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Andrej Božič (*Ed.*)

THINKING TOGETHERNESS

Phenomenology and Sociality

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Abstract: Gerda Walther's approach to sociality is unique in that it equally employs psychological and phenomenological concepts to conceive of collective experiences, thereby addressing manifold forms of togetherness. My intention is twofold. Firstly, I want to discuss how Walther embeds Husserl's "pure I" of intentional analysis into an "empirical I" with habitual dispositions and memories, so that social experiences are not merely the correlates of consciousness, but arise out of a concrete psychological history, in which our past emotional engagements with others are already implicated. Secondly, I will reinterpret Husserl's concept of protention in the context of Walther's approach to the communal. This allows for an idea of futurity, which is not based on the immanence of conscious experience, but on our explicit or habitual relationships with others, meaning that we cannot but include them in our approach to the future.

Keywords: Gerda Walther, phenomenology of community, intentional analysis, Husserl.

In the writings of early phenomenologists, one often finds the idea that phenomenology is an inquiry after essences. An essence is what constitutes and comprises all the essential characteristics of a thing or the features, without which the thing would not be what it is. To go "back to the things themselves," thus, does not mean to advocate for a strict empiricism, in which the world emerges as my sensation of it. Rather, it means to be able to detach oneself from this very immediate, sensual experience in order to find essential structures. This detachment can take on the form of eidetic reduction, as described by Husserl in his *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie*, but many early phenomenologists criticized Husserl for taking "the transcendental turn" in this very same work. According to writers like Hedwig Conrad-Martius, eidetic

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reduction goes towards elucidating the structures of conscious experience, but not the essential structures of the things themselves (Conrad-Martius 1965, 394). Rather, the concentration on *how* we experience seems to dissemble *what* is experienced, the real object existing throughout our experience and announcing itself in it. The interest of many early phenomenologists was to strip away the transcendental and psychological layers, which have been imposed on our grasp of reality. In this sense, one could say that phenomenology inquires after a reality that appears to us *in spite* of ourselves, offering a methodology, which enables us to directly and maybe somewhat recklessly approach the world in terms of essences.

In the paper, I want to focus on *Zur Ontologie der sozialen Gemeinschaften* by Gerda Walther. My guiding question, here, will be, if and how Walther's work on community can be considered as a *realist phenomenological* approach? Ultimately, my interest is in thinking about how this realist sense of the communal can furnish us with a temporality that goes beyond the subjective inner time consciousness of Husserl. Does my being part of a community confront me with a temporal experience that is not based on my immediate, subjective experience? Can there be a "realistic" future that is not simply the continuation of my own singular existence, but one that can be shared between the members of the community? And how much is a realistic phenomenology, or even an ontology, needed to establish this philosophically? In approaching these questions, I will establish the key motives that enable Walther to psychologically address the social as a shared experience. In the first part of the paper, I will, thus, consider the question of how the communal is constituted in individual experience, before discussing, in the second part, how this shared sociality can be addressed in terms of collective temporality.

1. The constitution of the social in individual experience

In her treatise, Gerda Walther sets out to analyze the ontological, not the phenomenological nature of community. In other words, her method does not begin from the question of how a community appears in consciousness, but what constitutes the real being of communities. Thus, the ontological inquiry always has to be grounded in existing reality, but not as it correlates to consciousness.

Yet, to approach reality means to reintroduce a phenomenological viewpoint, to intentionally address it. This inseparability of phenomenological and ontological inquiry comes out most clearly in Walther's description of essences as the transcendental guideline (*transzendentaler Leitfaden*) for the experience of real objects (Walther 1923, 9 f.). The essence dictates how a thing is experienced, how it is constituted in consciousness. From this intentional constitution, the ontological constitution is sharply distinguished (ibid., 10). Thus, one and the same essence produces different results depending on how it informs the method used. A phenomenological investigation reveals how an essence informs consciousness, thereby allowing to inquire after the essential structures of consciousness itself. By contrast, an ontological investigation will reveal the essence of the thing itself.

How do these two forms of investigation come together in Gerda Walther's treatment of communities? On my reading, she modifies the phenomenological method of Husserl's *Ideen* by reinterpreting it in psychological terms. Concretely, this means that her starting point is not the "pure I" of transcendental phenomenology, but the "empirical I," which is the center of ordinary experience. By starting with this empirical I, or the I-center (*Ichzentrum*), Walther is able to incorporate those features of sociality, which may seem incompatible with a strictly Husserlian account, most importantly the idea that the experience of community goes beyond the active and passive synthesis of the I, originating from a "self" that is prior to conscious experience (Walther 1923, 13).

In her introductory remarks, Walther explains why a purely phenomenological account of the I is insufficient, namely because of how it concerns the relationship between foreground and background. The background, into which this "psychological I" is embedded, is not the *Strukturzusammenhang* of experience, but its "self," its personal history of memories, decisions, friendships, hopes, disappointments, and so on (ibid., 14). While one could say that the pure I *actualizes* what is in its background, for instance, by turning towards the door after hearing a loud bang and wanting to find out what caused it, the "psychological I" *is actualized by* its background, by its psychological dispositions and habits, which influence its comportment in the world at any given time. This is, in my estimation, the

fundamental premise of Walther's inquiry. By reintroducing a psychological viewpoint into the transcendental "I," she makes room for thinking about how we are influenced by collective ideas and intentions, as well as by our own sense of being part of a community, how community is embedded in us and how it actualizes itself in our thoughts and actions.

Does this mean that her analysis completely shies away from the classical intentional analysis? Not at all, as the distinction between *Noesis* and *Noema* is fundamental to her study of community. But the meaning of this terminology is modified to fit the psychological profile of the I. The noetic side, which comprises the different modalities of living-through, or *Erleben*, receives a new role when applied to the psychological relationship between foreground and background. When a habitual feeling emerges from the background and takes place in actual experience, this very emergence itself carries with it a noetic quality. Thus, the noetic aspect of experience does not just reveal my attitude towards a noematic content in a specific situation; it reveals to me *what kind of person I am to have this attitude* as it comprises my whole person or "self" (ibid., 16). This noetic aspect allows to conceive the self and its importance for what I am consciously aware of, implying myself as a historical being with acquired dispositions, such that the past is constantly shaping the present and the future.

How is this relevant for the analysis of community? In order to actually grasp what communal experiences or *Gemeinschaftserlebnisse* are, we have to take into account how community is already at work in our everyday comportment. This can take the very general form of a cultural *a priori*, if the community is that of a nation or a region. Thus, I may often find myself to be the typical "German" when in the company of others. But a *Gemeinschaftserlebnis* can also take on the form of a very concrete experience that I share with others or with only another person. And, here, this feeling of togetherness or the we-experience also emerges not in my "I-center," as Walther says, or in the *cogito*, but behind my back, as it were, in the self. In other words, I consciously find myself sharing an experience or having a communal experience. The communal experience engulfs me, the other is already there in my experience, in *our* experience (ibid., 71). The argument for the centrality of this strong division between "self" and "I" is that it enables thinking the *priority of the communal*

from its most general to its most specific, situational forms. Wherever we are dealing with thinking the community, according to Walther, we are dealing with the question of how it already originates with us.

The basic psychological term that captures how the communal is inscribed in the self is unification (*Einigung*). Walther describes unification as a feeling that, occasioned by an external object, arises in the subject, which now strives to unite itself with this object. "A warm, affirmative wave of greater or lesser impact flows, with more or less vehemence, through the whole subject or barely reaches a particular sphere of the subject." (Ibid., 34.)[1] This feeling of unification arises out of the background of consciousness and may become the center of attention, thereby carrying the subject almost automatically towards the object. But we should not view Walther's idea that the feeling of unification is occasioned by an external object as the causal proposition of "A causes B." It does not really make sense to say that the object is the cause of the feeling, if its effect, namely the striving to unify oneself with it, emerges with more or less intensity *from one's own background*. In other words, the object does not simply prompt me to unify myself with it. Rather, it is my own background, the context of my lived experience, which predisposes me to feel a sense of relatedness to the object, thereby wanting to enter into some form of community with it.

As soon as the acute feeling of unification subsides, it returns to the self, behind the "I-center." The feeling returns from whence it came, having now been intentionally fulfilled by the object (ibid., 39 f.). But this does not mean that it simply sinks into oblivion. On the contrary, it remains active, whether we are aware of it or not. One could say that we remain pre-reflectively aware of this feeling of togetherness with the object (Schmid and Wu 2018, 114 f.). Thus, when I see the person I once felt unified with again, or maybe even only think of them, the feeling might arise anew in all its initial intensity. But it might also inconspicuously inform the actions and thoughts I have towards the community. To describe this, Walther uses the modified concept of *Noesis* to note that this habitual feeling plays a role in our subsequent experiences— without the need to be correlated to the *Noema* of the concrete memory of the unified object (Walther 1923, 40).

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1 All translations are my own.

While this psychological background presents a constant influence on occurrent experience and shapes our noetic attitudes, it is not some obscure ground beyond our reach. In fact, feelings as that of unification arise not simply out of this background as such, but arise from a "source point," or *Quellpunkt*. By introducing the concept of *Quellpunkt*, Walther enables us to differentiate between the layers of the self and to, thus, elucidate the source for the differences in unification, resulting in different forms of community. To further clarify this, we might consider the differences in the emotional afterlife of certain events in us. When we remember a mundane event, such as visiting the grocery store, we are actualizing past noetic and noematic contents, reliving them as past memories from our present position. The remembered event as such is over and done with. We are merely repeating a dead past, as Walther says. The reason for this is that nothing has touched us or invoked a sympathetic feeling in us. This is very different from remembering an encounter with a close friend. Here, we are not merely reliving a past experience, because the feeling towards the friend is still active when we remember it. In other words, we cannot remember the friendship without living and feeling it as well (ibid., 43). This is where the notion of *Quellpunkt* or source point comes in, because both acts of remembrance originate from different source points in our self. Determining what creates a sense of community means grasping the modalities of how and where this sense arises in us. This difference in source points enables Walther to distinguish between different modalities of unification and their reciprocation. For example, wanting to form a mostly purpose-driven friendship would not be adequately reciprocated by the desire to deeply get to know the other person. Here, one could, of course, also think of the classical examples of unrequited love, etc.

The gist of Walther's argument is that to conceive of the different kinds of communities and their different modes of unification, we have to look at how communal feelings towards the other members or towards the community as such arise out of the self and how they are experienced as accepted and returned. After this rough outline of how the social is constituted in individual experience, I am now able to address how a common sense of futurity might be conceived in Walther's ontology of communities.

2. Sharing a realistic future

As Walther replaces Husserl's "pure I" with a psychological or empirical I, her realistic phenomenological approach affords a different view towards the future as one that arises out of my own consciousness alone in the form of protention. How does the feeling and sense of community, in the form of habitual and reciprocal unification, influence my sense of futurity? How to anticipate or expect a future, in which the other members of the community are constitutively co-implied? To better unfold this question, I want to consider a longer passage, in which Walther describes how we-experiences are always already those of myself and others simultaneously:

> […] *my* experiences unfold in *my* current I-center, they arrive from my background consciousness, *my* self, in which it is embedded. But I am not alone as "myself" in this embedding, in this background, from which these experiences originate, since in communal experiences, I have integrated the others, I have intentionally included them behind my I-center in *my self* (or they grew into it on their own), and I feel with them (unconsciously, automatically, or based on an explicit unification). "My" experiences, insofar and *only* insofar as they are communal experiences, spring not just from myself, from my isolated self, my "only-my-self" behind the I-center, but they simultaneously arise from the others *within me*, from the we, the "people, who also," in whom I remain und with whom I am one. I live and experience from out of myself and out of *them* at the same time, from out of "us." (Walther 1923, 71.)

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Lived experience arises not as my own, but as that of others as well. This allows for a distinguishing between the weak and the strong version of we-experiences. In the weak version, the fact that these experiences are not just my own, but are also those of others, could be conceived as a mere *aspect of my own experience*, such that I am aware of what I experience right now is also experienced by others. I implicitly know that I am not alone in intending a certain object, for instance, when watching a movie with friends. The strong

version, on the other hand, would mean that I am not merely sharing, as it were, an object with the others, but that what I have intentionally present would not be there, or would afford a very different experience, were it not for the others. Here, we are much more immersed in the communal experience, to the point where we possibly cannot recognize ourselves as individuals in them, which also makes it difficult to tie this sort of experience to an intentional object.

This strong claim might appear to conflict with Walther's statement that every experience is ultimately that of an I-center, not of some metaphysical communal essence. However, I have shown that this I-center is not the pure-I of consciousness but the psychological I, which is embedded in its dispositions, habits, and experiences. Walther can make the strong claim about we-experiences, because her approach leaves behind the abstract idea of experience of intentional analysis. As a consequence, we cannot separate ourselves from the others as two *cogitos* encountering each other, nor is Husserl's distinction between the presentation of my own experiences in consciousness and the experiences of the other as appresentation applicable (Husserl 1960, 108 f.). To clearly distinguish between my experience and the experience of the other becomes difficult, if we have, as members of a community, included each other in our selves, that is, if we have formed habitual and emotional bonds.

This strong notion of we-experiences would have to be explained differently in regards to past, present, and future experiences. Antonio Calcagno has suggested that in Walther, there is a communal time consciousness, which derives from the individual one. According to his reading, this makes it possible to understand collective acts of remembrance as drawing from past experiences that have become habitual. Habit is "the structural retainer of the passive oneness of community, and it can be drawn upon to anticipate future possibilities for the community" (Calcagno 2012, 102). As a consequence, an act of remembrance can be that of a community, not just its single members. What I find intriguing about this suggestion is that it does not need specific intentional objects to construe a communal memory, since what is remembered arises from the habitual self.[2] In other words, we do not act and remember as a community, because we share a

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2 Regarding the aspect of non-intentional communal experience in Walther, cf. Calcagno 2018.

similar object, but because we are "noetically in tune," as it were, as each of us feels that this memory comes from a shared place, from a "we."

Yet, I would like to modify the kind of futurity that Calcagno's interpretation envisages by more clearly distinguishing between retention and remembrance, viz. protention and projection. While the communal oneness of past memories may be convincingly said to manifest itself in public commemorations or festivities, it is an altogether different matter to collectively project or anticipate a common future. By contrast to past events that may have become part of history books, protending or projecting a future is at first glance a highly individual act, being based not just on a common history, but on one's own highly singular experiences. A vision of the future, even if made more tangible through common political interests or concerns, cannot offer the same substrate for shared noetic acts as a common past. When we draw upon common remembrances to anticipate future possibilities, chances are we will end up with very different, singular projections of the future. Thus, it seems questionable how much a common future based on projections is possible.

The alternative is to conceive of a shared future based on protentions. The difference to projections is that we do not need to employ individual or collective imagination to give us an *image* of the future. Protention, as the form that experience takes in the anticipation of the near future, is itself without any original contents (Alweiss 1999, 182). Based on the preceding discussion, one can see how protentions do not just fit with the pure I of the Husserlian inner time consciousness, but also with the empirical I of Walther's social ontology. Here, the existence of protentions means that we are already linked up with, and embedded in the selves of others, in their worries, hopes, and anticipations. To have a we-experience of the future in this sense means that the future necessarily arises out of a common interest, or out of an emotional constellation that we share with others. In other words, we cannot *but* include the others in our approach to the future. This dynamic is already at work in a simple deliberation. Following Walther, the unification, as co-dependency or co-implication, shapes my expectations and anticipations even before I form what would ordinarily be a protention. In this sense, one could say that the ontology of the communal suggests the idea of a "realistic future," as it does not solely depend on my individual ambitions or projections. Rather, it depends

on me, letting myself be preceded by the communal, which is embedded in my self and in which I consequently experience myself *as* embedded.

It then becomes clearer how the affectivity construed by Walther, namely the manifold forms of reciprocal unification, is amended by the concept of protention: it is not just that a feeling of oneness arises out of different source points of the self and returns to it. One can now add that theses centrifugal and centripetal affective movements have a temporal index. In feeling united or unified with someone, the person (or persons, or the community as such) becomes part of my immediate protention, and the anticipation of my own future has just become broader and brighter to include those I feel unified with. Likewise, in habitual communities, where the feeling of oneness remains unconscious or is seldomly felt as such, the unquestioned belonging to a community is the reason why I anticipate that the community will persist. Here again, the feeling of being unified itself is concomitant with the expectation of permanence, such that one may never need to question why one should "stay together," as the habitual emotional bond carries with it its own sense of continuity.

166   In her treatise, Walther insists that the ontology of community does not entail the eradication of the particular or losing one's individuality as a member of the community. The case of protention and the realistic future perspective it affords may be seen as a clear example of the kind of union she had in mind: while the I remains the last or basic instance in the constitution of the communal, the experience this I makes would be quite abstract and solipsistic, if it did not include the affectivity of the self. While one can imagine how protentions are solely based on one's immanent experiences (and many of Husserl's classic examples of inner time consciousness never leave this realm), it seems clear that their social aspect should not be neglected. To anticipate a future, whether indirectly or in explicit meditation, does not merely include the others, but is guided and motivated by the different forms of our mutual unifications.

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