is presupposed by any 'Erlebnis' is the life of the self, *an inner life*, something radically distinct from any external relation of the ego for it is the specific relation between *me as knowing subject* and *me as the self* that is co-given in any 'Erlebnis.'

Now, this specific meaning of life as 'inner dynamism,' even though it is interrelated with 'life' that is embodied and actualized in the life-world, it does not coincide with, and is radically different from that. For the latter characterizes the givenness as *external* reality, thus it focuses on *what* is the core-content (creation or the ontological dimension) that is transmitted by the 'Erlebnis,' meanwhile the first focuses on the soul as the recipient of the '*donatum*,' *i.e. to whom* (salvation) the content is transmitted.

Only a soul that naturally experiences itself as urged by an inner dynamic motion to unfold and to realize its inner potentiality, is principally able to have any ‘Erlebnis.’¹⁷ Changes transmitted through ‘vital experience’ are only meaningful for that type of (human) soul that – given its dynamic relation to itself – is fundamentally open to and is interested in these phenomena.

What does it mean, however, that the soul is related to itself? How can we identify and characterize these two poles, between which there is *vivid* tension? To start out with the most radical proposal, the following question should be raised: Is it really the ‘*transcendental ego*,’ as an abstract unity beyond all life-world that is united to the ‘*constituted self*’ within the conscious field as Husserl suggested it (after his *transcendental turn*¹⁸)? – I think such an interpretation is misleading for it conceives this fundamental inner relation as a link between something that is *beyond* life and something that is *in* life. It remains, however, nothing but an abstract invention for there can hardly be any meaningful experience attributed to a lifeless ‘transcendental ego.’ Even if there were any such experience, it is enigmatic, why would such an *a-temporal* ego – as something opposed to the world and external to the sphere of life – at all be affected by or be interested in any ‘Erlebnis’?

Contrary to this idea, what we really have is a conscious data or an inner experience of the relations within a *complex “I.”* This “I” existing in time and space, however, is never fully identical with oneself, and is never fully realized or even fully present to itself. It is one of the most basic human experiences that one is not yet fully that which one should be. The ‘lost paradise’ that is to be recovered is, in this respect, far from

¹⁷ The fact that in the soul is called to respond above all to a supernatural reality does not exclude or contradict the fact that it has a natural inner striving to realize itself.

¹⁸ After the publication of his groundbreaking work the *Logical investigations*, Husserl’s philosophy got radicalized in kind of transcendental idealism that tried to reduce every experience to a constitutive power of the ‘transcendental ego.’ Most of his students of the Göttingen and München-school were against this development of phenomenological thinking. For very different reasons Heidegger, Scheler, Stein, Reinach, von Hildebrand did not follow their master. Most of them insisted on a realism that had been promoted by the early Husserl.

being a theological invention. It is an account that is supported by experience, especially if we think of the most perfect expression of being human: love. Both, the difficulties of the full and gratuitous '*donatio suiipsius*' (self-gift)¹⁹ to another human or divine person, as well as the clear desire to do so, give testimony to this essential aspect of '*conditio humana*' that manifests itself in the tension between the two 'selves' that compose our identity.

The restoration of self (of the past) that is fragmented by a divergent desire²⁰ is only possible in some future realization. In other words: Something of the fundamental meaning of our own existence that is felt present through a painful absence. We can only recapture it by projecting ourselves towards future.

The tension is located therefore between the 'ego' that is fully immersed in life and the 'ego' of some future world. The meaning of the latter remains always transcendent and it is thus a future-self that appears on the horizon of our deepest desire. The ego of the comparably deficient meaning is related here to a fully realized future self, to a *self of the full life*. No auto-realization of the ego expresses its full nature for the temporal limitation of that state. Therefore the self of the full life can't be conceived as anything else but as life free of temporal limitations.

Now, one might ask then whether this idea of a self of full life beyond temporality does not contradict our previous statement about the mistake of presuming that one pole of the fundamental relation within the soul is a 'transcendental ego.' This latter case, however, is essentially different. The reason is this: 'the transcendental ego' is beyond time, because its meaning is completely abstract and its existence is not sustained by anything. Thus the existence of such a 'transcendental ego' is ultimately speaking, questionable. What I propose here instead is an ego-pole that is not a-temporal but rather represents the fullness of time in the sense that instead of being void of meaning, its meaning is equally valid for

¹⁹ See especially on this notion: K. Wojtyła, *Love and responsibility*, San Francisco 1993.

²⁰ See on this Saint Augustin, *Confessions*, book VIII. See also: M. Heidegger, *The phenomenology of religious life*, [Bloomington] 2010.

all times. Moreover it offers such a fullness of sense for existential appropriation that cannot be fully realized in time.

This transcendent (as opposed to transcendental) ego-pole is referred to in an 'Erlebnis.' Ultimately speaking any 'vital experience' is meaningful inasmuch as it reveals, transmits and offers for appropriation this full sense of life: it is a pre-taste of something that we have never tried before but yet always desired.

The tension that characterizes the inner life of the soul, in which any 'Erlebnis' is inserted has to be conceived between two *real existing* 'selves.' None of these 'selves' is a mere abstraction, for both participate in life in a however different way, either limited by temporality or not. The one, whose identity stems from the past (Gewesenheit), does not exist any more at present time, at least not unrelated to the other pole of interpretation, i.e. to the future self. This latter one embodies the future's promise of a *full life*.

I would call this future transcendent self an '*ego of the eschatological future*' for it is the culmination of the past desires and yet, at the same time, it is radically different from anything that one can possibly imagine based on past experiences. It refers to the point where the ego becomes fully itself and thus radically different from anything that it has ever been before.

This relationship between the self that is actually present to consciousness as the fruit of past experiences (however fragmented) and the self that appears on the horizon of the future (even though it has been already announced by the meaningful aspects of the past), simply cannot be reduced to the difference between temporal stances of past and future. Even if these temporal stances bracket the fugitive present and both are eager to absorb its evaporating meaning, it would still be highly inappropriate to talk here about a relationship simply between past and future ego. These stances are more deeply interrelated with one another. Anything that is truly meaningful about the past stems precisely from the same 'future' that one is looking to realize. This 'future' that is visible as an origin of the past experiences appears in form of a residuum of meaning that one has not yet appropriated and which in this sense is

transcendent.²¹ It is precisely this inexhaustible surplus of meaning what reveals the eschatological future when our self is going to be fully that which it is: the self of the full life. The future possibility of becoming this or that self – as communicated by the actual ‘Erlebnis’ – is inasmuch perceived as relevant as it helps us to realize this remnant meaning of the past experiences.

Any ‘Erlebnis’, according to its nature, appears as an impediment or as an incentive for this inner dynamism of realizing one’s personal vocation to live a full life. There is no ‘vital experience’ if there is no proper dynamism that is capable of absorbing the content given through it, i.e. if there is no possibility of a future appropriation through reflection. We can hardly think of a past-self, the subject of different past acts and experiences that is not shattered in some way; the identity of such past self-identity is fragmented and thus naturally looks out for possibilities to get unified. The only point of view that promises a new unity is the ‘ego of the eschatological future’ that any ‘Erlebnis’ adequately understood refers to. This deepest meaning of ‘Erlebnis’ contains an ego that manifests itself as the possible real self endowed with full life; one is called to get converted to this self precisely by fully appropriating the transcendent meaning that is offered to him by the ‘Erlebnis’ which moves him beyond the subjective horizon.

Thus the second fugitive aspect of life implied in any ‘Erlebnis’ is the *inner life of the self*. This life is ‘Werden’ [becoming] for its meaning is already announced but not yet entirely comprehended. What makes the self *alive* is the promise of a full life. Thus the attitude required by any ‘Erlebnis’ is that of a *fundamental affirmation* of the disclosed meaning and the faithful guarding of the promise it entails. ‘Vital-experiences’ prompt us to watch out (*vigilare*) for a fundamental meaning which we can build our identity on. They also introduce thereby a tension for already bracketing the past-self while only pointing to the possibility of a future-self. Migrating in this “*nowhereland*” that is not the paradise any more, and is not yet heaven either, requires being fully open to and

²¹ J.-L. Chrétien, *The unforgettable and the un hoped for*, New York 2002 (Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, 26).

at the disposal of the *event* by which the promise of a *full life* can be realized. Any ‘Erlebnis’ is a mini-Odyssey, for we have to leave our house in order to find our home.

2.3. ‘Erlebnis’ as an event

In what was said before we approached life, the meaning of which is hidden in ‘Erlebnis,’ by making explicit *to whom* and *concerning what* the ‘Erlebnis’ is given. It is for somebody with a vivid tension to oneself and it concerns something that is part of the life-world. The third way of how life is disclosed within any ‘vital experience’ comes to the fore by analyzing the very phenomenon of ‘Erlebnis’ as an event. Thus we turn to the question of **how** life becomes present to consciousness when it gives itself in and through ‘Erlebnis.’

‘Erlebnis’ does not only reveal the *life-world* and makes reference to the *real self* one is called to be, but prior to all these, it is the primordial ‘scene’ where the ego gets confronted with reality. ‘Erlebnis’ in this sense is the most original form of *encounter* with what ‘*there is*’ (*il y a; es gibt, lo que hay*). It is the most original, most immediate and vivid way of how Life gives itself.

Philosophers, i.e. anybody truly interested in wisdom, are called to look behind what is obvious in order to discover with amazement: this ‘there is,’ what one encounters as exposed and exhibited, gets precisely transmitted when lived, i.e. as ‘Erlebnis.’ Reality – as we understand it – before the process of the sedimentation of its meaning and becoming ‘substantial,’ i.e. before the aspects belonging to the subject and the object get distinguished, simply *occurs (to us)*.

The *primary* reference of the expression ‘the meaning’ of life therefore isn’t an external fact or a state of affairs that could be formulated in a set of true-claims, but prior to this, it is an occurrence (Ereignis²²), something that one undergoes and what involves and transforms the subject.

²² Jean-Luc Marion defines ‘Ereignis,’ as a saturated phenomenon with certain specific features: “Événement, ou phénomène non prévisible (à partir du passé), non exhaustivement

Any event when experienced necessarily implies discontinuity within the continuous flux; events mark a difference between the states *before* and *after* and thus they structure the inner time-perception. This discontinuity obviously already presupposes some continuity or it is better to say, some permanence of the meaning-unites inasmuch as they participate in what is the full and all encompassing meaning of all, the *logos* itself they represent. What causes the disruption is the appearance of a new givenness, i.e. the self-revealing of some meaning beyond expectation. This new meaning does not stem from consciousness itself. It can't be (fully and exclusively) the result of the act of constitution, for the appearance of such a meaning would right away fit into the flux of consciousness and would not qualify as an event, i.e. as something carrying a transcendent meaning. What properly characterizes an event is the conscious grasp of the unconstituted core of meaning, i.e. its *original givenness for consciousness*.

If in the process of reflection somebody succeeds tracing back the *original givenness* within the complex meaning-unit and concentrates on this, i.e. on the act of givenness as such rather than on any other layer of meaning, this person will arrive at a certain 'zero-position.' He will witness **how Life is giving itself**. The event that qualifies an 'Erlebnis' in contrast to any other phenomenon of consciousness is therefore not the appearance of this or that particular meaning but rather the universally valid way of how Life gives itself. One catches a glimpse of life through tracing back the originality by which a particular meaning is given for consciousness.

The very event of coming to existence is what gives a testimony of revelation itself, of how Life as such and the full meaning of Life is communicated through the revelation. This event of the most 'original exteriorization of life' that underpins all experiences is called by Saint Thomas Aquinas "act of being" (*actus essendi*). It might be even more proper in

a certain sense to talk about an ‘act of Life’, for, A.) The meaning we receive concerns more than just being (substance); the revelation of being refers clearly beyond being (Holy Trinity) and B.) Whatever is revealed fills us and the whole life-world (reality) with new life, it revives being and leads to a rebirth of life-world.

That is why at this point the question is not how and what can one absorb of the given meaning but rather **how one can get transformed in the light of the transcendent meaning one participated in**. Such transformation is possible on the ground of remaining faithful to this unconstituted core of the event, to this original givenness beyond any conceptualization, is a difficult existential choice that is not only a real philosophical achievement based on moral qualities.

Let me explain here, what I mean by unconstituted core of an event! The original givenness (Urgegebenheit) that forms the core of any relevant ‘Erlebnis’ appears as a meaning that is not established by the constitutive work of consciousness which Husserl describes as *retention* and *protention*.²³ This meaning stems rather, from the unconstituted time I previously called the ‘eschatological future.’ The time that is, *approaches* us through the transmission of the different temporal stances (past, present, future) as forms of inner time-experience.

What qualifies as the unconstituted core is something that has never been expected and is beyond all desire or fear; with the expression of Jean-Louis Chrétien: the un hoped for. It hits us as a surprise. And as such, is more real than any fulfillment of previous expectations. What is really surprising and is a real event that gives rise to experience, is the sudden intuition into givenness as a revelation of things (*actus vivendi*) as vivid superabundance of their meaning beyond all metaphor and concept.

Since any true ‘Erlebnis’ communicates this ‘savagely’ and lavish meaning it appeals to be a new beginning. (i.e. It is not yet conceptualized and culturally, not elaborated. It has an original givenness that is transcendent to consciousness if this meaning is profound and relevant enough for the

²³ E. Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins*, Hrsg. R. Boehm, Haag 1966 (Husserliana: Edmund Husserl Gesammelte Werke, 10), especially § 11–13, § 16, § 19, § 24.

subject). Any relevant 'Erlebnis' thus goes against both, the philosophical and the existential pretension, according to which there is no real original meaning, nothing to be surprised or puzzled about: the eternal return of the same.

At the same time it also destroys the (mechanistic) view of a life that presupposes: life is determined by the past. For 'Erlebnis' as such clearly communicates that the future is not a fruit or a consequence of the past but it stems from a radically different source beyond subjective time-experience: eschatological future.

What makes possible a new start for the subject of an 'Erlebnis,' the rebirth as a gratuitous existence, is a fundamental disposition towards reality as received from the (eschatological) future, source of all givenness. Such a fundamental attitude gives rise to an act of withholding the natural inclination to absorb the original givenness of the meaning by leaving out of consideration *how* it suspends the validity of all previous interpretation. It is a resistance of the temptation of the *datum* to forget the *donum*, that indeed is susceptible to give a radically new direction of any desire and future projection.

3. The unity of life experience

Above I described the three distinct forms how we experience life: as the meaning horizon, i.e. as life-world, as the inner life of the soul and as events, in which life occurs.

However different these forms of life's self-manifestation might be they are deeply interrelated and their unity is more than relevant to understand what life "is" and how it gets donated. These forms are truly inseparable in the sense that no experience can be truly perceived or understood when not simultaneously co-given in these forms. In other words, these dimensions of life are co-constitutive for any meaning that life might have.

For no meaning of life can possibly be discovered without a meaning-horizon of life, without that life is always already accounted for as a basic and fundamental meaning that becomes explicit in form of the actual event-encounter.

Secondly, any event-encounter needs to be perceived to be recognized as life. A life-world as meaning-horizon of life and a life as event-encounter make only sense if there is a corresponding awareness, i.e. inner life of the soul for which life manifests itself.

Thirdly life shows itself from itself as an event; life already always occurs and it is this that allows for the existence of a life-world as well as that of the inner-life that consciously participates in this occurring of life itself. The event character of life reveals how contingent life truly is; it happens and one cannot sufficiently be amazed that it keeps on occurring. At the same time this event character is essential to the kind of life that is disclosed for us: the life beyond temporality that becomes temporal.

It is certain that the meaning of the unity of these three dimensions of life's own self-disclosure to consciousness is a true mystery. This does not mean that life as an original gift is inaccessible. Rather it means that even if a full comprehension is only possible through the *beatific vision*, life is always already disclosed to us in a fragmented way. The basic fragmentation is due to these three dimensions that are hard to be focused and reflected on simultaneously.

Moreover, this fragmentation is even more intense for the fact that the self-disclosure of life in these three dimensions is perceived within the inner life of the soul from a certain point of view that entails some concrete expectations. Life is mostly, though not exclusively, given in intentional experiences in which it is not explicitly thematized as such. In order to recover the unity of the meaning of life, the very *data of life* has to be made to an object of contemplation. The contemplative appreciation of life focuses on its gift-character as it is most clearly given through experiences in which life as such is thematically present. In other words: Life as an original gift is primarily accessible in experiences in which the life can be retraced to its origin.

Summary

On our itinerary from the data of life to the full acknowledgment of life as gift we accomplished merely the first part. After overcoming

the perhaps greatest hermeneutical-existential impediment, namely evil as *privatio vitae*, we shed some light on the basic structure of experience (Erlebnis) concerning the tacit and ongoing self-disclosure of life in its threefold-structure. Once this structure is clarified one can consider its underlying unity and thereby could access the full meaning of life. This task requires further analysis of experiences in which life is thematically given – a task to be realized in the second part of this investigation.

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