

## Husserl, the active self, and commitment

**Abstract:** In "On what matters: Personal identity as a phenomenological problem" (2020), Steven Crowell engages a number of contemporary interpretations of Husserl's account of the person and personal identity (including my own, see Jacobs 2010a) by noting that they lack a phenomenological elucidation of the self as commitment. In this article, in response to Crowell, I aim to show that such an account of the self as commitment can be drawn from Husserl's work by looking more closely at his descriptions from the time of *Ideas* and after of the self as ego or I and egoic experience as attentive experience. I specifically aim to sketch the beginning of a response to three questions I take Crowell to be posing to a Husserlian account of the person and personal identity: (1) What more than pre-reflective self-awareness can be attributed to the self on phenomenological grounds so that we can understand, phenomenologically speaking, how selves become persons? (2) How can what characterizes the self in addition to pre-reflective self-awareness be discerned in both our commitment to truth and our feeling bound by love and other emotive commitments that cannot be fully rationally justified, which Husserl acknowledges are both sources of personal self-constitution? And (3), do all selves become persons? In the paper I elaborate how my answers to the first two questions turn on the self not just being self-aware but active in a particular sense. And to begin to address the third question, I suggest that while any form of wakeful conscious experience is both self-aware and active, this activity of the self makes a difference for those who are socio-historically embedded in the way we are. Specifically, on the proposed Husserlian account, selves that are socio-historically embedded become persons in and through their active relating to what they attentively experience. In concluding, I indicate how this Husserlian account might compare to Crowell's claim that "self-identity (*ipseity*) is not mere

logical identity ( $A=A$ ) but a *normative* achievement [...] which makes a ‘personal’ kind of identity possible” (2020).

**Keywords:** Husserl; phenomenology; personhood; self; attention

### 1. Self, personhood, and commitment

There are several aspects of Husserl’s work that one might draw on to develop a sophisticated account of persons. The aspect of Husserl’s account of personhood that I have been particularly interested in is his account of personal self-constitution in and through the acquisition of standing convictions and enduring practical engagements by means of “position-takings” or “stances” (*Stellungnahmen*) (see Jacobs 2010a, 2016a, and 2016b).<sup>1</sup> According to this view, persons are embodied and socially embedded selves that make up their own minds or take a position with regard to some aspect of the world and others. Specifically, by taking stances we acquire convictions and make practical commitments that constitute who we are as persons to the extent that we have appropriated them as our own in light of evidence about how the world is or how we believe it should be. Thus, asking who one is as a person, on this account, is to ask what one believes in, what one values, and what one aims for in life.

While I as a person can change insofar as my stances change, I am still the same self—or what Husserl calls I or ego—that took a stance in this way. In that sense, we can differentiate

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<sup>1</sup> For a further discussion of personal self-constitution according to Husserl, see Heinämaa (2007), Rinofner-Kreidl (2011), and Zahavi (forthcoming). This particular concept of the person is not the only concept of person that can be found in Husserl’s work. See, for example, Heinämaa (2019) for different concepts of personhood in Husserl’s work and Loidolt (forthcoming), which investigates important dimensions of Husserl’s account of personhood in the context of practical agency.

between the self that takes stances and the particular person this self becomes through taking this or that stance. When I end up changing my beliefs, evaluative judgments, or practical orientation and have become different in this respect, it is the same self that believes, feels, or wants differently. This is also why, even though I can meaningfully say that I have changed as a person, I nevertheless will need to take up some relationship to who I used to be (see Crowell 2020; Loidolt forthcoming). It was after all me who took a certain stance (or not); and the self that for certain reasons can or cannot believe, feel, or want in this way (anymore) will have to reckon with that change. Specifically, as the same self then and now, the question of how one could be so misled, ignorant, joyous, angry, hopeful, trusting, or ambitious is a question one will have to settle for oneself even as one has changed in a certain way—both towards oneself and others.<sup>2</sup>

Even if this account of personal self-constitution strikes one as promising, it is in need of further development. And, as Steven Crowell (2020) persuasively argues drawing on Heidegger's work, one of the aspects of this account that requires considerable further elaboration is the notion of the self as commitment. Specifically, Husserl's descriptions of a self that takes stances presupposes a self that cares about how it believes, feels, and wants, which is why it commits this way or another and cares to change those commitments in light of evidence. As Crowell further points out, self-awareness, which is an essential feature of my awareness of the world both for Husserl and other phenomenologists, will not provide us with an account of the self as commitment. That is, as Crowell indicates, in Husserl's descriptions of personal self-constitution and the literature on it, "something like a 'self' has emerged to which terms like authorship, responsibility, decision, and commitment are germane, terms that entail more than the minimal self" (Crowell 2020).

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<sup>2</sup> I have elaborated this account of position-taking, self-constitution, and the relation between the self that decides and the person it becomes in more detail in Jacobs (2010a).

A phenomenological clarification of the self as commitment is, as Crowell rightly points out, also not provided by saying that selves are teleologically directed towards evidence and truth, as some who draw on Husserl to talk about persons have done. Even if it might account for us making up our minds by taking stances, a discussion of how we are geared towards evidence and truth does not in itself account for the other ways in which Husserl acknowledges we are constituted as persons—not just in and through the stances we take in light of evidence about how the world is or how we believe it should be but through commitments that have the form of deeply personal attachments like, for example, the loving commitment of a parent to a child or the commitment of an artist to their art. In this latter case, a phenomenological account of our being geared towards evidence and truth would not elucidate a phenomenologically discernable feature of our personal lives—namely, that at times we feel called by and deeply committed to people and causes that cannot be fully rationally justified in the way our other beliefs and commitments can be. Nevertheless, those commitments constitute me as a person in the sense that I am bound by them, and giving up on these commitments would amount to giving up on a part of myself as a person. Hence, as Crowell rightly argues, Husserl’s recognition of these two ways of being constituted as persons raises the following issue for his account of personhood and personal identity: “If we accept the distinction between formal (categorical) self identity and personal identity, and if the term ‘true self’ refers, on either disjunct, to formal self identity (either as the self called or as the self who ‘freely’ commits to the rational norm of *Evidenz*), then we must admit categories, beyond the mineness of conscious experience, that clarify how the self possesses the capacities attributed to it. For instance, whether we think of the self as commitment to a calling or as commitment to rationalizing one’s choices, we presuppose a self for whom its own identity matters, and precisely in a normative way. But on Husserl’s picture this presupposition—that

mattering belongs to the categorial structure of the self—has not been phenomenologically clarified” (Crowell 2020).

There is another reason, articulated by Crowell in his earlier work (2013), why Husserl’s descriptions of taking a stance in light of evidence will not provide a satisfying phenomenological clarification of the self as commitment. In Husserl’s later writings especially, descriptions of the stances that constitute persons are often descriptions of active deliberations. So, for example, in *Cartesian Meditations* Husserl ties personal self-constitution to deliberately making up one’s mind: “Since, by his *own active generating*, the Ego constitutes himself as *identical substrate of Ego-properties*, he constitutes himself also as a ‘fixed and abiding’ *personal Ego*” (Husserl 1960, 66). And Husserl describes this active genesis in terms of making a decision: “If, in an act of judgment, I decide for the first time in favor of a being and a being-thus, the fleeting act passes; but from now on *I am abidingly the Ego who is thus and so decided*” (Husserl 1960, 67). Likewise, in a manuscript from 1918 or 1921 Husserl explicitly ties being a person to acquiring convictions (*Überzeugungen*) through taking active stances:

I can only be a person to the extent that I do not only have abiding apperceptions and due to them an enduring world that stands over against me as alien to me but to the extent that I have abiding “convictions,” which I acquired and arrived at out of myself (*selbsttätig*), by means of active (*tätige*) position-takings by the self (*Ich*), abiding evaluations, abiding volitions. (Husserl 1973a, 196)

And Husserl defines position-takings, strictly speaking, in terms of deliberation. So, for example, in a manuscript dated after 1913, he writes:

The real taking a stance toward something, taking a stance in the strict and actual sense is taking a stance in response to a question, an intimation, a suggestion, for which I decide in favor of or against, depending on the act

domain and the kind of suggestion I am dealing with: theoretical decision, evaluative decision, volitional decision. (Husserl forthcoming)<sup>3</sup>

Or to provide one of Husserl's descriptions of making up one's mind through taking a stance:

Someone gives a beautiful talk and I am inclined to admire him. But something blocks this admiration, I have prejudices against this person, he has often displeased me, etc. Without being explicitly aware of it, I experience the negative intimation. When I have such a consciousness, which is ambivalent insofar as it does not really value the object and has to reckon with contradicting intimated values, I may have to proceed to "evaluate," to unpack the motivations and consider them. And then it is decided: that is actually something that speaks for him and that is really a lack with regard to him. And *then I decide*: the lack is "forgivable," all in all he is of an overriding value. I evaluatively decide in favor of him. (Husserl forthcoming, my emphasis)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Das echte Zu-etwas-Stellungnehmen, das Stellungnehmen im prägnanten und eigentlichen Sinn, ist Stellungnehmen zu einer Frage, zu einer Anmutung, Zumutung, für oder gegen <die> ich mich entscheide, und zwar je nachdem <wie> die Aktdomäne ist und die Art der Zumutungen: Urteilsentscheidung, Gefallensentscheidung, Willensentscheidung [...]."

<sup>4</sup> "Jemand hält eine schöne Rede und ich bin geneigt, ihn zu bewundern. Aber es sperrt sich etwas dagegen, ich habe Vorurteile gegen ihn, er hat mir öfters missfallen etc. Ohne dass das alles jetzt explizit vorstellig ist, so empfinde ich die darauf zurückgehende negative Anmutung. Habe ich so ein Bewusstsein, das zwiespältig den Gegenstand nicht wirklich wertet, sondern mit entgegengesetzten anmutlichen Werten behaftet, so kann ich zur ‚Auswertung‘, zur Entfaltung der Motivationen und zur Erwägung derselben übergehen. Und nun entscheidet sich: Das ist wirklich ein Vorzug von ihm und das ist wirklich ein Mangel an ihm. Und dann entscheide ich mich etwa: der Mangel ist ‚verzeihlich‘, alles in allem ist er von überwiegendem Wert. Ich entscheide mich für ihn wertend."

This characterization of stance-takings as active deliberations is also confirmed in Husserl's published writings. So, for example, in the first volume of *Ideas*, Husserl mentions: "Up to now we disregarded the peculiar character of the 'stance' taken by the pure ego that, in the rejection (especially here in the rejection by way of negating), 'directs' itself against what is rejected, the being that it is crossing out, just as in the affirmation it leans positively toward the affirmed and directs itself at it" (Husserl 2014b, 210; see also Husserl 2001, §§14–15).

If the way in which we constitute ourselves as persons is truly limited to moments of deliberation, Husserl's account of the person risks amounting to a two-tiered model of the self, according to which most of our ways of experiencing the world are not personal, while only those experiences in which we deliberate would be personal forms of relating to the world. Such a two-tiered model is problematic for a number of reasons. In dialogue with Christine Korsgaard's Kantian account of personal self-constitution, Crowell articulates at least two such reasons. First, this way of describing persons is phenomenologically inaccurate as it commits to "a rationalistic distortion of the phenomenology of agency" (Crowell 2013, 252). My actions, but also my beliefs and evaluations, would not be mine, strictly speaking, if no deliberation has occurred. But deliberation is rare, and it does not seem to be descriptively accurate to characterize most of our beliefs, evaluations, and practical engagements as impersonal ways of relating to the world.<sup>5</sup> Second, in order for any deliberation to make a difference for how we relate to the world, "questioning must be there at the 'pre-reflective'

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<sup>5</sup> To reply on Husserl's behalf that my deliberations abide in the form of habitualities, as I have discussed in Jacobs (2010a), would not quite address this concern. That is, my pre-reflective experience includes beliefs, evaluations, and practical commitments that by far outstrip what I do or have deliberated on, which is due to the socio-historical embeddedness of my experience. Hence, even when taking habitualities into account, when restricting the personal dimension of our experience to current or habitualized active deliberation, one risks ending up in a two-tiered conception of the self.

level of self-awareness as such; it cannot be brought in by some particular second-order intention” (Crowell 2013, 248). If, according to Husserl, who I am as a person is limited to what I have committed to through explicit deliberations, this would introduce a schism in the self which would make it unclear how or why I would ever come to deliberate about something. Differently stated, deliberation already requires that I care about how I believe, value, and act—otherwise I would not deliberate. But why do we care in this way?

Rather than pointing to some way Husserl explicitly addresses this question, in what follows I draw on Husserl’s description of the self (as ego or I) and its (egoic) experiences to propose an additional characteristic of the self that I believe brings us some way towards addressing the concerns Crowell has raised to Husserl’s account of personal self-constitution through deliberative stances—that is, the self is not just self-aware but active.

## 2. The self as active

The particular form of deliberative stance taking that Husserl considers in many of his writings to be the source of personal self-constitution is an activity in the sense that it can reasonably said to be something we do. Indeed, if I were asked by someone what I was doing while I was trying to make up my mind, it would be quite natural to tell them that I am deliberating or trying to make up my mind about something. So, at least the process of deliberation could be said to be something that I do, and in this sense then, when deliberating, I as a self am active. Husserl himself characterizes the activity of deliberation as follows: “responsively taking a position that is peculiar to making a decision, doing so actively, as proceeding from the ego” and “the active position-takings of the ego, the active decision, convictions, letting oneself be convinced in the broadest sense” (Husserl 2001, 92). However, it is clear that this phenomenon



of active deliberation in itself does not warrant the broader claim that in addition to being self-aware we are also active selves. Even when not deliberating we are pre-reflectively self-aware but not active in the particular sense of taking deliberative stances. Hence, the kind of activity that would warrant a characterization of the structure of the self as active would need to apply to our conscious lives as such, not just to a particular and fairly rare episode in it. From around the time of *Ideas* Husserl does indeed have such a concept of activity and this activity is characteristic of wakeful experience. That is, for Husserl, we are active beyond the rare moments of active deliberation when we are attentively experiencing something.<sup>6</sup>

For Husserl, attention is not one experience among others but rather a mode of experiencing the world and others. Or more accurately, Husserl distinguishes between different modes of attentive consciousness (e.g., paying attention to something centrally or marginally) as “modes of actualization” from what he calls the “mode of inactualization,” which refers to a mode of consciousness that is not attentive in any way (Husserl 2014b, 183). Attentive

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<sup>6</sup> As Sheredos has persuasively argued, at the time of the *Logical Investigations* Husserl denies that experiences can be considered to be acts in any substantive sense: “In *LU* Husserl drives a wedge between intentionality as *directedness* to an object and any invocation of *striving* towards an object I *desire*, of the sort that would be involved in construing mental ‘acts’ as traditional acts. And *because this traditional feature of actions is discarded*, Husserl maintains that this term ‘act’ should receive no active construal at all” (2017, 197). Sheredos also argues that this is different for the Husserl of *Ideas* where he considers attentive experiences to be active in the sense of both attentive and involving taking a stance. While Sheredos does not further specify what kind of activity we are dealing with here, he does suggest that mental acts might fall under the same genus as bodily acts (208). My account here does not consider whether and how the activity that is characteristic of attentive experiences is related to other activities. Rather, my aim is to discuss the senses in which the self is active in attentive experience, what kind of activity this is, and how this allows us to address the concerns raised by Crowell. I also restrict myself in what follows to non-neutralized experiences. On my understanding of the distinction between neutralized and non-neutralized experiences in relation to attention, see Jacobs (2016a).

experiences as an actualized mode of consciousness are further characterized by Husserl as those in which the I, as a self, “lives” (*darinnen lebt*) and as “radiating” (*ausstrahlen*) from the I (Husserl 2014b, 184). He furthermore states that “A stance taken, that bears the radiating of the ego in itself is accordingly *an act of the ego* itself (*Akt des Ichs selbst*)” (Husserl 2014b, 84; my emphasis). What I would like to claim now is that what Husserl describes here is both a conception of stance-taking and activity that is broader than active deliberation and presupposed by the latter. All attentive experiences are acts of the self or I in that when attentive the self takes a position, though not in the deliberative sense.

Husserl indeed acknowledges this broader conception of position-taking in the following manuscript passage: “But in these manuscripts and in *Ideas* I also use a concept of position-taking in a different and broader sense: each ‘act’ in the strict sense, each *cogito*, each intentional experience in the mode of actually being enacted” (Husserl 2020, forthcoming).<sup>7</sup> And *cogito*, in the *Ideas* and other works, refers to attentive experiences. As Husserl writes: “If an intentional experience is currently actual, i.e., implemented in the manner of the cogito, the subject in that experience ‘is directed’ at the intentional object. Inherent in the cogito itself and immanent to it is a ‘focus on’ the object, a focus that, on the other hand, springs forth from the ‘ego’ that thus can never be missing” (Husserl 2014b, 64). That active deliberation or taking a stance in the more narrow sense presupposes attention is stated by Husserl in the following passage: “Every instance of ‘carrying out, implementing an act,’ ‘actually taking a position,’ for example, ‘carrying out, implementing’ the process of resolving a doubt, rejecting something, positing a subject and attributing a predicate to it, or carrying out the process of making an evaluation and an evaluation ‘for the sake of someone else,’ the evaluation of a

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<sup>7</sup> “Aber ich gebrauche in diesen Manuskripten und auch in den „Ideen“ einen Begriff der Stellungnahme in einem anderen, weiteren Sinn: jeder „Akt“ im prägnanten Sinn, jedes *cogito*, jedes intentionales Erlebnis im Modus des wirklichen Vollziehens.”

choice, and so forth—all that presupposes focusing attention positively on that toward which the ego takes a position” (Husserl 2014b, 184). So, to sum up, the self is active in that it takes a stance even when attentive. And because it is already active when attentive, the self at times deliberates.

While I have developed Husserl’s account of attention in more detail elsewhere (see my 2010b and 2016a), what matters in the current context is that if attentive experiences in the broad sense can meaningfully be called active or acts of the self, this taken together with the fact that, for Husserl, we are attentive when awake (Husserl 2014b, 63) would amount to a characterization of the wakeful self as active in addition to being self-aware. That is, the self is active in addition to being pre-reflectively self-aware insofar as it is awake and in those experiences that are attentive. What I would like to elaborate in what follows is the sense in which attention is active or an act of the self in a way that supports a characterization of the wakeful self as active and that will put us in a position to begin to address the concerns raised by Crowell concerning the self that constitutes itself as a person.

As Julia Jansen (2016) has elaborated in the context of an account of conscious thinking as an activity in Kant and Husserl, one way to understand the claim that we are active when attentive is to consider oneself active when attending because paying attention is something that we do. As Husserl writes: “the ego lives in the *cogito*, and this gives to all the content of the *cogito* its distinct ego-relation. The turning-toward itself is characterized by an ‘I do’; and the wandering of the rays of attentive regard, or regard in the mode of turning-toward, is likewise an ‘I do’” (Husserl 1973c, 85). One may then further describe this activity as the activity of foregrounding insofar as attending to something amounts to bringing it to the foreground—whether visually, in our imagination, in memory, or in thought (for a contemporary account, see Watzl 2018). This way of thinking of attention as a kind of spotlight that we move to bring something to the foreground that was previously in the background is

certainly a characterization we can find in many of Husserl's phenomenological descriptions.

So, for example, Husserl writes:

We tend to compare attention to a light that illuminates things. What one specifically pays attention to is situated in the more or less bright sphere of light, but it can also move into half-shadows and into complete darkness. As inadequate as this image is for the sake of distinctly marking out [*auszuprägen*] all the modes that are to be fastened on phenomenologically, it is still significant to the extent that it indicates alterations in what is appearing as such. This change in illumination does not alter what appears (in terms of the composition of its own sense), but brightness and darkness modify its manner of appearance. They can be found and need to be described, when we focus on the noematic object. (Husserl 2014b, 183)

Leaving aside the issue of why the image of attention as a spotlight is considered inadequate by Husserl (see D'Angelo 2019 for a critique of this metaphor), to understand the activity of attention solely in terms of foregrounding cannot account for the self as active when attentive for the simple reason that attention is not always the top-down phenomenon in which I foreground something. As we all know, our attention is often captured unwittingly or even against our will and in that sense paying attention is not something *we* do. Or, as Husserl points out in a manuscript from 1922, attention that is active in this sense is only one kind of attentive experience under the broader genus of attentive awareness:

Interest is also an *actus* respectively a *habitus* of freedom, a general phenomenological form of "actus" the objects of which are not insisting on me, but rather objects towards which I have freely positioned myself, with whom I occupy myself, towards which I surrender. The free act is hence a specific type

over against the more general “I am conscious of an object, I am attentive towards it, directed at it.” (Husserl forthcoming, my translation)<sup>8</sup>

If we want to claim that the attentive self is active, whether freely steering its attention or not, it cannot be active in the sense of actively steering one’s attention, even though we do at times engage in that activity. However, as Jansen (2016) mentions, what Husserl calls receptivity is also a form of activity.<sup>9</sup> I would now like to further elaborate how exactly, for Husserl, attentive experience, even when solicited and not steered by me, is active because receptive.

According to some of Husserl’s descriptions, the receptivity that is characteristic of our attentive experiences is active in that when I attend to something, I am receptive to it in the sense that I accept how something appears to me (or not). For example, Husserl writes: “There is ‘receptivity’ (or better, an accepting), a doxic doing (*Verhalten*), that takes up what is passively given, and merely grasps in taking over. [...] Actually grasping, positing as an object is already spontaneity” (Husserl forthcoming, my translation).<sup>10</sup> Or also: “A sensuous grasping, a grasping of something sensible presupposes a sensuous appearance, and in this case the grasping entails an accepting, a taking on and taking up of something that already manifested

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<sup>8</sup> “Das Interesse ist also ein *actus* bzw. Habitus der Freiheit, eine allgemein phänomenologische Form “*actus*”, deren Gegenstände mir nicht aufgedrängt sind, sondern zu denen ich mich frei hingestellt habe, mit denen ich mich beschäftige, denen ich mich hingebe. Der freie Akt ist also ein besonderer Typus gegenüber dem allgemeineren: “Ich bin mir einer Gegenständlichkeit bewusst, ich bin auf sie aufmerksam, auf sie gerichtet.”

<sup>9</sup> Likewise Kidd (forthcoming) argues that for Husserl “perceptual receptivity is a form of subjective, self-determining spontaneity.”

<sup>10</sup> “Es gibt eine ‚Rezeptivität‘ (besser sprechen wir von einem Akzipieren), ein doxisches Verhalten, das hinnimmt, was passiv vorgegeben ist, und im Übernehmen nur zugreift. Deutlicher: Ein Gegenstand drängt sich mir auf, er steht aufgedrängt da, ich bin bei ihm. Das eigentliche Erfassen, Zugreifen, als Gegenstand Setzen ist schon eine Spontaneität.”

itself’ (Husserl forthcoming, my translation).<sup>11</sup> Receptivity is here characterized as an accepting, taking on, or taking up, which is in turn characterized as a doing (*Verhalten*) that is already a form of spontaneity. What this means is that Husserl at least sometimes is willing to speak of spontaneity even in relation to the activity and stance-taking characteristic of receptive perceiving. To be clear, Husserl does not always use “spontaneity” in this sense,<sup>12</sup> but he is sometimes willing to extend the concept of spontaneity to also cover the activity of receptive and attentive awareness. As Husserl puts it: “Turning toward is also to be considered as a function of spontaneity, and to that extent receiving (accepting) is also spontaneity; but we contrast this spontaneity to what we properly call spontaneity, which is a higher and creative spontaneity to the extent that not just a turning toward takes place but action in the form of thought-formation in light of ever new turning toward” (Husserl forthcoming, my translation).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Eine sinnliche Erfassung, Erfassung von einem Sinnlichen, setzt eine sinnliche Erscheinung voraus, und hier ist die Erfassung eine akzipierende, ein Annehmen und Aufnehmen eines Vorgegebenen.”

<sup>12</sup> So, for example, in the following passage, Husserl restricts spontaneity to active deliberation: “The ego that behaves in a merely perceptively aware and observant manner comports itself in a merely receptive fashion. Indeed, it is a wakeful ego and lives as such in the form of ‘*ego cogito*’; but this form itself encompasses a mere passivity and activity. This receptivity is the founding presupposition for the possibility of the specific ‘spontaneity’ of the ego, that is, for making possible the position-takings of the ego and what is [specifically] in question here, [namely,] judicative position-takings” (Husserl 2001a, 441). The latter are further characterized as position-takings in response to a consciousness in which I doubt whether the world is thus or so—that is, a form of deliberation (Husserl 2001a, 440).

<sup>13</sup> “Die Zuwendung ist zwar auch als Funktion der Spontaneität anzusehen, insofern ist Rezeption (Akzeption [Acception]) auch Spontaneität, aber wir stellen sie die eigentlichen und höheren, schöpferischen Spontaneität gegenüber, sofern nicht bloß Zuwendung, sondern Aktion in der Denkgestaltung im Licht immer neuer Zuwendung statthat.”

If Husserl does indeed allow for activity and spontaneity at the level of egoic attentive experience before and without active deliberation, let alone predication, how should we characterize the kind of activity at work in the receptivity of accepting how something appears? I would like to suggest that we can describe this kind of activity as a letting something count or going along with how something appears, which would capture the receptive character of this way of being aware of the world. At the same time, to think that this would not be a form of activity would amount to too narrowly restricting activity to spontaneous deliberation and predicative articulation.

If, as Husserl describes in these passages, attentive experiences involve an activity of accepting or taking up, we can also understand how the self that is active in being attentive and receptive to how things are at times ends up deliberating. That is, receptively accepting or taking up how something is experienced amounts to being open to how things are. Husserl describes this openness as follows:

In surrendering, being interested in the object, the object is not anymore the object that imposes on me, that has pulled me toward itself. I do first follow the affective pull. But the object “arouses my interest.” Now the object is one toward which I freely position myself, toward which I freely surrender, with which I occupy myself. What does being occupied with mean here? I actively (*tätig*) go towards the object, I open my arms and receive it in its impressional coming as expected with an inner ‘consent,’ I go towards it and I take it on. (Husserl forthcoming, my translation)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Der Gegenstand ist in der Hingabe, im Interesse nicht mehr aufgedrängter, der mich zu sich hingerissen hat. Zunächst folge ich wohl der Affektion. Aber der Gegenstand „weckt mein Interesse”. Nun ist der Gegenstand ein solcher, zu dem ich mich frei hinstelle, bei dem <ich> in freier Hingabe bin, mit dem ich mich beschäftige. Was ist hier das Beschäftigen? Ich sehe dem Kommenden tätig entgegen, ich öffne ihm meine Arme und empfangen es

However, given the activity involved in this openness, what Husserl here calls consent, this openness is also what at times gives way to acts of deliberation—that is, in those cases where I do not find myself to be in a position to just go along, accept, or take up how things present themselves to me. In those cases, which are cases of what Husserl calls modalization (*Modalisierung*), our straightforward experiencing may give way to active deliberation.<sup>15</sup>

That attentive experiences can give way to acts of deliberation in cases where how the world appears becomes dubitable is due to the very structure of attentive intentionality. Attentive (non-neutralized) experiences currently or actually posit (*setzen*) what they are aware of. All intentional experiences, whether attentive or not have the same structure in that they present something with a belief character and can hence be characterized as positings (Husserl 2014b, 232). However, only when an intentional experience is or becomes actual in the form of an attentive mode of experiencing does this positing become actualized in the form of a receptive accepting or not accepting (a *cogito* or stance-taking in the broad sense), which is the relevant activity. Husserl at times draws this contrast between current or actual positings and latent or potential positings in terms of “states” and “acts.” Those intentional experiences that are forms of background experiences (retained or at present) are characterized as states that can be modalized into an act: “Mere states are conscious experiences that are not aiming. Every aiming experiencing can modify into a mere state, each conscious state can become an act” (Husserl forthcoming, my translation).<sup>16</sup> Or also:

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im impressionalen Kommen als Erwartetes mit einer inneren „Zustimmung“, ich gehe ihm entgegen und nehme es an.”

<sup>15</sup> In Jacobs (2016a), I have provided a more detailed account of how and when deliberation arises.

<sup>16</sup> “Bloße Zustände wären Bewusstseinserebnisse, die nicht meinend sind. Jedes meinende Erlebnis kann sich zu einem bloßen Zustand modifizieren, jeder Bewusstseinszustand kann Akt werden.”



Act and state are in general to be distinguished as spontaneity (activity) and passivity. Each activity corresponds to a passivity insofar as activity can, according to an eidetic law, change itself into passivity. States can either be ‘intentional’ (constituting objects) or not (this concerns contents of sensation). With regard to intentional states, it can be either of two kinds. Either it is an original passivity, which means that it is not a modification of an activity, which originally constituted this object to which the state is related. Or it is such a modification. (Husserl forthcoming, my translation)<sup>17</sup>

States can hence refer to either passive experiences that were or were not previously active. If they were active, they were such because they were egoic or attentive—and it is in these attentive experiences that the self is active in the sense of accepting or taking up how something appears.

If the self is active when attentively and receptively experiencing the world, deliberations are but one expression of the self as active, where activity refers to the accepting that characterizes the mode of our conscious experiences as attentive. While both attentive and deliberative experiences are active in that they accept (or not) how something appears, deliberation is always in response to doubt. While what we attend to is not always something of our doing (even less so how something appears), our going along or accepting how something appears is a clear expression of our spontaneity—and we are not only spontaneous

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<sup>17</sup> “Akt und Zustand scheidet sich im Allgemeinen nach als Spontaneität (Aktivität) und Passivität. Jeder Aktivität entspricht Passivität insofern, als Aktivität in Passivität sich wesensgesetzlich verwandelt. Nun ist Zuständigkeit entweder „intentional“ (Gegenstand konstituierend) oder nicht (letzteres betrifft die Empfindungsinhalte). Was die intentionale Zuständigkeit anlangt, so ist sie von doppelter Art. Entweder sie ist ursprüngliche Passivität, das heißt, sie ist keine Abwandlung einer Aktivität, die ursprünglich dieselbe Gegenständigkeit konstituiert, auf die sich die Zuständigkeit bezieht, oder sie ist eine solche Abwandlung.”

in this way when actively deliberating (let alone predicatively articulating). This also means, however, that personal self-constitution cannot be limited to moments of deliberation. Rather, we appropriate beliefs, evaluations, and desires as our own when active in the broader sense of letting something count. What is more, we appropriate on the basis of evidence (see Jacobs 2016a). Differently stated, and as I will return to, because the self is active in the way I have discussed, it can become its own person in a socio-historical context. Before returning to the question of personhood, however, I will suggest in the next section that the activity that is characteristic of the attentive self can be discerned to be at work in both our rational and loving ways of relating to the world and others.

### 3. Rational and Loving Activity

The literature on the development of Husserl's thought and his ethics in particular tends to emphasize that while Husserl initially focuses on the self's relation to rational evidence, in his later work Husserl describes commitments such as love that do not allow for a rational justification in the way other evaluative and practical experiences and judgments do. Without dismissing important differences between Husserl's account of rational ethical valuation and deliberation and his descriptions of personal love, scholars have more recently argued that these descriptions are not necessarily entirely at odds with one another (see Drummond 2018; Heinämaa 2020; Rinofner-Kreidl forthcoming). When it comes to the account of the self as active as I have presented it, it seems that while the particular way we are active in relation to evidence and in relation to what is loved might differ in important respects, the activity and self that is active are the same in that we can receptively and then at times deliberately take up our loving commitments. And I would like to suggest that doing so would involve

attentiveness and openness to what one is committed to in this way. If so, the self is not only active in an epistemic sense but is also active in its loving and other commitments.

Insofar as Husserl describes the activity characteristic of attentive modes of consciousness in terms of receptivity or accepting, he clearly attributes epistemic importance to this activity. While Husserl does not by any means commit to a voluntaristic conception of belief according to which one can make oneself believe something despite evidence to the contrary, his account of our world-directed beliefs and other judgments provides an epistemic role to receptivity because our world-directed experience is never absolutely certain, and a variety of evidence can present itself to me. Not only can I accept or not accept how something appears (*as* being this or that kind of thing, event, or state of affairs) on the basis of more or less conclusive evidence, my accepting or not accepting in this way will also make me receptive to more and different evidence. That is, if I without further ado am receptive to how something appears because there is sufficient evidence in that nothing motivates me to doubt, I will not be inclined to engage further perceptually or otherwise.<sup>18</sup> And my accepting or not accepting will be made in light of interests, commitments, and past experiences in addition to the available evidence. Hence, the epistemic role of attention is not just that it makes us receptive to evidence in favor of or against how we take the world to be, but also—negatively—it means that we can close ourselves off to further evidence. Indeed, by redirecting our attention—willingly or not—we can close ourselves off to evidence that is right there in front of us, so to speak (see Rinofner-Kreidl 2012).

One aspect that differentiates certain loving commitments (and other commitments like love) from our epistemic orientation towards the world is that the force of these commitments does not derive from evidence supporting them. Husserl draws the contrast clearly when he

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<sup>18</sup> In Jacobs (forthcoming), I develop in more detail the way in which our way of relating to what we attend to (accepting or not) and what we attend to or not are non-trivially related.

writes: “There is something like an unconditional ‘you will and have to’ that directs itself toward a person, and for those who experience this absolute affective pull it is not subjected to rational justification and is not dependent on such justification in one’s rightfully being bound by it” (Husserl 2014a, 392, my translation). Certain commitments are unconditionally binding in the sense of not being dependent on rational justification (and in this sense absolute; see Rinofner-Kreidl forthcoming). This also means that one’s commitment to what is loved is not conditioned by or dependent on the characteristics of what is loved (see Drummond 2015 for the sense in which these characteristics do play a role). As Husserl writes, in the case of love:

A loving valuing flows from the self towards this individual object (which of course has its individual particularity and accordingly its objective value) and imparts the object with a value which originates from the self and is special for the self as having originated in the self. And this value is followed by a practical ought that is not determined by the value of the object (that originates in the object through affective pull), stands in no evaluative relation with possible objective values of these and other objects, and is not a practical ought that can be chosen in relation to another valuable something that “could” have weight. (Husserl 2014a, 352; my translation)

What is loved is not comparable to whatever else one values, and in this sense one ought not even deliberate between what one loves and otherwise values.

At the same time, as Husserl acknowledges, the self that is lovingly committed can relate in a number of different ways to what it is committed to. As Husserl points out, love “is not a momentary act, but rather a continuously-deciding-in-favor-of-another-person” (Husserl 2014a, 344; my translation). Or, as Heinämaa (2020) has recently argued on the basis of Husserl’s writings, “all loving involves two components: an affective component of feeling and a deciding egoic act which is responsible for the permanence of the emotion.” Likewise,

the experience of allowing for our loving commitments to wither and deteriorate by letting ourselves be distracted by things we do not love but that nevertheless manage to occupy us is likely familiar to many. So even if we are fortunate enough to experience love for someone, we often enough end up living in a way that does not honor this loving commitment. Importantly, to honor our commitments would seem to require the kind of activity that also characterizes our relation to evidence: the activity of deciding in favor of something not (only and primarily) by deliberating but by attending to it in loving devotion. Husserl speaks of the activity of decision-making in relation to what one loves as follows:

A value, that originates out of myself, in favor of which I decide, as the one I am, in original loving devotion, is practically unconditional, absolutely obligating, and binds me as who I am. Deciding against this value amounts to becoming unloyal to oneself, losing oneself, sinning against oneself, betraying one's true self, acting against one's true being (absolute practical contradiction).  
(Husserl 2014a, 356; my translation)

However, in addition to those situations in which we explicitly make a decision in favor of what we love or in which we are tragically forced to give up on what we love in favor of other absolute values or due to tragic circumstances, there are the more commonplace instances of being more or less in tune with what we love. What I would like to suggest is that to be attuned to what we love means at least in part that we attend to it in the business of our everyday lives that provide a myriad of ways for us to lose touch with what we love, and when we are so attentive we are in a position to devote ourselves to what we value and nurture our commitment to it. While Husserl does not state it explicitly this way, he does describe the different ways of relating to what we love as follows:

It is a free self, insofar as it can follow the call or can refuse to give heed to it or also can just not listen to it (not hearing and looking away). It is to be noted

that this individual call always goes back to values, but can be instinctively blind, like the originally blind mother instinct. Also in this form the call has the form of an absolute call and it is experienced as an absolute ought. (Husserl 2014a, 359; my translation; see also Rinofner-Kreidl forthcoming)

If to be active selves means to have the ability to not only steer one's attention but also to take up what one attends to, this characterization seems to capture both our epistemic and loving relations, even if attending and accepting take on different guises in these respective instances. What is more, it is then not only the activity of the self in an epistemic sense but also in relation to what we love that is constitutive of who we are as persons.

#### 4. Activity that matters

I have thus far emphasized the active dimension of attentive epistemic awareness of the world as well as of the loving commitments we honor in our everyday lives as particular persons. While this account may provide a description of what is characteristic of our ways experiencing some aspects of the world and others, it might also seem to fall short of capturing what uniquely characterizes the lives of persons. That is, we seem far from the only conscious forms of life that are attentively aware of the world.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, persons tend to think that there is something unique to their form of life. As I would like to suggest in concluding, while there is something to this thought, what makes us different (and any other form of life if it were different in this way) is not so much us being active selves but rather the worlds we find ourselves in, of which Husserl provides rich and numerous descriptions. Specifically, it is only

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<sup>19</sup> Crowell (2020) raises this issue when he writes “the minimal self belongs not just to persons but to *all* conscious beings,” and the same could be said about the active self as I have characterized it.

for those who are socio-historically embedded in the way we are (and any others like us) that the activity that is characteristic of conscious experience insofar as it is attentive yields the specific personal awareness of some aspects of the world and others. Or to state it more directly: It is only those self-aware and active selves (i.e., egos) that are socio-historically embedded like we are that become persons in and through the activity of accepting, and at times deliberating and predicatively articulating.

Husserl acknowledges the ego-like structure of non-human animal forms of consciousness in the following passage:

Their conscious life understood as a pure animal one is centered, and when talking of a subject of consciousness, of being conscious, there is something analogous or something more general in relation to the human ego of its *cogitationes* of these and those *cogitata* for which we do not have a fitting word.

The animal also has something like an egoic structure. (Husserl 1973b, 177; my translation)

At the same time, there are a number of ways in which Husserl does differentiate between the experience of human and non-human animals. A first difference that Husserl points out is the occurrence of predicative activity. So, for example, in *Ideas*, immediately after defining our wakeful lives in terms of the occurrence of attentive awareness, Husserl states that the presence of attentive experiences need not entail that one is able to predicatively articulate those experiences since “there are, indeed, also animal ego-subjects” (Husserl 2014b, 62). While animal forms of awareness are hence attributed attentive awareness, they are at the same time not considered by Husserl to have the ability to make statements about their own attentive awareness.

A second difference that Husserl articulates between the experience of human and non-human animal life pertains to the content of their experiences. While non-human animals experience a world, in Husserl's view this world is not a historical world:

The human as person is the subject of a cultural world [...] The animal does not live (knowingly) in a cultural world. This means: Humans are historical beings, they live in a "humanity" which exist in the form of a historical and history creating becoming; humanity is the subjectivity as what supports the historical world. (Husserl 1973b, 180; my translation; see also Di Martino 2014)

Or negatively stated: "The animal itself does not have a generative world in which it lives with awareness; it is not conscious of being in an open infinity of generations and correlatively it does not exist in an actual surrounding world, which we ascribe to it while anthropomorphizing it" (Husserl 1973b, 181; my translation). Importantly for my current purpose, Husserl connects being a person to being generatively connected to other persons when he writes for example: "its self [of the human being]—the self in the common sense—is a personal self, and every human being is for itself and in relation to all other human beings a person," and "each human being, insofar as it has consciousness of world, or insofar as it is truly an egoic subject for the world of which it is certain in its being, is for herself a person in an endless open generative connection, in the concatenation and branching of generations" (Husserl 1973b, 177–78, my translation).

What I would like to suggest on the basis of what I have elaborated thus far is that one way we can understand this difference between non-human and human animal life as Husserl conceives it is that for those conscious selves that are socio-historically embedded in the way we are, being active selves makes a difference in the way it may not for those whose experience is not so embedded. Specifically, when the content of our experience is rich and complex in the way our socio-historically embedded experience is, our experience also being active in the



sense of receptive is what makes it possible for our experience to be personal or our own. Our experience becomes and is personal when our relating in an active way to what is experienced makes an actual difference. We can easily imagine forms of conscious lives, which are not personal in this way and in which the experienced content is such that the activity of receptivity makes less of a difference than it sometimes does in our own lives.

The content of our experience is due to what Husserl calls the passive dimension of our conscious experience. Our experience is passive insofar as what is currently perceived awakens, by means of association, ways of experiencing with a horizon of expectation. While associations would also characterize the experience of other forms of conscious experience, our experience is significantly different because we are socio-historically embedded in the way other forms of conscious life may not be. The experience of socio-historically embedded selves is informed by what we take over or appropriate from our socio-historical context. Concretely, bodily gestures of others as well as language and the particular form of history that comes with it make it such that when we at present experience something *how* we experience something is informed by this history.<sup>20</sup> While our way of experiencing the world at present will have some grounding in what is currently actually experienced, what is actually experienced will not only not conclusively confirm our anticipations but will also allow for different ways of seeing and understanding the current situation. What is at present experienced is, hence, often in several respects underdetermined insofar as it is compatible with a number of ways of perceiving and understanding it—especially if we take into account the evaluative and practical dimensions that are characteristic of our perceptual awareness. In these cases, whether or not we take up

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<sup>20</sup> I have more fully developed this in the context of Husserl's work in Jacobs (2016a and 2016b).

or accept how something appears to us as informed by our socio-historical context is expressive of who we are or have become as persons.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

Having provided an outline of a Husserlian account of the self not just as self-aware but also as active in response to a number of important concerns raised by Crowell, one might wonder whether this account can provide us with what Crowell identified as a lack in the current interpretations of Husserl's account of the person—namely, an account of the self as commitment, or the self that adopts certain norms as binding. In concluding, and most probably going beyond Husserl, I would like to provide the beginning of an answer to this question by highlighting that while on the presented account commitment appears to be the very structure of consciousness (as attentive and active), this commitment only makes a difference for those who are subjects or a “subjectivity” (selves that are embodied and socio-historically embedded). And regarding the question of *why* someone would care about how they commit in being attentive and active and in what sense they can succeed or fail in how they commit, I

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<sup>21</sup> At this point, the proposed account raises a host of new questions. First, we can wonder whether all active human selves become and remain persons in that they actively relate to what they experience. The proposed view is compatible with there being a variety of ways and respects in which one can be active. The bottom line is, however, that someone would display personhood insofar as and because they, even if only pre-reflectively, endorse their (inherited) way of seeing, feeling, and wanting. Second, we can wonder how this account of personhood relates to the issue of personal identity. For this question, I refer to Jacobs (2010a), with the important addition that stance-takings cannot be limited to active deliberations. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for raising these questions which would require further elaboration along the lines suggested here.

would like to suggest that we look at who we stand with in how we actively relate to the world and others.

Insofar as wakeful experience is attentive and therefore active, and insofar as the activity of attentive experience consists in accepting or otherwise responding to what one experiences (be it something perceived, known, valued, wanted, or loved), there is a sense in which commitment is the very structure of consciousness insofar as it is egoic—and in our accepting or not we exercise this commitment. However, this commitment only matters because we are never just a consciousness but are always also an embodied and socio-historically embedded subjectivity. It is only because we are particularly embodied and embedded in a socio-historical context that whether we accept something or lovingly and attentively engage with something is such that something is at stake in it. That is, it is because of the limitations and complexity that comes with being an embodied and socio-historically embedded self that I can be considered to succeed or fail in the way I relate to the world and others. Concretely, I may accept all too gullibly what the communities I belong to accept as a matter of fact, I may overlook aspects of the world and others that merit my attention due to this all too easy accepting, or I may be blamed by myself and others for disregarding a loving commitment that constitutes me in who I am.

Even if this characterization of attentive consciousness as commitment and this commitment making a difference for subjects like us makes sense, this account still seems to leave Crowell's most pressing question for a Husserlian account unanswered: "Why should I listen to a call or care" (Crowell 2020)? Or differently stated, why should I care about how I actively relate to what I attentively experience and what I attend to? The proposal I would like to make at this point is that we can get some insight into why we always already do care (though perhaps not why we should care) by looking at the self's relations to others. Specifically, our caring about how we attentively and actively relate to what we experience is an expression of

our caring about belonging to certain communities or about standing with them for better or worse. What this means is that our accepting or not accepting of how we experience the world and others is indicative of the communities we consider ourselves to stand with, which can range from self-conscious rational communities to our families as well as those communities of others that are omitted, silenced, and distorted in the shared experiences of the community we happen to find ourselves to be part of. It is in light of those commitments to others that certain ways of seeing the world can become unacceptable, and the withholding of our endorsement of these ways of seeing is a testimony to the awareness of and endorsing of different ways of seeing, believing, valuing, wanting, and loving. What is more, this awareness is even present in our unquestioning commitment to a particular and limited way of experiencing the world and others. That is, because we are embedded in a socio-historical world that is heterogenous and characterized by dissent, even our just going along with a certain way of experiencing is never just passive—it is active. And it is this activity and how we exercise it that is constitutive of the persons we are or might become.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Two anonymous referees were instrumental in my formulating this suggestion in conclusion, which is only an outline of the beginning of an answer to their insightful questions.

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