

Edmund Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology

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We remember Edmund Husserl as a philosopher who had a great influence on known phenomenologists like Max Scheler, Edith Stein, Martin Heidegger, among others. These abovementioned followers acknowledged their indebtedness to Husserl despite their being unrecognized by Husserl himself. In fact, Stein, as Husserl's "secretary," was treated like a slave. Husserl considered Scheler's phenomenology as fool's gold. And not only that, Scheler and Heidegger were referred to as antipodes.

Husserl created an opening to Continental philosophy. This opening is called phenomenology – a work that would eventually take philosophy beyond the older, tired alternatives of psychologism and formalism, realism and idealism, objectivism and subjectivism.¹ In this paper, I shall attempt to critically expose Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and explore some implications to real-life situations.

Phenomenology

For Husserl, phenomenology is foundational for all philosophy (i.e. 'pre-philosophical'). It is a reflexive act that cuts across the normal flow of *consciousness* to reveal and delineate its eidetic, or essential, structures, i.e. its intentional nature, as the subjective condition for the possibility of all thinking whatsoever, especially science.² The phenomenological method is necessarily connected to the fundamental idea of (Kantian) transcendental philosophy that all objects are in principle accessible to consciousness.³ This goes to say that in phenomenology, consciousness is always *consciousness of*. All conscious awarenesses are intentional awarenesses; all consciousness is consciousness-of-something.⁴ Phenomenology is the special method of the eidetic reduction by means of which the phenomena are described. Through the method of imaginative variation (examples of instantiation and comparative examination), the invariant or eidetic aspects of a particular phenomenon are explicated.⁵

In here, we realize that everything is under the domain of consciousness. In other words, nothing can get away from consciousness so that all are subject to its activity. But such consciousness is not operating for its own end. Its function is rather tied to

¹ *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*, ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indianan University Press, 1999), ix. Hereafter *Welton*.

² In his introduction, Kenneth Stickers indicates the differences between Schelerian and Husserlian phenomenology. Cf. Max Scheler, *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge* trans. Manfred Frings (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 9. Hereafter *Frings*.

³ Wolfgang Stegmuller. *Main Currents in Contemporary German, British, and American Philosophy* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1969), 128. Hereafter *Stegmuller*. For some hints on Hussert's influence from Kant, see also Hebert Spielgelberg. *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 230. Hereafter *Spielgelberg*.

⁴ <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/orientations-in-phenomenology/transcendental-phenomenology/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

something outside of it. For instance, we do not simply think out of nothing and for nothing. Otherwise, we are simply fantasizing or daydreaming or becoming insane. We normally think on something other than our thought. We think of the things before us, that which appear to us, especially those significant to us. Indeed, thinking presupposes something.

Husserl's primary concern was the phenomenological investigation of the transcendental ego or the ontological question of Being. His preoccupation is on the questions of method;⁶ "his entire understanding of Being moves within the contrast between and the complementarity of transcendent entities and the Being of transcendent consciousness. In other words, phenomenology is the rigorous science of all conceivable transcendental phenomena. In itself, it is investigation of horizons."⁷

We understand here that phenomenology become an important tool of analysis to knowing the essential characteristics of the things around us. In phenomenology, we know things not just what they are but how they are appearing to us and how we live through them. In phenomenology, we are not doing abstraction. Neither do we come up with abstract realities. Phenomenology gets us involved into the lived-world – a world of experience that is within our reach. The real world is the point of departure for our investigation into a deeper reality. True enough, I cannot know what is beyond my capacity to know. My knowledge is no less what I can know.

The transcendent and the transcendental

Since the distinction between the transcendent and the transcendental is the ultimate conceptual framework for Husserl, the most elemental set of categories in his thought,⁸ we should therefore present here their being essentially together. As Caputo points out, "the transcendencies are always constituted in and for transcendental consciousness; they rise up for and are given shape in the transcendental. The transcendental, on the other hand, is what it is only in the exercise of the life of the transcendental synthesis by which it constitutes the world of transcendencies."⁹ He elaborates,

The transcendent is that which transcends our consciousness. It is the *plenum* which, being other than consciousness, never gives itself up to consciousness; an inexhaustible otherness and fullness which consciousness apprehends now this way, now that; is what always manages to escape consciousness, to overflow it, to be too much for it at any one time. Transcendencies are mundane, empirical realities which give themselves to subjectivity in a complex of presence and absence, of partly filled and partly empty intentions.

⁶ Frings and Funk present this contention by contrasting Scheler's phenomenology to Husserl's. Cf. Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism* trans. Manfred Frings & Roger Funk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), xiv. Hereafter *Frings and Funk*.

⁷ Caputo, 206.

⁸ Caputo, 206.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Meanwhile, the *transcendental* does not belong to the world at all. It is not mundane [...] or empirical, but instead ‘transcends’ the world; does not transcend the world in a manner of metaphysics, in the sense of belonging to a second, totally other, nonempirical world; is “prior” to the world, providing the ultimate subjectivity before which the world rises up as a phenomenon; it is in the face of which all objectivity takes shape; is not anything *in* the world, not anything *above* the world, but the condition of possibility *prior* to the world which lets the world be; the center around which the world groups itself, the subject for which the world is object.¹⁰

We are presented here with a complex reality that our limited mind is confronting with. Nonetheless, phenomenology facilitates in understanding the complexity of this reality. The reality may not be that easy to understand, but through phenomenology we are in turn made aware of the process that we are going through. This speaks of the vastness of life. Sometimes, we are at a lost despite our efforts to know what we should do. Yet we continue on searching for the truth; we trust the process that one day, we will arrive to the goal we are desiring.

Transcendental-phenomenological reduction

Phenomenology, as philosophic discipline, describes its objects instead of constructing explanations. It begins only after the “transcendental-phenomenological reduction.”¹¹ Descriptions not preceded by this “reduction” are not phenomenological. This goes to say that understanding the Husserlian transcendental phenomenology and employing the phenomenological method is to first understand and practice the transcendental-phenomenological reduction.¹² Ricoeur asserts that “the phenomenological ‘reduction’ is presented as the explication of the method practiced in the description of phenomena and simultaneously as the elaboration of a transcendental philosophy implying a genuine metaphysical decision concerning the ontological status of these phenomena” and “is ultimately concerning the reference of a consciousness to a transcendence.”¹³ Further, “the transcendental reduction entails the eidetic reduction, beginning from the point where consciousness is treated as the field for a seeing, for an

¹⁰ *Caputo*, 205-206.

¹¹ There are different ways of approaching this reduction, in either way, one is led to the question of what had previously seemed self-evident: may follow the Cartesian road of total doubt (wherein we are led to question all presuppositions of human experience) or, may examine one of the traditional philosophic disciplines of logic (by which the presuppositions of judging, of validity and truth become questionable. Cf. Richard Schmitt, “Husserl’s Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol20, no2, 1959, 238-245 accessed in <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2104360?uid=3738824&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21102570933167>. Hereafter *Schmitt*.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ricoeur*, 9.

intuitive experiencing. If the transcendental can be looked at, seen, and described, then this intuiting must grasp the transcendental fact in essence. This is why it brings the ‘fiction’ into play, causes the datum of consciousness to vary imaginatively, and develops experiences in the mode of ‘as if.’ The ‘fiction’ is the path from the fact to the eidos of the experienced ‘reality,’ and it permits our grasping a consciousness as an a priori possibility.”¹⁴

This means that we are not putting reality into a box like confining it, classifying it, or putting it under an all-encompassing category. Description is different from definition. This is just like telling our own stories. We normally do the describing of our life rather than defining it. This is so because we are unable to completely remember past events and perfectly picture out what had actually happened. However, when we tell stories in a new way, it does mean we fabricate it (unless we intentionally do so). For an honest to goodness storytelling, it is still the same story but we present it anew.

Epoché and reduction proper

The phenomenological reduction consists in these two “moments” of epoché and reduction proper. The moments are internal logical moments and do not refer to two “steps” that one might take to conclude the procedure as one might do, for example, in waxing a floor: where the first step is to strip off the old wax and the second step is to apply the new wax; steps imply a temporal individuation that is not true of the moments of the phenomenological reduction. Husserl’s term, *epoché*, the negative move whereby we bracket the world, is not a “step” that we do “first” in an effort to prepare ourselves for the later “step,” reduction proper; rather, the bracketing *and* the move whereby we drive the self back upon itself, the reduction proper, occur together. Taken together, the epoché and the reduction proper comprise the phenomenological reduction since these two moments cannot occur independently.¹⁵

Caputo contends that Husserl introduces transcendental consciousness by means of the epoché or ‘parenthesizing’ of the objective world. Stated from the side of the object, the epoché means that the actuality of the world is ‘bracketed’ and we are left only with a world which *claims* to be real, claims to be objective and actual, but which in fact has been reduced, for the phenomenologist, to a phenomenon. Stated from the side of the subject, epoché means that our ‘belief’ in the reality of the world is ‘suspended.’ We ‘abstain’ from this belief, no longer participate in it. The effect of the epoché is in one sense nothing and in another everything. In one sense, nothing is changed. The world continues to appear precisely as before, and our belief in the world remains in the manner of an act which can be investigated.¹⁶

By epoche, we mean trying to do away our own biases and prejudices about the world around us. This method has something to do with our objective consideration to things themselves. Normally, our knowledge of things clouds our new experiences. For example, if I happen to meet a person from Mindanao, my bias would bring me to a conclusion that the person is a Muslim. But then, it does not necessarily follow. If I would not allow myself to talk to the person and know the facts about him or her, then I

¹⁴ Ricoeur, 91.

¹⁵ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/phen-red/#SH5a>.

¹⁶ Caputo, 206-207.

might only be getting an impression about him or her, a false reality about the person. In effect, I will be missing the truth of his or her person.

Meanwhile, who it is that is doing the abstaining directly concerns the moment of the reduction proper. If the epoché is the name for whatever method we use to free ourselves from the captivity of the unquestioned acceptance of the everyday world, then the reduction is the recognition of that acceptance *as* an acceptance. It is the seeing of the acceptance *as* an acceptance that is the indication of having achieved a transcendental insight; it is transcendental precisely because it is an insight from outside the acceptedness that is holding us captive. “Seeing” refers not a “knowing *that*” we live in captivation-in-an-acceptedness, but is rather more like the kind of seeing that occurs when one discovers that the mud on the carpet was put there by oneself and not by another, as was first suspected.¹⁷

In connection to the example given above, we realize here that the person is from Mindanao but may not be a Muslim. We acknowledge here that not all those from Mindanao are Muslims, although they can also be. At least, we are certain that we are not sure about the person’s religious affiliation. We are able here to distinguish prudently that the person is from Mindanao and maybe or probably be a Muslim.

As is quite clear, Husserlian phenomenology, particularly the transcendental phenomenology, constitutes the following characteristics:

- **In phenomenology, consciousness is always *consciousness of*.**

All conscious awarenesses are intentional awarenesses; all consciousness is consciousness-of-something.¹⁸ Phenomenology is the special method of the eidetic reduction by means of which the phenomena are described. Through the method of imaginative variation (examples of instantiation and comparative examination), the invariant or eidetic aspects of a particular phenomenon are explicated.¹⁹ For this reason, a direct contact of the knower to “the things themselves” is essential but not sufficient in itself.²⁰

- **Transcendence and transcendental belong essentially together.**

Transcendencies are always constituted in and for transcendental consciousness; they rise up for and are given shape in the transcendental.²¹ On the one hand, the *transcendent* is that which transcends our consciousness. It is an inexhaustible otherness and fullness which consciousness apprehends now this way, now that. It is what always manages to escape consciousness, to overflow it, to be too much for it at any one time. Transcendencies are mundane, empirical realities which give themselves to subjectivity in a complex of presence and absence, of partly filled and partly empty intentions.” On the other, the *transcendental* does not belong to the world at all. It is not mundane or

¹⁷ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/phen-red/#SH5a>.

¹⁸ <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/orientations-in-phenomenology/transcendental-phenomenology/>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Florentino Hornedo, “Phenomenology; Knowing with the Whole Self”

²¹ John D. Caputo, “Transcendence and the Transcendental in Husserl’s Phenomenology” in *Philosophy Today*, Fall, 1979, 206. Hereafter, *Caputo*.

empirical, but instead ‘transcends’ the world. It is “prior” to the world, providing the ultimate subjectivity before which the world rises up as a phenomenon; it is in the face of which all objectivity takes shape. The transcendental is not anything *in* the world, not anything *above* the world, but the condition of possibility *prior* to the world which lets the world be. It is the center around which the world groups itself, the subject for which the world is object.²²

- **Phenomenology is the rigorous science of all conceivable transcendental phenomena.**

All knowledge should be based on absolutely certain insights. But the rigor of the method of phenomenology is interpreted philosophically rather than in terms of any elaborate, objective procedures of the physical and natural sciences.²³ The natural sciences start from a complex set of presuppositions, frameworks and perspectives of knowledge, but these are not questioned by the sciences themselves. For Husserl, phenomenology is a rigorous, human science precisely because it investigates the way that knowledge comes into being and clarifies the assumptions upon which all human understandings are grounded.²⁴

- **Phenomenology begins only after the transcendental phenomenological reduction.**

Phenomenology, as philosophic discipline, describes its objects instead of constructing explanations. Descriptions not preceded by this “reduction” are not phenomenological. This goes to say that understanding the Husserlian transcendental phenomenology and employing the phenomenological method is to first understand and practice the transcendental-phenomenological reduction.²⁵

- **Transcendental phenomenological reduction is ultimately concerning the reference of a consciousness to a transcendence.**

Transcendental phenomenological reduction is the process that “leads me back to,” and enables me to see, my stream of consciousness as transcendental, and the world as a transcendental phenomenon.²⁶ The phenomenological “reduction” is presented as the explication of the method practiced in the description of phenomena and

²² Caputo, 205-206.

²³ <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/orientations-in-phenomenology/transcendental-phenomenology/>. Similarly, Edward Ballad, in the translator’s foreword, contends of a “more critical awareness of the presupposition of the finality of the scientific ideal of rigor and objectivity.” Cf. Paul Ricoeur’s *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1967), xx. Hereafter *Ricoeur*.

²⁴ <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/orientations-in-phenomenology/transcendental-phenomenology/>.

²⁵ Richard Schmitt, “Husserl’s Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol20, no2, 1959, 238-245 accessed in <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2104360?uid=3738824&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21102570933167>.

²⁶ *A History of Philosophical Systems* ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: The Philosophical Library, Inc., 1950), 360.

simultaneously as the elaboration of a transcendental philosophy implying a genuine metaphysical decision concerning the ontological status of these phenomena.²⁷ Further, the transcendental reduction entails the eidetic reduction, beginning from the point where consciousness is treated as the field for a seeing, for an intuitive experiencing. If the transcendental can be looked at, seen, and described, then this intuiting must grasp the transcendental fact in essence. This is why it brings the ‘fiction’ into play, causes the datum of consciousness to vary imaginatively, and develops experiences in the mode of “as if.” The “fiction” is the path from the fact to the *eidōs* of the experienced “reality,” and it permits our grasping a consciousness as an a priori possibility.²⁸

- **The phenomenological reduction consists two “moments” of epoché and reduction proper.**

Husserl introduces transcendental consciousness by means of the epoché or “parenthesizing” of the objective world. Stated from the side of the object, the epoché means that the actuality of the world is “bracketed” and we are left only with a world which *claims* to be real, claims to be objective and actual, but which in fact has been reduced, for the phenomenologist, to a phenomenon. Stated from the side of the subject, epoché means that our “belief” in the reality of the world is “suspended.” We “abstain” from this belief, no longer participate in it. The effect of the epoché is in one sense nothing and in another everything. In one sense, nothing is changed. The world continues to appear precisely as before, and our belief in the world remains in the manner of an act which can be investigated.²⁹ Meanwhile, if the epoché is the name for whatever method we use to free ourselves from the captivity of the unquestioned acceptance of the everyday world, then the reduction is the recognition of that acceptance *as* an acceptance. It is the seeing of the acceptance *as* an acceptance that is the indication of having achieved a transcendental insight; it is transcendental precisely because it is an insight from outside the acceptedness that is holding us captive.³⁰

- **Transcendental phenomenology is reflexive act as well as philosophically reflective act.**

While phenomenology is reflexive act that cuts across the normal flow of *consciousness* to reveal and delineate its eidetic, or essential structures, i.e. its intentional nature, as the subjective condition for the possibility of all thinking whatsoever, especially science,³¹ it is also a reflective observational analysis of transcendental consciousness, particularly with respect to its intentionality and its intentional objects, e.g., the transcendental phenomenon.³² With this idea of reflection, we realize that epoché is not enough. We are introduced into a kind of egology, presenting a two-tiered

²⁷ Ricoeur, 9.

²⁸ Ricoeur, 91.

²⁹ Caputo, 206-207.

³⁰ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/phen-red/#SH5a>.

³¹ In his introduction, Kenneth Stikkers indicates the differences between Schelerian and Husserlian phenomenology. Cf. Max Scheler, *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge* trans. Manfred Frings (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 9. Hereafter *Frings*.

³² *A History of Philosophical Systems* ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: The Philosophical Library, Inc., 1950), 361.

ego, i.e., only one ego which is capable of two different kinds of acts: one is empirical and the other is transcendental. The former is portrayed as always living in belief while the other is portrayed as extricating itself from belief, as withdrawing itself from the life which the empirical ego lives. This phenomenologically reflective act sets up the ego which reflects, i.e., ego which performs the epoché or the reflecting ego, on a higher – or transcendental – level than the ego reflected upon, i.e., ego which does not perform the epoché or the pre-reflective ego. If the sphere of transcendental consciousness is attained by epoché, the transcendental sphere is attained only in reflection.³³

Conclusion

Husserl is not so much concerned of “defining” things themselves. His phenomenology, as a method, proceeds by “describing” reality in its “fullest” sense. The descriptive manner of phenomenological analysis provides us a notion of the *a priori*, the givenness of things, their essence – a general characteristic of phenomenology. This rigor that is evidently involved in the phenomenological project serves well in its purpose to decipher what lies beneath, behind, beyond the realities of things themselves. True enough, “from what rests on the surface one is led into the depths.”³⁴ In this approach, we are embarking on a modest position in our inquiry or investigation towards things. We are not too ambitious to really arrive at the very core of what lies beyond our capabilities.

Contrary to scientific obsessive tendency to objectify and ascertain and defining things, Husserl described phenomenology as the rigorous science of all conceivable transcendental phenomena. All knowledge should be based on absolutely certain insights. But the rigor of the method of phenomenology is interpreted philosophically rather than in terms of any elaborate, objective procedures of the physical and natural sciences. The natural sciences start from a complex set of presuppositions, frameworks and perspectives of knowledge, but these are not questioned by the sciences themselves. For Husserl, phenomenology is a rigorous, human science precisely because it investigates the way that knowledge comes into being and clarifies the assumptions upon which all human understandings are grounded.³⁵ Paul Ricoeur would also assert that the transcendental phenomenology is a radicalization of the Cartesian discovery on doubt and cogito as well as the continuation of the struggle against objectivism.³⁶ This is also affirmed by Edward Ballad who, in the translator’s foreword, contends of a “more critical awareness of the presupposition of the finality of the scientific ideal of rigor and objectivity.”³⁷ The phenomenological method assumes a nobler purpose of combating the arrogance of scientific inquiry. Even in the olden times, we are already given a hint

³³ Caputo, 207.

³⁴ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* trans. David Carr (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970, p.355. Hereafter *Husserl*.

³⁵ <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/orientations-in-phenomenology/transcendental-phenomenology/>.

³⁶ Ricoeur, 161.

³⁷ Ricoeur, xx.

that science and its framework failed. We remember the earth-centered universe which later on was proven to be false.