

ontological reflection on the environment

Francesca De Vecchi

COMMON-SURROUNDING WORLD AND
QUALITATIVE SOCIAL ONTOLOGY – PHENOMENOLOGICAL
INSIGHTS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND ITS CRISIS

Abstract

I deal with the issue of the environmental crisis from the perspective of a phenomenologically embedded qualitative social ontology. The first point I make is that our environment is a «*personal world*», and not a «naturalistic world»: a world that is experienced in the «personalistic attitude» and as such is an ontologically qualitative world, in which both *natural and social entities* are given to us as essentially constituted by value-qualities and meanings, and not as merely material things. The second point I argue for is that our environment is also a «common-surrounding world» whose personal collectives are its essential correlate: «*common-surrounding world*» and personal collectives existentially depend on one another, and human persons, both individual and collective, are responsible for the existence of their environment and its entities. I apply the tools of phenomenological eidetics to the ideas of «personal world» and «common-surrounding world», and inquire into the ontologically qualitative implications that they have for our environment and its crisis.

1. Introduction

In my paper, I address the issue of the environmental crisis from an ontological perspective and, more precisely, from a social-ontological one. Indeed, since our *environment* is characterized by the *intertwining of natural and social entities*, an ontological perspective about our environment and its crisis needs not only to include the social world, but also to focus on the social world and its relation with the natural. In order to do that, I suggest endorsing the perspective of what I label a *qualitative social ontology*. This is a phenomenologically oriented social ontology that adopts a «personalistic attitude» (*personalistische Einstellung*) – instead of a naturalistic or a constructivist one – vis-à-vis the

world we inhabit, and is able to provide a *humanly adequate* ontological account of our environment, so to speak. Indeed, according to qualitative social ontology our “environment” is none other than our «life-world» (*Lebenswelt*): our «common-surrounding world» (*gemeinsame Umwelt*), in which both natural and artefactual entities are given to us not as merely material things but as essentially value-structured and meaning-laden things, as goods and ills that are the motivational correlates of our lives as personal subjects, both singular and collective. Therefore, qualitative social ontology is specifically the ontology that is able to account for our world, as it is experienced by us, in the personalistic attitude.¹

The first point of the phenomenology of the environment I am arguing for (see § 2.) is that our environment is a «*personal world*» and not a «naturalistic world», and as such is a human and cultural world: an ontologically qualitative world. The personal world is constituted through the assumption of the «personalistic attitude»; in it, human subjects are seen as persons who are characterized by a «motivational life» irreducible to causally psychophysical connections, and the various kinds of entities that inhabit our environment – be they living or non-living, humans or animals, natural or artefactual – are perceived as the motivational correlates of our intentional experiences – rather than just as mere nature and matter, as in the «naturalistic attitude» (*naturalistische Einstellung*). In the personal world we are subjects of *personhood*: of agency and position-takings. So, our personal world is our environment precisely in the sense that it is the horizon of our personal lives, and it is there for me and others as a world of goods (and ills) and of (positive or negative) value-qualities that we experience through acts of feeling and to which we respond by position-taking acts.

The second point I make (see §§ 3-4) is that our environment is a «*common-surrounding world*»: a world we share with the persons with whom we constitute personal collectives («personal communities» or «personal unities of a higher level») in performing intersubjective and social acts. It follows that the «common-surrounding world» and «personal collectives» are essentially correlates (the former being the objective pole of the latter, and the latter the subjective pole of the former) and *depend existentially* on each other.² I dwell on this mutually existential dependence between the common-surrounding world and personal collectives and deal with its ontologically qualitative implications for our environment. I argue that collective persons – and the

¹ The main references of the phenomenologically embedded social ontology I present here are Edmund Husserl's *Ideas II* (1912/28) and *The Crisis of the European Sciences* (1936). On Husserl's social ontology in *Ideas II*, see Caminada 2019. More in general, phenomenology is as such a qualitative (social) ontology – on this point, see De Vecchi 2016, 2018, 2019.

² See Husserl 1912-1928.

individual persons that constitute them – are *responsible* for the existence of their «common-surrounding world» and all the entities that inhabit it – be these entities natural or artefactual and social, be they humans or non-human living beings. I point out that they are responsible not only for their mere existence, but also and above all for the quality of their existence or *wellbeing*. This is a typical and specific issue of qualitative social ontology that characterizes my paper specifically. I deal with it in accounting for value-qualities as essential parts of the ontological structure of entities: indeed, as the phenomenological eidetics suggests, value-qualities are essential parts of any entity as a whole and play a crucial role in satisfying the “eidetic paradigms” that define the “good life” and the “degree of existence” of any type of entity in our common-surrounding world.

Therefore, with respect to the current “eco-phenomenology”, which also takes into account the “personalistic attitude” and the relation between nature, experience and value in our lifeworld, the phenomenologically-grounded qualitative social-ontology that I argue for in my paper distinguishes itself by introducing into the phenomenological debate about environment further, and hopefully fruitful, research perspectives: the focus on the environment as a personal and common-surrounding world that is a cultural world not divided into, but rather co-constituted by, both natural and artefactual entities; the claim that both natural and artefactual entities are the bearers of value-qualities that are essential parts of them and are protagonists of their well-being; the idea that human beings are specifically, individual and collective, personal subjects of a motivational life whose intentional correlates are the entities of our environment, experienced as goods and ills, and with respect to which human beings take position and for which they are responsible.³

In short, in my paper I claim that a phenomenologically inspired qualitative social ontology represents a fruitful perspective for taking into account our environment and its crisis: of course, not as yet with the aim of providing direct solutions to the huge problem of the environmental crisis but of drawing our attention to an existential posture that allows to us to focus on the ontologically qualitative structure of our environment. Indeed, what turns out to be the implicit presupposition of my paper is that the environmental crisis is also a crisis embedded in the neglect of the personalistic attitude and its personal world as a value-laden common-surrounding world.

³ Amongst the various contributions on environmental phenomenology and phenomenology of nature, published in the last twenty years, in this paper I refer to Melle 1996, Brown-Toadvine 2003 and Bannon 2016.

2. Environment as «personal world»

2.1 The «general science of the person»

In the third section of the second volume of his *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Husserl deals with the issue of «The Constitution of the Spiritual World» (*Die Konstitution der geistigen Welt*), i.e., of the «personal world». Indeed, it should be emphasised that the meaning of the German term “*geistig*”, i.e., “spiritual”, which occurs in the title of this section of *Ideas II*, should not be understood only in the sense of something that is detached from physical nature and is the opposite of the “bodily” – i.e., “spiritual” as “supernatural” –, but also and above all as “personal”, in the sense of that motivational layer of the human person that transcends the causal levels both of the «material nature» and «animal nature» on which human beings are founded. This is precisely the sense in which phenomenology uses the term “*geistig*”. Therefore, the phenomenological idea of «The Constitution of the Spiritual World» means precisely «The Constitution of the Personal World» conceived as the world where persons live as subjects of a motivational life, that is, as subjects of *personhood* (*Persönlichkeit*): of agency, authorship and position-takings at various levels.⁴

This third section of *Ideas II* on «The Constitution of the Personal World» follows two previous sections devoted to «The Constitution of Material Nature» and «The Constitution of Animal Nature», respectively. The distinction between the spheres of the physical and psychical natures, which are both characterized by causal connections, on the one hand, and the sphere of the personal life, which is marked by motivational connections, on the other hand, is a topical issue for phenomenology. «The Constitution of the Personal World» represents just the place in which Husserl intends to tackle this issue and to take on, from a phenomenological point of view, the research project on the distinction between «sciences of the nature» [*Naturwissenschaften*] and «sciences of the spirit» [*Geisteswissenschaften*] previously undertaken by Wilhelm Dilthey, as Husserl himself explains in the introductive paragraph of «The Constitution of the Personal World»:

The following investigations are dedicated to the clarification of a group of interconnected distinctions in metaphysics and scientific theory, all of which have their source in the difficult distinction between psyche and spirit, which, thus, is the fundamental one in this entire group. On it obviously are dependent the opposition between *nature*

⁴ On the meaning of “motivation” and “personhood” and on the relation between “agency” and “personhood” in phenomenology, see Husserl 1912/28: chapter 2. «Motivation as the fundamental law of the spiritual world», in particular § 61. On this point, see also De Monticelli 2020 and De Vecchi 2020.

and the world of the spirit, between the natural sciences and the human sciences, the sciences of the spirit, between a natural-scientific theory of the psyche on the one hand and theory of the personhood (of the ego, egology) as well as theory of society (theory of community) on the other hand. [...] What is needed is a new “psychology” of an essentially different type, a general science of the spirit that is neither “psychophysical” nor naturalistic.⁵

Husserl’s research project focuses on the fundamental distinction between «psyche» and «spirit», where “spirit” has to be understood as “person”. According to Husserl, the clarification of this distinction is a necessary condition for distinguishing between “nature”, “sciences of the nature”, “scientific theory of the nature” on the one hand, and “personal world”, “sciences of the spirit”, i.e., “sciences of the person”, i.e., “human sciences”, “theory of the personhood (egology)” and “theory of society (community)”, on the other. Only if the concept itself of “spirit” is radically and phenomenologically reconsidered and not merely reduced to that of a psychophysical or naturalistic “psyche”, is it possible and meaningful to carry on Dilthey’s theoretical distinction between sciences of the spirit and sciences of the nature.

Therefore, Husserl’s proposal in «The Constitution of the Personal World» is to build up a new «general science of the spirit», that is, a general science of the person: a general science that ought to take into account the transcendence of the sphere of the personhood of persons with respect to the psycho-physical layers of persons and not reduce the being of persons to their psycho-physical level – as instead psychology does traditionally. Moreover, this general science of the person ought to focus not only on singular persons but also on collectives of persons. It ought to be a «doctrine of society and community», i.e., a *social ontology*. Only on the basis of this new theoretical frame, according to Husserl, is it possible to develop, in a consistent and justified way, the distinction between sciences of the nature and sciences of the person.

Husserl’s proposal involves a crucial point for the arguments of my paper: the idea of a “general science of the person” that breaks up both the traditional dichotomy between nature and spirit (natural world on the one hand, and spiritual and cultural world on the other) and the reductionism about the “spirit”, conceived only either as the domain of the supernatural or as that of causally psychophysical connections. According to the phenomenological perspective there is one fundamental world and that is our surrounding world, the environment in which we live as persons in a «personalistic» and not «naturalistic attitude»: therefore, in an ontologically qualitative attitude. This is the world that is humanly significant and that manifests itself just as the environment we have to take care of in our personal lives.

⁵ Husserl 1912-28, § 48: 173; En. trans.: 181, slightly modified.

This humanly meaningful world has an ontological priority with respect to the natural world as it is reduced to a naturalistic world by natural sciences in the naturalistic attitude – «The Ontological Priority of the Spiritual World Over the Naturalistic» is the title of the last chapter of «The Constitution of the Personal World». The human, personal world constitutes the condition of possibility of the naturalistic world. The naturalistic world is founded on the personal world, through the reduction of the personal life-world to mere nature. Natural sciences have to do their job; they are, of course, necessary but they ought not to forget their human ground in our surrounding and personal world, in our life-world – as Husserl claims in its *Crisis of the European Sciences* (1936).

It is exactly this phenomenological perspective that allows to connect the sciences of the person – “person” meant both as singular and collective persons – with social ontology, and to deal with the world as a humanly significant and ontologically qualitative world. I claim that this precise phenomenological perspective represents a fruitful and necessary perspective for taking into account our environment as a qualitative world and its crisis. Indeed, my point is that the environmental crisis is an issue that is related to our inhabiting the world qualitatively as our personal world – as common surrounding world and our life-world, as we will see.

Let us focus on the first chapter of the «Constitution of the Personal World» where Husserl tackles «the opposition between the naturalistic and personalistic worlds», contrasts the concepts of «personalistic attitude» and «naturalistic attitude», and «motivational life» and «psychophysical connections», and above all introduces the concept of «common surrounding world».

2.2. The «personalistic attitude» as the natural – not the naturalistic – one

In the [naturalistic attitude], the “Objective” physical nature, as a totality, was, or is, there for us as founding, scattered therein, lived bodies, sensorial experiences, and psychic life. All men and animals we consider in this attitude are, if we pursue theoretical interests, anthropological or, more generally, zoological Objects [...] animated Bodies, Objects of nature, themes of the relevant natural sciences.

But it is quite otherwise as regards the *personalistic attitude*, the attitude we are always in when we live with one another, talk to one another, shake hands with one another in greeting, or are related to one another in love and aversion, in disposition and action, in discourse and discussion. Likewise, we are in this attitude when we consider the things surrounding us precisely as our surroundings and not as “Objective” nature, the way it is for the natural science. We thus have to do here with an entirely natural and not an artificial attitude [...]. In the natural life of the ego we do not always – indeed not even predominately – consider the world in a naturalistic way, as if we were doing physics and zoology, as if our theoretical and extra-theoretical interest would have to

be directed inevitably to the psychic only as founded in the Body [...], as intertwined with it in a real-causal way.⁶

In the «naturalistic attitude», persons experience entities of the world as mere «“Objective” nature» and experience them only as physically and causally constituted objectivities.

On the contrary, the personalistic attitude is the one we are in, *qualitatively*, in our everyday life. It is the attitude we have when we live our intersubjective and social experiences, together with other persons – be they cognitive, emotional or practical experiences. Moreover, when we are in the personalistic attitude we perceive the things in the world as things surrounding us; be they living beings or material objects, we interact with them, singularly or collectively, and consider them as belonging to our world and defining our life-horizon. Consequently, the «personalistic attitude» is the natural or normal attitude in which we live as persons vis-à-vis the world and the entities that inhabit it. Be those entities material objects, non-human living beings or human beings, in the personalistic attitude persons experience all of them as essentially characterized by (positive or negative) value-qualities and as motivational correlates of their intentional experiences: of their value-feeling acts and of their position-takings.

Thus, the «personalistic attitude» has nothing to do with a subjectivist or relativist stance with regard to the world. Rather, it is the specific attitude of the persons who are the subjects of their motivational life, and as such are not reducible to mere subjects of causally inter-connected psychophysical states.

The personalistic attitude is that of the «life-world»: the world of the «pre-scientific and extra-scientific life» in which we live habitually as human beings who belong to «the common horizon of the world» and know it.⁷ Unlike the «personalistic attitude», which is our natural attitude, the «naturalistic attitude» is the one that abstracts from the life-world and makes the world a merely objective nature.

There are not here two attitudes with equal rights and of the same order [...], but the naturalistic attitude is in fact subordinated to the personalistic, and the former only acquires by means of an abstraction or, rather, by means of a kind of self-forgetfulness of the personal ego, a certain autonomy – whereby it proceeds illegitimately to absolutize the world, i.e., nature.⁸

The naturalistic attitude is ontologically subordinated to the personalistic attitude, just as the naturalistic world is ontologically subordinated to the personal

⁶Husserl 1912/28, § 49: 183-184; En. trans. 1989: 192-3, slightly modified; italics mine.

⁷See Husserl, 1936: § 36, § 38.

⁸Husserl 1912-28, § 49: 183-184; En. trans.: 193.

world. In the personalistic attitude persons constitute their personal world as the world where they live as subjects of a personal ego, of personhood. In this world persons may then assume a naturalistic attitude only on condition that they forget their personal ego and suppress the grounding connection by which the naturalistic world is founded on the personal world. Only under such conditions could the naturalistic attitude and the naturalistic world acquire an apparent existential independence, as if the world could be merely a naturalistic, value-free and meaningless world, and people could live merely in a naturalistic attitude.

2.3. Environment as «surrounding world» both of natural and social entities – a humanly significant world

It is important to emphasise that the world in which we live in the personalistic attitude, i.e., the personal world, is labelled by Husserl as a «surrounding world» (*Umwelt*), or “environment”. Moreover, Husserl highlights the ontological varieties of the entities that inhabit our personal and surrounding world. These are objectivities that may be natural or artefactual entities, social and institutional entities, on the one hand, and subjectivities that are personal subjects, both individual and collective, on the other.

This surrounding world is comprised not of mere things but of use-Objects (clothes, utensils, guns, tools), work of art, literary products, instruments for religious and judicial activities (seals, official ornaments, coronations insignia, ecclesiastical symbols, etc.). And it is comprised not only of individual persons, but the persons are instead members of communities, members of personal unities of higher order [...].⁹

In the existential posture that is specific to the personalistic attitude, these different kinds of entities, which are in the surrounding world and constitute it, both the objectivities and the subjectivities, are understood in their human significance and relevance, as cultural entities, and not in their mere materiality or as mere nature – «mere things» – as is, on the contrary, required by the naturalistic attitude.

The objectivities are the correlates of our motivational life. As human beings we refer to, create and use them as private, public and institutional objects in our everyday lives: artefacts, work of arts, and social, institutional, religious instruments, which we share in social practices of various kinds. Analogously, subjectivities are also not experienced as merely psycho-physical beings, but rather as personal subjects who are both individual and collective persons: communities and personal unities of higher order that transcend the individual persons on which they are founded. In the personalistic world, Husserl points out,

⁹Husserl 1912-28, § 49: 182; En. trans.: 191.

Instead of the causal relation between things and human beings as natural realities, there is substituted the *relation of motivation* between persons and things, and these things are not the things of nature, existing in themselves – i.e., the things of exact natural science with the determinations claimed there to be only Objectively true ones – but are the experienced, thought or in some other way intended and posited things as such, intentional objects of personal consciousness.¹⁰

Therefore, both the objectivities and subjectivities of the surrounding world are ontologically qualitative entities that we experience in their relevance and salience with respect to our own lives. The surrounding world is never just “pure nature”, but also and above all “culture” (*Kultur*): a cultural world whose entities have a human and personal relevance, and this independently of whether they are natural or artefactual.¹¹ Indeed, as Husserl’s phenomenology and qualitative social ontology points out here: also natural and not only artefactual entities can be cultural. The surrounding world is the world that is inhabited by any kind of entities having a human relevance in the sense that they are crucial for human beings to exist as personal subjects. Thus, in this perspective, even natural entities have a human and cultural relevance, since they also are the motivational correlate of our intentional experiences. That plant, that fruit, that animal being, etc. – and not only that work of art, that artefact, that institution – is an entity overflowing with human significations and value-qualities – be they practical, aesthetical, moral, religious, institutional etc. We perceive the value-qualities of the entities as essential parts of their identity, i.e., as entities that are more or less useful, pleasant, flourishing, beautiful, holy etc.¹² We do not experience the entities of the surrounding world just as «existing in themselves», devoid of value-qualities and meaningless, as merely material bodies that are neutrally there, as only occupying a space-time position.

In this sense, the phenomenological view of the world as a surrounding world, as environment, opens up a qualitative social ontology, and moreover, a qualitative social ontology whose domain is not limited to entities created by human beings, but also includes natural entities.¹³ So, with respect to clas-

¹⁰ Husserl 1912-1928: 189; En. trans.: 199.

¹¹ On the false belief that only artefactual and not also natural entities can be cultural and on the common tendency “to confuse the cultural with artefactual”, see Embree 2003: 40-41.

¹² On the common surrounding world as a «value-laden and meaning-structured lifeworld», see Kohák 2003: 25-26. On the surrounding world as a cultural world and its relation with the personalistic attitude, see Melle 1996: 24: «The life-world is a personal-cultural world. Culture in the broad sense comprises all realities, which have predicates of meaning. “Culture in general is thus the correlate of performing subjectivity”» (quoting Husserl 1919: Ms. FI 35/115b) and also Piana 1966.

¹³ A paradigmatic example of the classical way of understanding “social ontology” as the domain of only social entities, meant as entities that, unlike natural entities, are created by human intentionality and language, is presented by Searle 1995 and 2010.

sical ontology and contemporary social ontology, Husserl makes an extremely original and fruitful point. Indeed, Husserl's move is extremely important for social ontology and for a qualitative social ontology concerned with the environment and the critical state it finds itself in: it provides an account of the surrounding world as the genuine world we experience in our everyday life as personal subjects, i.e., persons who – singly and collectively – perform acts of the will and actions, feel the value-qualities that characterize the various kinds of entities in our world and emotionally respond to them, perceive others and their experiences in inter-subjective acts, perform social-speech acts, follow rule-based practices, and, more in general, are subjects who take a position in relation to the experiences they happen to be living.

So, qualitative social ontology is the specific ontology of the personalistic attitude with respect to the world. It points out that our experience of things is always and also an experience of their value-qualities, since in the personal world things are never given to us as merely material but also as valuable things. Our acts of experiencing things are always and also acts of value-perception: acts of valuing the things we are experiencing and acts of perceiving their value-qualities.

In [acts of valuing] the object is brought to consciousness as valuable, pleasant, beautiful, etc., and indeed this happens in various ways, e.g. in original givenness. In that case, there is built, upon the substratum of mere intuitive representing, an evaluating which, if we presuppose it, plays in the immediacy of its lively motivation, the role of a value- "perception" (*Wert-Wahrnehmung*) [...] in which the value character itself is given in original intuition.¹⁴

We always experience the entities of our surrounding world as qualitatively characterized, positively or negatively: we experience that plant as flourishing or withering, that sea-water as clean and inviting to bathe in or as polluted and uninviting, that air as fresh and reinvigorating or as stale and stifling, that person as gentle or brutal, that law as just or unjust etc. In value-perception acts (also called value-feeling acts), we experience value-qualities as originally given data that constitute the qualitative layer of the ontological structure of the things we encounter in the world, and it is this qualitative layer that makes the things to be the goods and the ills of our motivational life as personal subjects.¹⁵

In our everyday experience we apperceive our environment so immediately with spiritual predicates of meaning that «these predicates are downright designated as perceived, as seen, as heard, etc. just as the real predicates which are given in the most

¹⁴ Husserl 1912-1928: 187; En. trans.: 196.

¹⁵ The most exhaustive phenomenological account of value-perception and value-qualities is that of Scheler 1913-1926, which constitutes a real treatise of axiology.

immediate sensuous experience». Our everyday environment is not for us a world of pure things or facts.¹⁶

Therefore the value-qualities we experience, in perceiving the entities of our surrounding world, belong to the being of those entities, and are not merely “mind-dependent” qualities: as sensory qualities are the given data of our intentional acts of external perception, i.e., of seeing, hearing etc., so value-qualities are the given data of our intentional acts of value-feeling. We grasp both these kinds of intentional contents as offered to us by things themselves in an original way of givenness: they are not just imposed by us on things. So, in the personal and surrounding world, both sensory qualities and value-qualities of the things we experience have the same ontological dignity, so to speak.¹⁷

3. Environment as common-surrounding world

The next step that is crucial for the qualitative social ontology of the environment I have been arguing for is pointing out that the surrounding world, i.e., our environment, is a «*common-surrounding world*» (*gemeinsame Umwelt*): our surrounding world is an ontologically qualitative environment since it is also a common-surrounding world.

Husserl claims that persons, who inhabit their personal and surrounding world, are also the subjects of intersubjective and social acts through which any individual person understands the experiences of others and communicates with them. It follows that, in performing acts of empathy, both unilateral and mutual, and social acts of communication, singular persons constitute «personal communities» – according to Husserl, such acts represent the essential condition for the creation of «personal unities of higher orders». Then, the surrounding world of any singular person is always a common surrounding world that she shares with other persons, with whom she enters in intersubjective and social relation and constitutes personal collectives.

This account of our personal surrounding world as a common surrounding world of personal collectives enlightens a crucial feature of the ontological structure of our environment: this is a personally and therefore humanly marked environment only on the condition that it is also a shared environment, the one whose subjective pole are not singular persons but exactly collective persons. So, personal collectives and common surrounding world are essentially correlates of each other, and depend existentially the one upon the other: neither the common-surrounding world, nor personal collectives can exist independently of

¹⁶ Melle 1996: 24, who cites Husserl 1919: Ms. FI 35/115b.

¹⁷ On this phenomenological perspective on value-qualities as essential features of the things that are given to us in our personal experience, see Forlè 2018.

each other.¹⁸ It is not only the case that the common-surrounding world cannot exist without personal collectives as its counterpart; but it is also the case that the personal collectives cannot exist without a common-surrounding world as their motivational correlate. It follows that this existential interdependence of common-surrounding world and personal collectives that constitutes our environment is essentially qualitative and the existence itself of our environment is intrinsically qualitative, since the ideas themselves of surrounding world and persons are *per se* ontologically qualitative ideas, as I have shown in the previous paragraphs. But let us focus on this point in analysing this emblematic Husserl's passage.

In the *comprehensive experience of the existence of the other*, we thus understand him, without further ado, as a personal subject and thereby as related to Objectivities, ones to which we too are related: the earth and sky, the fields and the woods, the room in which "we" dwell communally, the picture we see, etc. We are in a relation to a common surrounding world – we are in a personal collective: these belong together. We could not be persons for others if a common surrounding world did not stand there for us in a community, in an intentional linkage of our lives. Correlatively spoken, the one is constituted essentially with the other. Each ego can, for himself and for the others, become a person in the normal sense, a person in a personal collective, only if comprehension brings about the relation to a common surrounding world.¹⁹

Husserl claims that in experiencing the other, in intersubjective and social acts, we understand the other as a personal subject and consequently as a subject who is in relation to the same objectivities we are also in relation to. According to Husserl there is therefore a mutual implication between our perceiving the other as a personal subject and our grasping the other as a subject who refers to the same kinds of entities, i.e., to the same surrounding world that we also refer to. Being a personal subject and being in relation to the same surrounding world is the same thing. We understand the other as a personal subject only if we and the other share a common surrounding world. Correlatively, this also implies that we understand the other as a personal subject only if the other belongs to the same personal collective to which we also belong: only if we and the other are members of the same personal collective.

So, the mutual ontological dependence between the common surrounding world and personal subjects is very rich and fruitful in the perspective of a qualitatively ontological account of our environment. In dealing with the concept of "common-surrounding world" Husserl points out an ontologically specific

¹⁸ See Husserl 1912-1928: § 51, where he develops an analysis of intersubjective and social acts that are fundamental for the constitution of the common-surrounding world and of the collective subjects as essential correlates of the common-surrounding world.

¹⁹ Husserl 1912-28, § 51: 191-192; En. trans.: 201, slightly modified.

feature of the environment: this is the world as shared by singular persons who constitute personal collectives, and these are the subjective pole of the common surrounding world. Now the crucial point here is that this idea of “environment” entails important implications concerning the ontological status both of human and personal communities. Indeed, it is not merely that our surrounding world becomes a common surrounding world only on condition that it is the world other personal subjects also refer to; but it is also the case that the other becomes a personal subject for us only on condition that she/he also refers to the same common surrounding world we refer to, and belongs to the same personal collective to which we belong. In other words: sharing a common-surrounding world and, correlatively, belonging to a personal community are conditions of possibility for being a human person.

4. Value-qualities and ontological paradigms

This means that the entities of our common surrounding world are the correlates of our *personal identity*, both individual and collective. Indeed, they are the motivational correlates of our intentional experiences – value-feelings, intentions-actions and more in general position-takings. They are the goods and the ills that embody the value-qualities, both positive and negative, that we feel and respond to emotionally in structuring our personhood. In the constitution of personal collectives, we share these goods and ills and their value-qualities with the other persons, and these become the motivational correlates of our *collective personal identity*. Thus, an essential condition for being part of a personal community is the referring to and sharing of the same entities: the same goods or ills and their value-qualities.²⁰ This point is well exemplified by the specific status of the stranger, who is exactly the one who is typically excluded from such sharing and who as such fails to be perceived as a personal subject or is perceived as being inferior. So Husserl’s claim about being in relation to a common-surrounding world – i.e., belonging to it – as a necessary condition for perceiving the other as a personal subject should be carefully considered during the process of social integration in order to prevent such kinds of inhuman exclusion.²¹

²⁰ On the sharing of value-qualities and its role for the constitution of personal collectives, see Scheler 1913-1926: Section “The Collective Person”. Scheler presents a very fine analysis of the constitution of collectives: he claims that there are different types of social unity, according to both the different spheres of value-qualities – higher and lower – to which personal subjects are oriented and the different kinds of intentionality that characterize the relations among personal subjects. I dealt with this issue in De Vecchi 2015.

²¹ I cannot deal with this issue here. For further phenomenological developments of this issue, see Schutz 1944 and Steinbock 1995.

Moreover, the ontological interdependence of the common surrounding world and personal collectives is a qualitative one also because it requires that personal subjects are responsible for their common surrounding world and all the entities it is comprised of: be they natural kinds or artefacts, non-human living beings and human beings, eco-systems or institutions, natural landscapes or urban centres, they are all goods or ills we experience, according to the positive or negative value-qualities they embody. All of us who inhabit and share the same surrounding world are responsible for each other and also for all the non-human creatures and things that belong to our common-surrounding world, that are its specific goods and ills, and constitute it as our unique and precious environment.

The crucial point is that we are *responsible for* all these entities in a qualitative sense: not only for their mere existence but also and above all for *the quality of their existence*: for their “good life”. They are entities whose value-qualities are essential parts of their ontological identity (as we have seen above, § 2.3) and as such they need to be realized and fulfilled in the value-qualities that essentially belong to them. Actually, there is here a *normative claim* implied by the ontologically qualitative structure of entities: it is the *eidetic claim* that any entity is a whole made up of parts, and value-qualities are also parts of the ontological structure of any entity as a whole; they belong to it, and are not mere contingent “accidents” or “decorative frills” of a substance that can exist independently of them. Moreover, the parts constituting any entity as a whole are subject to variations: their contents can be modified, within certain limits, which are exactly the specific ones of any type of entity. Therefore, in varying the contents of the parts belonging to the eidetic structure of any entity, any entity exemplifies its type in different degrees and ways. Then value-qualities play a fundamental role here: indeed, they are essentially connected with the fulfilment degrees of the ontological paradigm of any entity. This is the ontologically qualitative issue of the *degrees of existence* of any entity and their relation to its *eidetic paradigm*.²² The idea is that any kind of entity may be more or less fulfilled with respect to its ideal being and that any single entity satisfies its essential legacy in its individually contingent way: in exemplifying its ontological paradigm at different fulfillment stages – more or less adequately. But the idea is also that there are bound-constraints that define the possible variations of such fulfillment and degrees of existence of the entities: there are limits that, if they are overstepped, undermine the wellbeing of the entities and may even lead to their extinction. So, a forest ought to be thick and shadowy, according to its eidetic paradigm, and contingently may be more or less thick and shadowy, according to the specific contents of its parts: the abundance and dimension

²²I addressed the qualitative ontological issue of “eidetic paradigms” and “degrees of existence”, in De Vecchi 2016, 2018, 2019.

of the trees' leaves, their being evergreen or not, their being struck by wind or rain, etc. Anyway, the point is that there is a limit to the possible co-variations of the forest's parts. A limit which, if overstepped, implies that that forest as such ceases to exist – it becomes another type of entity: a clearing, a pasture or a field, a motocross parkour.²³

It follows that the fact of being responsible for the quality of the existence of the entities in our common surrounding world implies taking care of the quality of their existence, precisely in the sense that we need to ensure that any entity exists according to its ontological paradigm, as far as possible. The implications of this ontologically qualitative perspective for the environmental crisis are plain: we can properly speak of an environmental crisis when we neglect and violate the ontological paradigms of the entities of our common-surrounding world, i.e., when we perceive these entities just as mere «things existing in themselves»; when we overlook the value-qualities that constitute them, as we do in the naturalistic attitude, and when we manipulate and modify them, overstepping the limits imposed by their eidetic legacy.

Of course, this all applies not only to natural kinds. As qualitative social ontology claims, the entities that comprise our common surrounding world, that we experience as goods and ills and that we need to share in order to be and to live as personal subjects, are of various ontological kinds: they are both natural and artefactual kinds imbued with practical, social, and institutional – in a word – human meanings. They are – as Husserl says in the above quoted passage – «the earth and sky, the fields and the woods, the room in which “we” dwell communally, the picture we see, etc.». All together they constitute the common-surrounding world in which we live and exist as personal subjects, and we have to take care of and respect their ontological paradigms.

5. Respect and fidelity to the given data

So, the advantage in looking at the environmental crisis from the perspective of the phenomenologically embedded qualitative social ontology, which I have been arguing for, is that it can provide tools for taking care of our environment that are grounded in the ontological structure of the things themselves. Indeed, it should be manifest by now that phenomenology involves respect for, and fidelity to, the given data of the things we experience: it accounts for both sensory and qualitative data as constitutive parts of the things, and claims that these parts can vary in their contents but within the limits imposed by the ontological structure of the thing itself.

²³ On the phenomenological theory of parts and wholes, see Husserl 1901, Third Logical Investigation, and on the relation between individual entity and essential type, see Husserl 1913, Section “Matter of Fact and essence”.

Let us consider again the example of the forest. In experiencing a forest, say this beech forest near my home on the Orobie Pre-Alps, I do not only perceive the given data that are contingently offered to me, here and now, such as the sensory qualities of the green buds and grey trunks (as a beech forest can typically be at the beginning of Spring) and the value-qualities of the calm and safety of the forest (as the only one place where I can walk without worrying about meeting other people in the time of Coronavirus); but I also experience the essential given data that make that particular beech forest an exemplar of the forest type and that consist precisely in the bound-constraints that limit the possible co-variations of the contents of both sensory qualities and value-qualities – limits which, if exceeded, imply the end of the existence of that forest as such. Indeed, contingent and essential given data are two sides of the same coin: they are inseparable and distinct at the same time, since the essential structure of the thing is what allows the contingently individual thing to be an exemplar of its type.²⁴ Therefore, phenomenological eidetics shows that any kind of thing has its own objective structure, and it is the thing itself that gives us the data it is made up of and the limits of their possible co-variations – limits to which any kind of thing is bound, in order for its existence to be preserved as the type of thing it is. Phenomenology enables us to understand the intrinsic normativity of things: an objective normativity, since it belongs to the being itself of any kind of thing. So, phenomenology provides us with a substantial (*sachlich*) way of respecting our environment and the living beings inhabiting it: a way that is founded on the eidetic legacy constituting any individual thing as the type of thing it is.

In other words, the phenomenological perspective allows us to look at the things of the world through an alternative third view with respect both to the naturalistic and objectivist view on the one hand, and to the relativistic and subjectivist view on the other. This is a third view that brings together the “subjective” and the “objective”.²⁵ It is not the objectivist view of the naturalistic attitude that sees things only as «existing in themselves», as purely material bodies characterized just by objectively measurable properties and devoid of value-qualities. Nor is it a merely subjectivist and relativistic view that conceives things only as constructed by subjects and ontologically dependent on them. Rather, it is a view that suggests that the given-data of things and their bound-constraints, which define any kind of thing as the thing it is, are objectively offered to us by the things themselves and are not subjectively imposed by us on the things. But this is the view that we can assume only in the personalistic attitude, and not in the naturalistic one! Indeed, only in the personalistic attitude, as I have shown above (see § 2.2), can we go “back to the things themselves”

²⁴ See Husserl 1913: § 2, on the “inseparability of matter of fact and essence”.

²⁵ See Husserl 1936.

and experience them as they are qualitatively. Only in assuming that existential posture, which allows to us to live and act as human persons, can we experience the value-qualities as parts of the eidetic structure of things, perceive things as the goods or the ills that are the correlates of our motivational life, and take a position about them: deciding to respect or violate their eidetic paradigms, and to support or undermine the quality of their existences.

6. *Conclusions*

In my paper I have been claiming that the environment and its crisis could and should be fruitfully taken into account by a phenomenologically-oriented qualitative social ontology that assumes a «personalistic attitude» towards the world, which turns out to be a «personal world». In it, human beings are the personal subjects of a motivational life, and entities of the world are, as goods or ills embodying (positive or negative) value-qualities, the humanly relevant correlates of their position-takings. Moreover, I pointed out that the personal world in which we live is a «common surrounding world» that existentially depends on personal collectives, which are constituted by human beings who act and live as personal subjects; conversely, the personal collectives depend existentially on the common surrounding world – only on the condition of having a common-surrounding world of shared meanings and values there may be personal collectives.

I argued that one of the crucial contributions provided by qualitative social ontology in accounting for the environment and its crisis is that the value-qualities of the entities of the common-surrounding world are essential parts of their identity – whether they be natural, social, human or non-human entities. Therefore, in qualitative social ontology what is at stake is not only the existence of such entities, but also and above all the quality of their existence according to their eidetic paradigms and their being subject to degrees of existence and fulfilment.

I have also suggested that in this qualitatively ontological perspective we can account for the intertwining of the natural and the social that characterize our experience of the common surrounding world, and understand the necessity of respecting the ontological paradigms of all kinds of entities, both natural kinds and artefacts, in order to preserve our environment and combat its crisis. Indeed, I have maintained that we can take care of our environment and preserve it from destruction only if we consider it not as mere *nature*, as assumed by the naturalistic attitude of natural sciences, but also and above all as *culture*, as we do in the personalistic attitude. This is a qualitatively ontologically perspective in which we experience the entities inhabiting our world not as mere things, i.e., value free and meaningless, but as essentially constituted by value-qualities: only in experiencing and then considering this qualitative layer of the entities

of our environment, can we preserve the existence of these entities and pay attention to their wellbeing.

References

BANNON, B.E.

- 2016, ed. *Nature and Experience. Phenomenology and the Environment*, London Rowman & Littlefield

BROWN, CH. S., TOADVINE T. (eds)

- 2003, *Eco-Phenomenology. Bach to the Earth Itself*, New York, State University of New York Press.

CAMINADA, E.

- 2019, *Vom Gemeingeist zum Habitus: Husserls Ideen II. Sozialphilosophische Implikationen der Phänomenologie*, Springer Nature Switzerland.

DE MONTICELLI, R.

- 2020, *The Phenomenology of Rational Agency*, in Ch. Ehrhard, T. Keiling (eds), *Handbook on Phenomenology of Agency*, London, Routledge: 360-373.

DE VECCHI, F.

- 2015, *The Plural Subject Approach to Social Ontology and the Sharing Values Issue*, “Phenomenology and Mind”, 9: 84-97.
- 2016, *The existential quality issue in social ontology: Eidetics and modifications of essential connections*, “Humana.Mente. Journal of Philosophical Studies”, 31: 187-204.
- 2018, *Fenomenologia: la filosofia come eidetica e ontologia qualitativa del concreto*, “Giornale di metafisica”, 2: 570-582.
- 2019, *Eidetics of empathy: Intersubjectivity, embodiment and qualitative ontology - Rediscovering Edith Stein’s account of empathy*, “Humana.Mente. Journal of Philosophical Studies”, 36: 221-243.
- 2020, *The intentionality and positionality of spontaneous acts – Adolf Reinach’s account of agency*, in Ch. Ehrhard, T. Keiling (eds), *Handbook on Phenomenology of Agency*, London, Routledge: 53-66.

EMBREE, L.

- 2003, *The possibility of a constitutive phenomenology of environment*, in Ch. S. Brown, T. Toadvine (eds), *Eco-Phenomenology. Bach to the Earth Itself*, New York, State University of New York Press, 37-50.

FORLÈ, F.

- 2018, *The “How” and “What” of aesthetic experience. Some reflections based on Noë’s strange tools. Art and human nature*, “Phenomenology and Mind”, 14: 18-28.

HUSSERL, E.

- 1901, *Logische Untersuchungen, Zweiter Teil. Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis*, in U. Panzer (ed.), *Husserliana XIX*, vol. 2, Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1984; English trans. by J.N. Findlay, *Logical Investigation. Second part. Investigations concerning phenomenology and the theory of knowledge*, London, Routledge, 2001.
- 1912-1928/1952, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, in

- M. Biemel (ed.), *Husserliana IV*, Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1994; English trans. by R. Rojcewicz, A. Schuwer, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy. Book 2: Studies in phenomenology of constitution*, Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1989.
- 1913, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*, in K. Schuhmann (ed.), *Husserliana III/1–2*, Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1950; English trans. by F. Kersten, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book. General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1982.
 - 1919, *Nature und Geist. Vorlesungen Sommersemester 1919*, in M. Weiler (ed.), *Husserliana Materialbände IV*, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 2002.
 - 1936/1954, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, in W. Biemel (ed.), *Husserliana VI*, Den Haag, Martinus Nijhoff, 1976; English trans. by D. Carr, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy. An Introduction to Phenomenology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1970.
- KOHÁK, E.
- 2003, *An understanding heart: Reason, value and transcendental phenomenology* in Ch. S. Brown, T. Toadvine (eds), *Eco-Phenomenology. Back to the Earth Itself*, New York, State University of New York Press:19-36.
- MELLE, U.
- 1996, *Nature and Spirit*, in Th. Nenon, L. Embree (eds), *Issues in Husserl's Ideas II*, Contributions to Phenomenology, vol. 24, Boston, Kluwer: 15-35.
- PIANA, G.
- 1966, *I problemi della fenomenologia*, V. Costa (ed.), Lulu, 2013.
- SCHELER, M.
- 1913/1926, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die material Wertethik. Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus*, in M.S. Frings (ed.), *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. II, Bonn, Bouvier, 2009; English trans. by M.S. Frings, R.L. Fung, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- SCHUTZ, A.
- 1944, *The stranger: An essay in social psychology*, “American Journal of Sociology”, 49, 6: 499-507.
- SEARLE, J.R.
- 1995, *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York, Routledge.
 - 2010, *Making the Social World. The Structure of Human Civilization*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- STEINBOCK, A.
- 1995, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press.