

PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH AS AN COMPLEMENTARY STATE OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

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1.0 Introduction

The question we seek to respond to is; how humans acquire phenomenal as opposed to noumenal knowledge? The interrelationship between phenomenology and epistemology cannot be gainsaid. Epistemology deals with an object without the object that appropriates and knows it, while phenomenology deals with an object within the human mind after appropriation process by the subject. Epistemologists study the empirical experiences (outer sense or *sense-perception*), whereas phenomenologists study only the conscious experiences (*inner sense* or intentionality).

Using the phenomenological approach to knowledge, we begin as we should with the reflective attitude which is introspective, conscious and intentional. It focuses on conscious experiences which puts aside all subjective prior presuppositions and prejudices. It then goes further to the things themselves in order to know their meaning or essence.

Phenomenological approach primarily emphasizes on intentional consciousness by the knowing subject directed towards the object. With the phenomenological approach to knowledge, we only deal with mental phenomena, which are different from the physical ones. According to Brentano, the mental phenomena are those phenomena given to the mind. They are the phenomena of conscious experiences, that is, the experiences within our consciousness¹.

Since the object of investigation is phenomenologically within the mind, we need to move from the natural attitude to the transcendental attitude. According to Edmund Husserl, in the natural attitude, we assume unquestioningly that the world exists outside there. But in the transcendental attitude, we are aware of the objects within our mind. This is why phenomenology aims to articulate what shows itself to our mind². It aims to interpret the mental phenomena, that is, the phenomena which give themselves to us.

¹ Craig, Edward (ed.). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Volume4: *From Genealogy to Iqbal*. New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 816b-817b.

² Wallace, William A., OP. *The Elements of Philosophy. A Compendium for Philosophers and Theologians*. New York: St Pauls, 1977, p. 297.

As an alternative and complementary approach to epistemology, phenomenology studies things as we experience them.³ In his *Ideas*⁴, Edmund Husserl describes phenomenology as the science of phenomena. Like Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edmund Husserl defines phenomenology as the interpretation of our conscious experiences. In this way, phenomenology deals with the meaning or essence of the phenomena that appear to our consciousness. With the phenomenological approach to knowledge, the objects of investigation are no longer outside there; but they are within the subject of investigation.

1.1 The Method of Phenomenology

Phenomenology is not a unified method of philosophy. Its main proponents (Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty) interpret it differently. Although it is possible to present a broad characterization of what they share, Edmund Husserl focuses on the transcendental method, while Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty focus on the existential method⁵. This is why I will mainly present the Husserl's "phenomenological reduction."

Husserl's method has two kinds of reduction: the *epoché* reduction applied to the subject of investigation and the *eidetic* reduction applied to the object of investigation. The Husserlian *epoché* reduction is somehow similar to the *Cartesian methodic doubt* because the bracketing process (i.e. the putting aside) is a process of doubting everything. Like René Descartes who doubts everything (i.e. the former knowledge; the senses, dreams and the evil genius; and even the mathematical truths), Edmund Husserl puts between brackets (puts aside) all the prejudices and influences that can constitute obstacles to the knowledge of the objects of our consciousness.

By using the *epoché* reduction, Edmund Husserl aims to build his new philosophy on a solid foundation. Like Descartes, Husserl starts by suspending all knowledge about everything. He aims to bracket (i.e. to put aside) all his prejudices and presuppositions. The way our senses can deceive us, he also acknowledges that the natural attitude is naïve and unreliable. This is why Husserl asserts: "Our first outlook upon life is that of natural human beings, imagining, judging, feeling and willing from the natural standpoint."⁶

Edmund Husserl aims to move from the natural attitude to the transcendental attitude (i.e. the philosophical attitude of mind)⁷. According to Husserl, the natural attitude takes reality for granted. With this natural attitude, we think that something is always given to us. This attitude stands for what Husserl calls the "fact-world" (i.e. the general thesis of the natural standpoint). For Edmund Husserl, the natural attitude takes reality as something which is always there, existing outside our mind and even transcending our consciousness.

³ Hammond, Michael, Jane Howarth and Russell Keat. *Understanding phenomenology*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991, p. 37.

⁴ Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Volume1: *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, Translated by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer, Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989, p. 41.

⁵ Craig, Edward (ed.). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Volume7: *From Nihilism to Quantum*. New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 343a-344a.

⁶ Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Volume1: *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, p. 101.

⁷ Husserl, Edmund. *The Idea of Phenomenology*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964, p. 13.

This natural attitude is transcendent, whereas the philosophical attitude of mind is transcendental. Since the natural attitude is the one of the common sense, it is naïve and unreliable. In this way, Edmund Husserl shifts/moves from the natural attitude to the transcendental one. At this level of the transcendental attitude, Husserl brackets, that is, doubts all the former assumptions. This is why he argues: “The attempt to doubt everything has its place in the realm of our perfect freedom. We can attempt to doubt anything and of current usage may also be expressed in the words: I suppose (I make the assumption) that it is so and so.”⁸

According to Husserl, we need the transcendental attitude which is a bracketing process. This philosophical attitude of mind is a phenomenological reduction from which new knowledge can spring. This transcendental attitude disconnects us from all prejudices and presuppositions that pertain to the natural standpoint. Concerning the disconnection process, Edmund Husserl says: “I disconnect them all, I make absolutely no use of their standards, I do not appropriate a single one of the propositions that enter into their systems, even though their evidential value is perfect, I take none of them, no one of them serves me for a foundation.”⁹

For Husserl, the transcendental attitude is a conscious process in order to describe the meaning or essence of the phenomena. It is a “philosophical attitude of mind”¹⁰ required for judging, valuing and signifying the world of experience. With this philosophical attitude of mind, we move from the natural experience (i.e. the experience beyond or outside our consciousness) to the transcendental experience (i.e. the experience present or within our consciousness).

With the transcendental attitude, the outer experience is fundamentally transformed into an inner one. With this new attitude, the natural experience is completely transcendentalized because the transcendental Ego becomes the conscious ego in order to describe the meaning or essence of the phenomena. Husserl goes on saying: “Posited as real (i.e. transcendental), I am now no longer a human Ego (i.e. the transcendent ego) but rather a conscious Ego in the universe of possible sense.”¹¹

With regard to the transcendental subjectivity, the transcendental Ego becomes a “pure I” or “the philosophizing Ego.” For Husserl, this transcendental Ego is centered on the self-reflection of the Ego whereby the “pure Ego” becomes aware of its own phenomenological self-contained essence that is posited as the Ego who invests the essence of the phenomena. As Edmund Husserl says: “The posited Ego means that the world is no longer given to me in advance and outside there, but the positing world is within the transcendental Ego.”¹²

⁸ Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Volume1: *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, pp. 107-108.

⁹ Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Volume1: *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, p. 111.

¹⁰ Kambale, Mathe Jean de Dieu. *Edmund Husserl's Concept of "Life-World" as the Ground and Horizon for Transcendental Intersubjectivity*. Thesis at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2017, pp. 43-44.

¹¹ Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, Translated by Dorion Cairns, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999, p. 84.

¹² Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Volume1: *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, p. 118.

Since the posited Ego transcendentalizes the positing world, the conscious experience transcendentalizes the natural experience. In the process of transcendentalizing the positing world (i.e. the transcendent world), the *epoché* reduction constitutes an alternative and complementary approach to epistemology.

The *eidetic* reduction consists in focusing on the essence of things or on the essential structures of what appears. At this level, Husserl ascribes to the subject (“mind and body”) a *constitutive role* of giving the sense or meaning of things. According to Edmund Husserl, the *eidetic* reduction leads us to a subjective knowledge of the phenomena. For him, the structures of the world can only be those experienced by the subject. This is why Husserl says: “I must lose the world by *epoché*, in order to regain it by a universal self-examination.”¹³

With the *eidetic* reduction, Edmund Husserl wants to go back to the things themselves. Husserl says that “We must not make assertions about that which we do not ourselves see.” For this reason, Edmund Husserl rejects those portions of Descartes’s and Kant’s philosophies which go beyond the immediate phenomenological realm, what Husserl terms the transcendent world, the world of experience. Kant’s distinction between the *phenomenal* reality and the *noumenal* reality is unacceptable to Husserl. Edmund Husserl rigorously limits the scope of his phenomenology to the realm of conscious experience, which is called transcendental world.

According to Husserl, the transcendental world is that of conscious experience, that is, the world of the transcendental Ego or the world of consciousness. In order to know this transcendental world, Edmund Husserl speaks of two kinds of the phenomenological reduction. The *epoché* reduction deals with “putting things aside” in order to avoid any prejudices and presuppositions, while the *eidetic* reduction deals with the sense or meaning of what appears.

By bracketing the realm of experience (i.e. using the *epoché* reduction), Husserl is led back (*reducere*, in Latine) to the center of transcendental world. Concerning the subject of investigation, Husserl states that: “I have discovered that I alone am the pure ego, with pure existence... Through this ego alone, the being of the world make sense to me and has possible validity.”¹⁴ However, by focusing on the second kind of the phenomenological reduction, Husserl says “all consciousness is always a consciousness of something beyond it, something presented to it but not contained in it.”¹⁵

After applying the *eidetic* reduction on the object of investigation, the phenomena can be either *real* or *apparent*, either *explicit* or *implicit*¹⁶; these phenomena can either *represent* or *misrepresent* the reality; they can either *reveal* or *hide* the reality, depending on how we experience things. In other words, our experience of the phenomena leads us to a dichotomy between an *inner* world and an *outer* world. But how does Edmund Husserl define this “phenomenological method”?

¹³ Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, p. 157.

¹⁴ Stumpf, Samuel Enoch. *Socrates to Sartre. A History of Philosophy*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1998, p. 475.

¹⁵ Wallace, William A., OP. *The Elements of Philosophy. A Compendium for Philosophers and Theologians*, p. 299.

¹⁶ Hammond, Michael, Jane Howarth and Russell Keat. *Understanding phenomenology*, p. 42.

1. The phenomenological method is a philosophical method by means of which one returns to the “origins and beginnings” of things instead of relying on the superficial aspects of the material objects. With this philosophical method, one should place himself or herself in the sphere of “original and clear beginnings.”¹⁷
2. The phenomenological method is a procedure by which one perceives things themselves as they are without any presuppositions or prejudices¹⁸. It is a procedure by which one perceives the original phenomena exactly as they present themselves to us.
3. The phenomenological method is a change of attitude by which one learns to see things in a more radical way. In other words, one needs to penetrate into things in order to see the meaning behind the material objects.¹⁹
4. The phenomenological method is an adoption of an objective and neutral position toward the former knowledge. This procedure requires that one must free himself of the philosophical solutions that have been proposed for the various philosophical questions. One should free himself or herself of hypotheses handed down from ancient to modern times²⁰. One should only rely on his or her neutral positions about things.
5. The phenomenological reduction is a process that leads one from the realm of facts to that of their “essences.”²¹ It is a process through which one raises his or her knowledge from the level of facts to the sphere of ideas. In other words, this process helps one with immediate access to the realm of essences.
6. The phenomenological reduction is somehow a *Cartesian methodological doubt* because it also deals with the “bracketing/suspension of all prejudices and presuppositions so as to reach the meaning or essence of things. It is an attempt to a universal denial²² (i.e. the process of bracketing, suspending or letting aside). It is a process of attaining knowledge with certainty.
7. The phenomenological reduction is a procedure by which someone moves/shifts from the “natural standpoint to the transcendental one” in order to get the meaning of things. It helps someone to move from the empirical judgment to the transcendental one, and from natural attitude to the transcendental one so as to deal with the essence of things. It also helps someone to go back to what is essential and meaningful in the material things²³.

¹⁷ Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, Translated, with an Introduction, by David Carr, Evanston/Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970, p. 146.

¹⁸ Kockelmans, Joseph J. *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 12.

¹⁹ Edmund Husserl. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Volume 1: *General Introductions to a Pure Phenomenology*, p. 59.

²⁰ Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Volume 1: *General Introductions to a Pure Phenomenology*, 37.

²¹ Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Volume 1: *General Introductions to a Pure Phenomenology*, 12.

²² Kockelmans, Joseph J. *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*, p. 34.

²³ Kockelmans, Joseph J. *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*, p. 42.

1.2. Intentionality and Knowledge Acquisition

Intentionality is the mind's capacity to direct itself on things. Brentano characterizes intentionality in terms of the mind's direction upon an object. For him, *intentionality* is what distinguishes mental from physical phenomena. By intentionality, Brentano focuses on an object given to our mind. In this way, intentionality is the directedness of the mind upon something; it is the aboutness of the mental states or the attentiveness of the mind.²⁴

However, some philosophers have used the term "consciousness" for four main topics: intentionality, introspection, knowledge in general and phenomenal experience. In Husserl's perspective, consciousness deals with the intentional and introspective object. In other words, Edmund Husserl describes phenomenology as the study of conscious experiences (i.e. the intentional and introspective experiences). At this level, intentionality has the same meaning as consciousness, which is the foundation of Husserl's phenomenology.

The Husserlian concept of "intentionality" is fundamentally related to that of consciousness²⁵. Unlike René Descartes who focuses on the existence of the subject alone, Edmund Husserl focuses on the existence of the subject in relation with something in the world. At this level, Edmund Husserl considers intentionality/consciousness as the foundation of his phenomenology because it is the basis of knowledge.

Husserl considers intentionality/consciousness as the activity of the mind. For him, intentionality/consciousness is the awareness of our experience and it presupposes a subject and an object. The *subject of experience* is a subject that undergoes an experience, whereas the *object of experience* is an object that is experienced. Focusing on his phenomenological reduction, Edmund Husserl speaks of the following features of intentionality/consciousness:

- 1) Consciousness is a mental activity that takes place inside us. The objects of consciousness are usually within us. These objects of consciousness include *thinking, believing, knowing, imagining, listening, deliberating, deciding, choosing, loving, liking, hating, desiring*, etc. these are all conscious acts and they take place in the mind.
- 2) Another distinguishing feature of consciousness is its *indubitability* because it cannot be doubted. It is impossible for a given subject to doubt that he is conscious because the very act of doubting is itself a manifestation of consciousness. That was why Descartes, after doubting everything else, found himself unable to doubt the fact he was thinking since doubting is itself an act of thinking which is in turn an act of consciousness.
- 3) A third feature of consciousness is its *inaccessibility* to anybody else except the subject of the consciousness in question. For Husserl, one person's consciousness is inaccessible to another person because it takes place in his subjectivity. There in his subjectivity a person is in a world of his own, a world that is inaccessible to others. That is why we all have secrets because whatever is in mind, for example, remains a secret unless and until I decide to tell it to somebody. In fact, someone else cannot understand what is going on in my consciousness, except myself.

²⁴ Searle, J. R. *Intentionality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 26.

²⁵ Omogbe, Joseph I. *Epistemology (Theory of Knowledge). A Systematic and Historic Study*. University of Lagos: Joja Education Research and Publishers Limited, 1998, pp. 1-4.

4) A fourth feature consciousness is the fact that it is not *spatial* because it is not physical, not quantified, not measurable, and not localizable. This is of course implied by what we said earlier that it is a mental activity. However, although it does not take place in space, it nevertheless takes place in time. For example when I am thinking about something I am doing so at a particular time but not in any space. According to Husserl, our bodies occupy space, but not our minds because they are not physical entities.

5) A fifth feature of consciousness is its *continuous nature*. The conscious activity is a continuous activity because human mind is always at work, except when someone is asleep, in a state of coma, or by losing his/her consciousness. For Edmund Husserl, as long as one remains conscious, one's mind is always at work, passing from one thing to another. In this perspective, Husserl says that man is, by his very nature, always thinking because his mind is always working, as long as he remains conscious.

6) A sixth feature of consciousness is that it is outside-oriented. This is what Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl insisted on by saying that consciousness is always *consciousness of something outside itself*. For these philosophers, there is always a link between consciousness and its object which is always outside. In phenomenology, this is what Husserl calls "intentionality." The Husserlian meaning of intentionality is the fact of consciousness always being directed to an outside object, the fact of its being object-oriented. In other words, the conscious subject (the person) is always in relation to something (the object). The phenomenological meaning of intentionality does not deal with the so-called "bad or good" intention, but rather with the fact that consciousness is always linked with an object by the very act of his consciousness.

7) The last feature of consciousness is the fact that it is *reflective*. Consciousness, in other words, is by its very nature conscious of itself as consciousness. If I am thinking of something, for example I am conscious of the fact that I am thinking of it. That is why the pain experienced by man, for example, is more painful than a similar pain experienced by an animal, because man does not only feel pain but is also conscious of the fact that he is feeling the pain because he reflects on it, whereas an animal does not. For Husserl, an animal feels pain of course, but it does not reflect on it, so its pain is consequently less than that of man who is experiencing a similar pain and reflects on it, and this makes the pain worse. In addition, Edmund Husserl says an animal that is feeling pain cannot ask itself "why is this happening to me?" because it cannot reflect on the fact that it is feeling pain. Unlike man, the animal does not have reflective consciousness.

CONCLUSION

With the phenomenological approach to knowledge, we only deal with mental phenomena, which are different from the physical ones. Phenomenology becomes an alternative and complementary approach to epistemology because phenomenologists deal with only the objects which are within the human mind.

Husserl's phenomenological reduction is all about the *epoché* reduction (bracketing or putting aside all our prior presuppositions and prejudices) and the *eidetic* reduction (going back to the things themselves in order to know their meaning or essence). At this level, Husserl describes the phenomenological reduction as: (i) a philosophical method that brings us to the "origins and beginnings" of things; (ii) a procedure by which one perceives things themselves as they appear to his/her consciousness; (iii) a change of attitude by which one learns to see things in a more radical way; (iv) an adoption of the objective and neutral position toward the former knowledge; (v) a process that leads one from the realm of facts to that of their meanings or essences; (vi) a Cartesian methodological doubt because it deals with the "bracketing" or "suspending" of all prejudices and presuppositions about reality; (vii) a procedure by which someone moves from the natural attitude to the transcendental one.

Edmund Husserl's basic idea is all about "intentionality" because he focuses on our conscious/intentional experiences, that is, the experiences of our consciousness/intentionality. Since Husserl's concept of "intentionality" is well related to that of consciousness, we can describe this consciousness as: (i) a mental activity which takes place in human mind; (ii) an indubitable activity because it happens in the thinking process; (iii) an inaccessible activity because it takes place in a single person; (iv) a non-spatial activity because it is only a spiritual activity; (v) a continuous activity because human mind is always at work, except when someone is asleep or in a state of coma; (vi) an outside-oriented activity because it is always a consciousness of something else; and (vii) a reflective activity because it only deals with conscious experiences. With regard to the *starting point* (how can we know phenomenologically), the *method* (phenomenological reduction) and the *foundation* (the concept of intentionality) of Husserl's philosophy, phenomenology is an alternative and complementary approach to epistemology.

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