

HUSSERLIAN ‘EPOCHE’ AND THE EXPANSION OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

Husserlian ‘epoche’ requires the researcher to intentionally set aside prejudices, biases, presumptions and presuppositions previously acquired from culture, religion, and society. This ‘epoche’ will enable the individual to have his or her own personal unbiased or unprejudiced assessment of the phenomena – objects, persons, events. Most, if not all cultures, religions, and society seem rigid and dogmatic in imparting knowledge to younger generations. Most persons who can reproduce the knowledge imparted to them are often celebrated as intelligent persons even when they may not have expanded the knowledge in question; thus ignoring those who may produce an unbiased or unprejudiced assessment of the phenomena – persons who may contribute to and expand knowledge. While the reproduction of cultural or communal knowledge by a given generation has historical values, it limits the generation in question to the limits of the knowledge community. This paper, using the analytical and phenomenological methods, argues for the expansion of human knowledge by encouraging researchers to have their encounter with the phenomena using the Husserlian ‘epoche’. Such knowledge acquired by the individual should be seen as an expansion of or additional knowledge to that of the knowledge community.

Keywords: *Epoche*, Knowledge, Proposition, Phenomenology, Testimony

Introduction

Knowledge is essential to human survival. What to do or not do, what to eat and drink, the best environment to live in towards enhancing human life, the extent of what we know of other persons, objects, places and things, and so on are essential to human survival.

Now, nature seems to be evolving. And humans, as part of nature, seems to be acquiring more skills by the day which enable humans to have a better knowledge of nature as well as other persons. Thus the knowledge we currently possess of the nature of the person and reality, in general, seems to be the best of all knowledge hitherto produced by the human race because we have further expanded, via our own experiences, the knowledge we acquired from our predecessors. With all sense of sincerity and commitment to the survival of the human race, the knowledge we possess today we will also pass on to other persons (scholars or researchers inclusive).

However, despite our genuine commitment to the survival of the human race, humans are still plagued with viruses, natural and man-made disasters, famine and hunger, poverty and premature death, terrorism and wars due to our inability to manage ourselves as temperamental and sensual beings who, more often than not, are prone to be irrational than rational.

Finding solutions to the above challenges require handing over or transmitting knowledge from one generation to another. This is often done through the propositional knowledge of scholars or researchers. Such knowledge helps the scholar or researcher to be up to date with the historical development of the knowledge in question. But if all that the scholar or researcher does is to memorise and reproduce the knowledge imparted to him or her, then meeting the challenges of the seemingly changing nature and human behavioural patterns may be difficult.

There is, therefore, the urgent need to impart knowledge to scholars or researchers at all levels in such a way that they will be able to have their own experiences of the phenomena. Such experiences of theirs will be their contribution to the knowledge community and expand their knowledge of reality. To adequately expand human knowledge and resolve now challenges that threaten human existence, the phenomenological method of Husserl, especially his *epoche* is of great importance.

Thus, this paper will expose the phenomenological method of Husserl as captured in his *epoche* towards revealing how it can help expand human knowledge. Before doing this, it will expose what knowledge is and argue that knowledge, as taught in schools, are fundamentally propositional, historical and ultimately testimonial in nature. Testimonial knowledge attests to the need for *epoche* in expanding knowledge for the survival of the human race.

What Knowledge Is

To the epistemologist, the knowledge that is of importance is propositional knowledge, which is often in the form of ‘I know that...’

Such knowledge presupposes that the knower has experienced phenomena – persons, objects, things, events and state-of-affairs. From a phenomenological point of view, especially as espoused by Husserl, such knowledge also include things like universals or essences, numbers, values, and so on. Knowledge here is an expression of the knower's experience (directly or indirectly) with a phenomenon via sense perception, rational or cognitive inference or judgment, testimony (knowledge from other persons' experiences), revelation, authority or experts, memory, and so on.

Traditionally, knowledge has been defined as 'justified true belief' (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 201 c-d). The main challenge with this definition, especially as captured by Gettier's counterexamples (Gettier, 1963: 123), is how to justify knowledge claims. It is not enough to claim to know something, to claim to have an experience of something, to claim to have come in contact with something or to claim to have reflected on something and, thus, have an idea of it without providing a satisfactory and reasonable explanation for one's knowledge claim.

Attempts to justify knowledge claims have led to different criteria of justification which largely depend on the school of thought of the knower. Materialists are likely to limit themselves to that which is perceptible to the senses and, if they are scientists, they are generous enough to include the conclusions reached by the senses with the aid of scientific instruments that help to meliorate the limits of sense perception.

Idealists seek the certainty of knowledge beyond the limits of sense perceptions. They are likely to place more trust in reason or inferential knowledge in their search for essences or universal qualities that can endure through time. If they are religiously inclined, certainty in knowledge will be sought for in the relationship they have with the divine or supernatural being who is believed to have created all things that can be known, and who infuses into the human mind the lacuna in sensual and cognitive knowledge via revelation, intuition, dreams and feelings.

For instance, as it concerns an idealistic conception of knowledge, Abanaku (2018: 52) is of the view that the ultimate reality (the One or the Supreme Being) is the sole criterion of truth for the One is truth itself. The most humans can know of reality is to some certain degree of certainty. Thus "human knowledge could be described as characterized by degrees of clarity, distinctness and truth as it deepens from individual through communal to ultimate knowledge." (Abanaku, 2018: 53)

But Teichman and Evans (1991: 65) negate the idealistic notion of knowledge because it seems to ignore the notion of propositional

knowledge. Propositional knowledge is seen by them as the testimony of a knower about an event that took place at a time in history, and the event is about nature that seems to be evolving.

However, irrespective of the school of thought one may adhere to, once the subject of knowledge (a knower) believes that he or she knows anything, the knowledge acquired becomes propositional at the point of communicating or transmitting it to others.

Propositional Knowledge as Testimonial Knowledge

The subject of knowledge (the knower or epistemic agent) believes that he or she knows when there is some reasonable degree of conviction. This reasonable degree of conviction is put to the test when the knower presents the knowledge he or she claims to have to another person or group of persons. This presentation of a knowledge claim is in the form of a proposition, that is, the knowledge claim is presented as a claim that can be true or false, even though the knower presents it with the conviction that the claim he or she makes is true.

On propositional knowledge, Hegel (1892: 144) is of the view that it gives us a partial picture of reality; partial idea from the perspective of the knower. While a full knowledge of reality can be attained at the level of 'Absolute Knowledge', before attaining absolute knowledge via dialectic, the knower produces propositional knowledge from a given perspective and groups things into different classes.

Now, propositional knowledge allows other epistemic agents (who are being presented with the knowledge claim of the knower) to verify whether or not the knowledge claim of the knower is true or false. It also brings to the awareness of epistemic agents that the knowledge in question is as understood and expressed by the knower; that is, it is the testimony of the knower concerning the knowledge claim.

Propositional knowledge, therefore, becomes the testimony of the knower at the point of dissemination. If epistemic agents (hearers) are convinced of the veracity of the knowledge claim or are reasonably satisfied with the justification provided by the knower, then it becomes knowledge for the epistemic agents based on the testimony of the knower. But if epistemic agents doubt the knowledge claim of the knower, then the knowledge claim becomes probable.

Furthermore, testimonial knowledge is historical in the sense that it is the proposition of a knower containing a knowledge claim of phenomena or state-of-affairs acquired in some distant or immediate past. Since reality is interpreted differently from the experiences of different epistemic agents, and what we claim to know seems to constantly evolve, then there is a need to constantly keep track of what we can know of the phenomena or present state-of-affairs. But if we

bring into our experience of the phenomena or present state-of-affairs the previous conclusions we deduced from our past experiences or previous conclusions reached by culture, religion, society, other researchers and epistemic agents from previous phenomena or similar state-of-affairs, then we may fail to detect what the present phenomena or present state-of-affairs is revealing or has evolved into. These previous experiences of ours or conclusions reached by culture, religion, society, other researchers and epistemic agents are what Husserl referred to as biases, prejudices, presuppositions, etc. To experience phenomena or a present state-of-affairs as it currently is or as it is currently revealing itself without bias, prejudice or presuppositions requires one to practice Husserl's *epoche*. The practice of Husserl's *epoche* will lead to a meaningful growth of knowledge.

Husserlian Epoche and the Growth of Human Knowledge

For Husserl, viewing the world from the opinions and conclusions of others is the "natural standpoint". The natural standpoint is the conventional way of learning or imparting knowledge to others. Also, this conventional way of perceiving reality limits reality to sense perception and trivializes our ability to know things inferred by reason – the idea of the mind, universals or essences.

To attain knowledge of things as they are (which is not possible for Plato and Kant), Husserl developed a method that requires the bracketing away of the opinion, bias, prejudice, and presuppositions of the natural standpoint to be able to experience the phenomena as it is. This method is known as *epoche* or the "phenomenological reduction". It is the reduction of experience to the level of not being influenced by the judgments and conclusions of previous epistemic agents. This "phenomenological reduction" also known as "transcendental reduction" leads to the experience of the pure act of consciousness about the phenomena or state-of-affairs.

According to Lawhead (2002: 530 footnote) "Epoche was the term used by the Greek sceptics when they recommended we withhold our commitment and suspend judgment about things that were uncertain." Thus, we can say that Husserl is challenging us to suspend all previous judgments, conclusions, opinions, and presuppositions about a phenomenon or state-of-affairs. We should approach the phenomenon or state-of-affairs with the mindset of allowing the phenomenon or state-of-affairs to reveal itself to us. With the revelation we have experienced we can form our judgment about the phenomenon. The phenomenon is explicated from one's own experience without the bias or influence of any philosophizing (Husserl, 1960: 151). Such an experience of the phenomenon is pure and will help us know things as they are in

themselves because it brackets away biases and attitude acquired at the level of the natural standpoint.

This method of *epoche* also known as 'bracketing' is an intuitive process similar to Descartes methodic doubt. Descartes, armed with experience, doubted the knowledge of reality he previously had on the bases that the sources of such knowledge had limitations. During this process, he could not doubt that he was doubting or thinking. Thus he concluded that essentially he was a thinking being that exists. This idea of a thinking being that exists was something he could not doubt and he believed that the sceptics, no matter how much they try to doubt it, will not be able to doubt it (Descartes, 1912: 26 – 27).

Descartes method of doubting everything he used to believe to be knowledgeable to be able to arrive at the "thinking being" with all clarity and certainty is similar to Husserl's *epoche*. Husserl believes that with the method of *epoche* he can arrive at the knowledge of things as they are.

Looking at the limitations of the senses and reason as sources of knowledge, and given that propositional knowledge is dated for they are about past experiences, in order not to live in the shadows of the past (especially if we want to know things as they are today), we must bracket away from the knowledge of the past. Ojong and Ibrahim (2011: 185) have both stated the problems with some sources and theories of knowledge and, taking a clue from the works of Kant and Kuhn they opined that today's knowledge claims are a product of the experience of the knower with interpretation arrived at by the workings of the mind of the knower. And, given that reality changes, the interpretation arrived at when reality changes produce new paradigms that "make us see the world from a different perspective."

Besides, Ojong (2010: 39, 44) encourages any epistemologist who is experiencing "epistemic loneliness" (egocentric predicament) over false ideas, to overcome his or her fears and scepticism by engaging in epistemic discourse with other epistemologists. He or she will effectively engage the external world using the tool of language to avoid the challenge of 'private' language.

But given that the idea of the epistemologist is relative to some degree, the researcher or scholar need not bother too much about objectivity or truth as defined or presented to him or her by the epistemic community. His or her main concern is to explain reality as currently experienced or as it currently presents itself.

Furthermore, from Kant and Kuhn's idea of a paradigm shift, one can infer that if indeed, reality undergoes changes, each major change will produce a new paradigm. Every new paradigm will produce new knowledge. Thus the researcher or scholar needs to bracket away

previous paradigms to enable him or her detect possible new changes of reality to be able to acquire knowledge current to the reality of his or her time. Such knowledge acquired becomes a contribution to the knowledge of the epistemic community. Knowledge, as collectively owned, has thereby expanded or grown.

Glorifying the Past

Husserl does not condemn the past. He did not play down the importance of customs and traditions. He also did not condemn the knowledge of our past experiences or from experts. He was, however, against dogmatising or canonising the experience of the past to the detriment of what the phenomena or state-of-affairs is currently revealing. Thus, if we are to find new patterns in the phenomena or state-of-affairs, if we are to solve today's emerging problems and challenges, and if we want to expand the frontiers of knowledge then we need to include our own unique experiences through the practice of Husserl's *epoche*.

Conclusion

Humans are communal beings. We live in communities and share things in common with members of the community in which we live. Knowledge is one major thing we share in common especially as it is essential to the survival of the human race.

However, as beautiful and essential the knowledge we acquire from the epistemic community is, it is dated. If the researcher or scholar is to contribute meaningfully to the epistemic community he or she belongs to, he or she should practice the Husserlian *epoche* especially since the world in which we live seems to be evolving. Whatever the pure act of consciousness intuitively deduces or produces from *epoche* is, according to Husserl, the way the phenomena or state-of-affairs is. This knowledge from the pure act of consciousness will further be implemented by reason and senses in our everyday experiences. Such knowledge, if different from what was previously thought about the phenomena or state-of-affairs, will be a genuine contribution to knowledge. It will be an advancement of knowledge. But then, it will not be proper to dogmatise it or to canonize it as the ultimate truth as far as the phenomena or state-of-affairs is. To dogmatise or canonize will amount to using this conclusion to assess subsequent or similar phenomena or state-of-affairs, and this will be against the principle of Husserl's *epoche*.

In other words, each time we approach familiar or strange phenomena or state-of-affairs we should apply *epoche* so that the pure state of consciousness can intuitively know the phenomena or state-of-

affairs as it is. If the phenomena or state-of-affairs has evolved, the subject of knowledge that is investigating it phenomenologically will detect it and add the experience to that of the knowledge community. If the phenomena or state-of-affairs has not evolved, it will reveal itself as it did the previous time it was experienced.

However, as difficult as it is for many to practice *epoche* or “Transcendental reduction,” it produces and expands the frontiers of knowledge, conquers new challenges, and keeps humanity surviving.

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