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Description of Module

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Husserl's Phenomenological Epistemology

1. Introduction

In this lesson, our topic for discussion is Husserl's phenomenological epistemology. German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is considered the founding figure of the twentieth century phenomenology movement, which gave rise to other European phenomenology-inspired philosophical movements like existentialism, philosophical hermeneutics and post-structural deconstruction. Let me begin with a few introductory remarks about phenomenology as a philosophical movement, after which I will move to Husserl's phenomenological epistemology.

The distinction between appearance and reality is foundational to Western philosophy. The word *phenomenon* simply means reality as it appears to consciousness, or simply appearance. Kant famously distinguished between noumenon or things in themselves and phenomenon or things as they appear. Kant, Fichte and Hegel used the term *phenomenology* to mean the science or study of phenomena or the study of consciousness and the phenomena it gives rise to. Husserl, following the pioneering work of Franz Brentano (1838-1917), developed phenomenology as a unique philosophical methodology and school of thought. Broadly, we may define Husserl-inspired twentieth century phenomenology as the study of the intentional structures of consciousness from a first-person and yet generalisable perspective.

The concept of intentionality, developed by Brentano, is about the object-directedness of consciousness, the fact that consciousness is consciousness *of* something. We can thus distinguish between the lived experience of intentional objects or representations, which is consciousness, and that of which consciousness is conscious. Whether our consciousness takes the form of perception, judgement, recollection, expectation, belief, wish, doubt, thought, fantasy, imagination, hallucination or something else, each of these forms has an intended object. Phenomenology is essentially about properly and philosophically describing the intentional structures of consciousness.¹ Both common sense and natural science are seen as naïve because they take what is given in consciousness for granted; they do not ask how that which is given in consciousness is constituted, or how is it *given* (Husserl 1960, 153-53). Phenomenology is about this very question. Husserl's phenomenology does not describe any particular intentional object except for the sake of exemplification – like the apple tree in section 88 of *Ideas I* – but describes the conditions that make intentionality possible, like the act, content, subject, object, horizon, the intentional relation of consciousness, time and the like. However, carefully describing the intentional object as such or simply experience is also phenomenology, or applied phenomenology in the least. Accordingly, in the latter class of descriptions, one can have a phenomenology of the experience of illness, poverty, dancing, playing a game and so on.

Unlike the other types of phenomenology, Husserlian phenomenology is a thoroughly epistemological project. The intentional character of consciousness is the transcendental condition for the possibility of knowledge. However, the Husserlian epistemological project is different from Kant's, even though Kantian transcendentalism or the establishment of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge

¹ However, consciousness need not be always intentional. Feelings like pain are non-intentional (Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, 572-73). Raw sensations are non-intentional because it is apperception or the act-character of consciousness that –ensouls sense, and is in essence such as to make us perceive this or that object, see this tree, e.g., hear this ringing, smell this scent of flowers– (Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, 567). In *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* we read that experiences can be divided into two fundamental classes: –experiences in the one class are acts, are –consciousness off –ø are experiences that –refer to something– experiences in the other class are not. The sensed color does not refer to somethingí – (Husserl 1991, 94). Since the latter class of experiences does not refer to something, they are non-intentional.

is central to it. Like Hegel, Husserl takes consciousness as fundamental, at least for questions of knowledge, certainty, truth and objectivity. His phenomenology is centered on the slogan "To the things themselves!" which means that what we know as the intentional object of consciousness is all that can be called the *thing* as such. There is no meaningful thing outside consciousness, although the *unmeaningful* nature that is independent of consciousness cannot be denied. Husserl's main epistemological intent is to overcome the Kantian separation between consciousness and object; outside consciousness there is no object according to him. We shall now see how Husserl formulates his epistemological ideas.

2. Phenomenology of Knowledge

In the phenomenology of knowledge, we are concerned with the experience or consciousness of knowledge; that is, about how something is given as the *known* in our consciousness. The notion of *givenness* is very important to Husserl. It is this notion that he has in mind when he declares that phenomenology's slogan is "To the things themselves!" He is asking us to consider for analysis only that which is given to our consciousness. If we are to decide whether something is real, ideal, hallucinatory or imaginary, we can do this only by referring to our experience or consciousness. Since all objects are given to consciousness and since consciousness alone intends its objects, we cannot go to the things except through the route of consciousness (Husserl 1970a, Vol. I, 194-95). Husserl asks us to forget about the object as such and look at the "acts of consciousness," which alone gives us the object of knowledge (Zahavi 2003, 12). Phenomenology is not interested in the biological, naturalistic or scientific understanding of consciousness, but in the experience of consciousness from a first-person point of view; that is, consciousness just as it is experienced. Givenness to consciousness is direct and unmediated. There is no "thing in itself" in the Kantian sense other than what is given in consciousness. Hence, Husserl is not teaching a representational theory of cognition, which would mean that our conscious life is all fiction (Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, 594-96).² At the same time, givenness to consciousness would mean that the intentional object is already loaded with meaning because it is already interpreted *as* something, as "what they are for us, and as what they count as for us, in varying forms of objective intention" (Husserl 1970a, Vol. I, 385).

The intentional object is given to consciousness in various ways. As I pointed out above, an object is given in consciousness not only in perceiving but also in desiring, fearing and the like. This qualitative difference between various pieces of intentional consciousness is what Husserl calls the *quality* of experience, and the object as such that consciousness intends is called the *matter* of experience. For example, I desire an ice cream and fear a charging dog. Desire and fear are the qualities of my experiences in this case, and the ice cream that I desire and the dog that I fear are the matters of my experiences (Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, Investigation V, section 20). Husserl's analysis of intentionality goes on to make further nuanced distinctions that are important in order to understand his epistemological position. In the above example, if I were to judge the dog, saying, "It is a German Shepherd" when it is in front of me and if I were to make the same judgement when it was not before me, this would consist of the intentional object in terms of its *two different modes of givenness*. Husserl calls the former judgement *intuitive* and the latter *signitive* or empty (see Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, Investigation VI, section 14). There can be varying degrees of emptiness, as in imagination, fantasy and the like. Something is thus intuitively present when it shows itself through its very "bodily presence".

² For Husserl, the intentionality of the object means that the object is *immanent* or is given within my consciousness. The immanent object is at the same time transcendent because the whole of it, its various sides and profiles, are not altogether given or present to consciousness at the same moment. Here *transcendent* means that which is not within consciousness. Husserl says that if God is present to my consciousness, it simply means that God is the intentional object of my consciousness. The object is intentional when it is a real part of consciousness, whatever be its form.

Now, Husserl's idea of intuitive and empty modes of givenness of the intentional object within consciousness has important epistemological significance. When he claims that intentional objects can be intuitively given to consciousness, he is not contradicting the key element of his intentionality thesis: *existence-independence*. His emphasis here is on "the intentional object in a particular mode of givenness, namely intuitively present" (Zahavi 2003, 30). Seeing the German shepherd in front of me, seeing it in a photograph or imagining it without reference to anything does not mean that I am encountering three different objects; it is one and the same object given to my consciousness in three different modes. This is not about the Kantian separation between object and consciousness, but about that which *fulfills* an intention and what would otherwise be a merely empty intention.

With the notion of *fulfillment*, we arrive at Husserl's understanding of knowledge and truth. Fulfillment here means cognitive fulfillment, or arriving at knowledge or truth. Since Plato, philosophy has understood knowledge as true belief that can also be justified or evidenced. My belief regarding the German Shepherd's color as brown is fulfilled when I intuit its color as brown as it stands before me. Fulfillment for Husserl means arriving at the synthesis between what is intended or meant and what is given to consciousness evidently. Synthesis grants knowledge because it guarantees the fulfillment of the intention of consciousness. It is not the correspondence between intentional object and the object outside the mind, but that between one mode of intentional consciousness (the merely signitive) and another (the intuitive) (Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, 670 and 765ff). With synthesis, there is truth. At the same time, this does not mean that something is true only when it *is* actually fulfilled – a claim that *can* be actually fulfilled is also true (Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, 766).

What is true has the character of self-evidence or evidence. Here Husserl means that truth is "complete self-manifestation of the object" without any room for doubt for the self that experiences the true. That is, self-evidence means perfect "synthesis of fulfillment" (Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, 765). This is truth or the total coincidence of signitive and intuitive intentionalities. As such, truth is not the correspondence between mental and physical objects. This does not mean that truth and evidence are mere feelings within oneself – if something is self-evident to a person, "it is *self-evident* that no second person can experience the absurdity of the same" (Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, 769). That thing would be self-evident to others as well. Truth implies universal synthesis of fulfillment. Truth and its evidence are therefore not private experiences, although truth is achieved in judgement. The fact that there can be fulfillment and self-evidence, and thus truth, means that there is no room for skepticism. Proving an evidence false calls for a foolproof evidence in its place, not for absolute doubt. Fulfillment is a dynamic process and not a static and finished givenness of an object. In fact, objects are given to us perspectively; all profiles, sides, aspects and properties of objects are not given to us at once. However, we judge them wholly. Fulfillment or knowledge happens when the object is fully given to us intuitively in all its aspects.

At the same time, knowledge is not merely perceptual or sensual. In fact, a complex process is required for what is merely perceptual to become actual knowledge. For Husserl, there are real or perceptual as well as ideal or categorial objects of knowledge, which have to be complexly combined in order to arrive at knowledge. Thus, in the knowledge-process, we move from simple perceptions to ideal or complex categorial levels. In other words, we perceive particulars and make sense of them in terms of their universal dimensions. This is what Husserl discusses as the part and whole relation in the knowledge process (Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, Sixth Investigation, section 48). The intuition of the ideal objects or wholes is called categorial intuition as opposed to sensible intuition (Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, Sixth Investigation, section 45). Categorial intuitions can be synthetic and universal. Synthetic categorial intuitions are always attached with certain objects and cannot be intended independently. When I say, "this German Shepherd is brown", the universal category of *brownness* cannot be detached from the German Shepherd in front of me. However, universal categorial intuitions can be detached from concrete objects. When we say, "God is love", this is exactly what we do (Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, Sixth Investigation, section 52). Husserl is aware that fulfillment or knowledge cannot be achieved only through

perceptual intuitions but also need categorial intuitions (see Husserl 1970a, Vol. II, Sixth Investigation, Chapter 7).

3. Transcendental Phenomenology of Knowledge

It might be pointed out that Husserl's phenomenological account of knowledge as presented here so far, and which is a summary of his epistemological position in *Logical Investigations* (1900/601), is close to a common-sense account of knowledge, albeit one based on astute phenomenological reflection. The common assumption of accessing knowledge of the world through the senses is a recurrent theme in this account (Pietersma 2000, 50). This is sometimes called the *realist phenomenology* of Husserl. Husserl's transcendental turn in *Ideas I* (1913), as far as his epistemological position is concerned, attacks in a Kantian fashion the naturalist naiveté of realism and the skepticism it can give rise to. Hence, in *Ideas I* we get an account of the cognitive subject, like in Kant's first *Critique*. Let us now see how Husserl formulates his transcendental phenomenology of knowledge.

Ideas I is an attack against philosophical naturalism and physicalism as Husserl strictly distinguishes between "being as mental process and being as a physical thing" (Husserl 1982, 89). From our commonsensical and natural attitude, where we take the existence of the real world for a fact, what is given to us is a physical thing in its physical reality. However, if we bracket or withhold our *natural attitude* of assumptions about the natural world, what would be given to our consciousness are the essences of things or things as such. This concept of bracketing or parenthesising the natural attitude and the whole natural world, which "completely shuts me off from any judgment about spatiotemporal factual being" (Husserl 1982, 61), is called *phenomenological epoché* in Husserl's technical language. He thinks that we can do this in freedom, but when we do this the natural world continues to be there; its factuality is not negated, but its factuality cannot figure and cannot be taken advantage of in phenomenological reflection. Intentional objects are not mental activities as psychologism teaches, but are objects themselves in their essence, though not in relation to their factuality. This line of thought is already present in *Logical Investigations* but is not explicitly articulated. In *Ideas I*, this kind of doctrine is explicitly stated by way of the devices of phenomenological epoché and phenomenological reduction, or the directing of our attention solely "to pure consciousness in its own absolute being" (Husserl 1982, 113) without any naturalistic assumptions of the world. In fact, Husserl is asking us to take up a thoroughly reflective and phenomenological perspective to understand the transcendental conditions of cognition, which rejects any form of naturalism. The philosophical attitude then is to be one of the "disinterested onlooker" (Husserl 1960, 35).

For Husserl, a primary difference between the phenomenological object and the natural object is that while the natural object is given in profiles/sides/adumbrations, the phenomenological object is given to consciousness in its totality (Husserl 1982, 91). These are two different modes of givenness; that is, there is a primary ontological difference in the way the object is given to consciousness in the natural and the phenomenological perspectives. Husserl argues in section 43 of *Ideas I* that the object perceived or given to consciousness in perception is not a representation or sign of something else; rather, it is the object itself. This position can be called *internal* or *experiential* rather than *metaphysical* realism (Zahavi 2003, 71).³

From the phenomenological perspective, according to Husserl, an intentional object has a noetic-noematic structure. Noesis is the immanent or real content of the act of consciousness that has two elements: a non-intentional sensuous content or *hyle* (stuff) and an intentional content or *morphe*. The

³ This is a smooth merger of transcendental idealism and empirical realism as in Kant. We have noted above that this position is already defended in *Logical Investigations*.

reference here is to the Aristotelian division of matter and form. Noesis is the *quality* of the intentional experience. The *matter* of the act of consciousness is noema, which is the meaningful object as it is intended (See *Ideas I*, Part III, Chapter 3).⁴ While noesis is the act of consciousness in its temporal dynamism, noema is the object as such in its meaningful presence. Husserl also claims that the act of consciousness and its objects or pure mental processes assume the *transcendental ego* as the subject of the intentional object (Husserl 1982, 102). Like Kant, he takes transcendental subjectivity as the necessary condition for objectivity. We shall now discuss how Husserl believes that these new ideas in his phenomenology can help his epistemological project.

In the sixth investigation of *Logical Investigations*, Husserl does not really treat objectivity, but deals with the synthesis of two types of acts of consciousness: perceptual intuition and categorial intuition. He tries to deal with objectivity in *Ideas I*. His phenomenological argument urges us to leave the merely natural perspective in order to meditate on the essences, since this meditation alone can ground the sciences that base themselves on natural perception (Husserl 1982, 35). According to Husserl, science is grounded in intuition, which is "the principle of all principles". Intuition is what is presented in consciousness as *being* within the limits in which it is presented there, on which all cognition is based, including scientific cognition (Husserl 1982, 44). Intuitions are originary, according to Husserl. "Originary" means accessing the essences of things that are non-empirical. Pure, originary experience is the experience of the essence. Every empirical science, thus, has this non-empirical ground.

The point here is that not all phenomenologically reducible noematic essences can be justified and thus become knowledge. Hence, the problem is to pay attention to the universal structure of the noema from the point of view of "the phenomenological problem of the relation of consciousness to an objectivity" (Husserl 1982, 308). The epistemological question here is about the claim of the relation of consciousness to something objective, and the validity and well-foundedness of that claim. For Husserl, as he mentions in *Logical Investigations*, rational justification or evidence is "seeing the object". He makes a difference between asserting "two plus one is equal to one plus two" blindly and doing the same "in the manner peculiar to intellectual seeing". In the latter case, he says, "the predicatively formed affair-complex, the synthetical objectivity corresponding to the judgment-synthesis, is given originally, seized upon in an originary manner" (Husserl 1982, 327). That is, in such cases a judgement is originally intuitive and achieves well-foundedness. As we have seen, this is the ultimate ground for knowledge. This is not a representation or image, but the object itself; this is evidence. The fact that such evidence also has to be agreeable to the intersubjective community further attests its evidence, but does not create that evidence in the first place.

Evidence can be adequate or inadequate. While both types of evidences are originary presentations of the objects to consciousness, adequate evidence has no room for error; it is apodictic. Inadequate evidences can, in fact, go wrong.⁵ Adequate evidence is the most perfect form of rational justification. It cannot be improved or rectified because it is perfect "it has no degrees of perfection. Inadequate evidence, on the other hand, can be improved and perfected over time. In *Ideas I*, Husserl thinks of mathematical objects as the most adequate essences of phenomenological reductions in an idealist vein.

What, then, is the status of the world of experience according to transcendental phenomenology? The transcendental phenomenologist's technique of bracketing requires that the reality of the external

⁴ For the interpretive dispute on whether noema is ideal meaning / sense or the object as it is intended, see Zahavi 2003, 58-62.

⁵ An example of adequate evidence is a true arithmetic proposition, which is "an act of 'reason'" (Husserl 1982, 329). An example of inadequate evidence is an empirical proposition like "this is a landscape". It is not a matter of essences as in the case of the arithmetic proposition.

physical world be asserted only from the point of view of the natural attitude. From the phenomenologist's own point of view – which is not naïve – beyond its intentional being in consciousness, the world is nothing phenomenologically (Husserl 1982, 112). As phenomenologists then, we can only assert the structure of the world as given to consciousness in cognition. Transcendental phenomenology, according to Husserl, strives to overcome the common-sense realism of perception arising from its unawareness of "its own transcendental condition," which when assisted by transcendental phenomenological reflection (epoché), elevates knowledge to its fulfillment. However, in *Cartesian Meditations* (1929), the objective world is said to be conditioned on transcendental intersubjectivity. The "identical world for everyone" is said to be "a universal super-addition of sense to my primordial world" (Husserl 1960, 107). Transcendental intersubjectivity is the "intrinsically first being, the being that precedes and bears every worldly Objectivity" (Husserl 1960, 156).

Similarly, according to transcendental phenomenology, essences, universals or concepts are neither individual mental products identifiable with mental activities as in psychologism, nor are they independent entities as in Platonism; rather, essences are essential features of our experience. Without transcendental consciousness, there would be no essence. In the second part of *Logical Investigations*, Husserl calls essences *ideal species* and argues that we abstract or intuit them by comparing, in imagination, the many instances of its occurrence in various objects. In section 4 of *Ideas I*, imaginative variation for intuiting essences is termed *free phantasy* (Smith 2013, 327-222).

4. Conclusion: Is Husserl's Epistemology Foundationalist?

Like Descartes, Husserl gives primacy to clear and distinct knowledge, to the immediate evidence of the given or object and to the idea that from the phenomenological standpoint, objects exist for the transcendental ego, which is its ground or condition (Husserl 1960, 26). However, Husserl is not a conventional foundationalist epistemologist. His epistemology of direct perception has a coherentist character. For Husserl, the meaning of the object arises out of what he calls the *horizon* (Pietersma 2000, 40).⁶ Horizon is the "obscurely intended indeterminate actuality" surrounding what is clearly and determinately intended (Husserl 1982, 52). It is what we inattentively take for granted while perceiving an object, like the backside of a book. In this sense, the whole world wherein we place our objects of perception can be said to be the horizon, "a halo of background-intuitions" (Husserl 1982, 70).

Husserl's last work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1935), offers a concrete phenomenology of experience of the surrounding world, known as the *life-world*. The life-world is not only the world of the senses but also of values and culture, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, and historical meanings and contextual beliefs. It is the background of all our experiences and, therefore, also of knowledge. It is the ground of the knowledge of both transcendental and scientific evidence. This context of knowledge is to be taken account of (Husserl 1970b, 128). Life-world is the phenomenological structure of the intuitive givenness of objects in their meaningfulness.

⁶ There is indeed a dilemma in Husserl regarding the transcendental ego. In section 12 of *Cartesian Meditations*, he points out that the transcendental ego is prior in the order of knowledge to all objective knowledge (Husserl 1960, 27). However, he does not want to hold like Descartes that all objective knowledge is grounded in the transcendental ego. He speaks of a new idea of grounding which he calls "transcendental grounding." What does Husserl mean here? It is not only the ego that is immediately given; with the ego is also given experienceable objects (Husserl 1960, 29). Husserl, therefore, abandons Cartesian foundationalism of the *ego cogito*, which grounds knowledge. The ego may be said to be prior in terms of its transcendental significance, but we never find an ego without experiencing objects phenomenologically. Transcendental experience at any particular time involves a horizon that is "strictly non-experienced but necessarily also meant." The ego's obscure and not fully articulable past belongs to the horizon (Husserl 1960, 22623).

Hence, our consciousness is characteristically intentional and intentionality has a certain transcendental structure. However, when it comes to the evidential fulfillment of givenness of objects within our consciousness, which is knowledge, what we need to look for are not Kantian universal categories of the understanding but rather background beliefs formed by tradition. The tradition and the history of science shape our scientific cognitive practices. Husserl is here giving expression to the possibility of transcendental phenomenology that does not overlook history. This view is beyond skepticism because the skeptic cannot suspend her/his life-world to raise the skeptical question itself. Epoché does not suspend the life-world as such, but merely refrains from making use of its natural actuality. The life-world and its objects are all phenomenological and hence, the skeptical question of establishing the relation between the mind and objects independent of it does not arise. It is the phenomenological realm itself that is the guarantee of the self-givenness of its objects or knowledge. For Husserl, consciousness is not a product of history; rather, history is internal to absolute consciousness (Pietersma 2000, 83-84).⁷ Since consciousness is absolute in this way, Husserl, like Hegel before him, is saved from the relativism of historicism.



⁷ Although, like Hegel, Husserl would have to say that truth is historical, there is a universal teleological sense to history in Husserl just as in Hegel (see *Crisis*, p. 378). Husserl thus sees both universal history and universal reason as productions of absolute consciousness.