

# EDMUND HUSSERL'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION AS A QUEST FOR CERTAINTY OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

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## Abstract

The historical discourse surrounding the feasibility, essence, validity, and scope of knowledge stands as one of the most ancient debates, addressed by nearly every esteemed philosopher. As Aristotle posited in his *Metaphysics*, inherent in all individuals is the yearning for knowledge. This innate desire propels individuals to engage in a profound quest for knowledge, often resulting in a heightened susceptibility to misinformation. In the current era marked by rapid advancements, particularly influenced by social media, a culture of post-truth and relativism prevails. In line with this, Edmund Husserl's phenomenological reduction represents a systematic philosophical method designed to secure the foundations of human knowledge against skepticism and relativism. He employs the technique of epoché by which he brackets both cultural and natural assumptions in order to access the phenomena as they present themselves in pure consciousness. In the second stage which is eidetic reduction, he identifies the essential structures of experience that are beyond cultural and historical particularities. The quest for certainty arises through this methodological turn of returning to the things themselves, by prioritizing the universal structures of intentionality and consciousness. This paper uses hermeneutical method to unravel the techniques of Husserl by breaking down the two important terms of epoché and eidetic reduction for a better understanding and then applying them in combating the culture of relativism. By emphasizing the roles of the lifeworld and intersubjectivity, this paper offers a kind of middle path between foundationalism and relativism. It reconciles the necessity of perspective with the aspiration of shared and stable meaning which leads to objectivity.

**Keywords: Reduction, Quest, Knowledge, Phenomenology, Certainty, Relativism.** Reduction refers to the methodological or conceptual process of simplifying or explaining complex phenomena in terms of more fundamental or basic components.

## Introduction

Philosophy as a discipline has many problems of which one of them is that of certainty of knowledge. All through the ages, many great thinkers and philosophers have found it burdensome to provide a lasting solution to this problem. The problem of certainty of knowledge has led to skepticism. Skepticism is the doubt, or denial of the possibility of knowledge. Knowledge implies certainty (Omeregbe, 2009, p. 8). It is a system that questions the possibility of true knowledge. This system was championed by the Sophists. For them, there is nothing one can know for certain. Hence, they were very critical about traditional beliefs and knowledge claims. One of these sophists is Gorgias, who wrote that nothing exists, even if it did, one cannot know it, and if they knew it, they could not communicate it (Popkin and Stroll, 1979, p. 174). The statement above is just an attempt to disprove the certainty of knowledge.

However, many philosophers starting from the ancient era did not find it pleasing to accept that there is no certain knowledge. Hence they agitated against the sophists. To curb this problem, they went into critical search to avoid errors.

In the 20th century, Edmund Husserl, who is regarded as the ‘father’ of phenomenology, made a conscientious effort to wrestle this age-long problem of epistemological certainty. In his phenomenology; Husserl sought to make philosophy certain and indubitable. Like Descartes, he was worried about the fate of philosophy as a science. He believes that for philosophy to be scientific and to be worthy of that name ‘philosophy’, a new approach towards the discovery of reality is inevitable. Husserl’s phenomenology is an attempt to consolidate philosophy on an indubitable foundation. His phenomenology grew out of his deep conviction that Western culture has lost its direction and purpose.

The task of Husserl’s phenomenology is therefore to ensure certainty of knowledge by describing the data of experience exactly the same way it is presented to our consciousness without taking anything for granted. It is Husserl’s contention that with the method of phenomenology, certain, indubitable, and apodictic knowledge is guaranteed because phenomenology offers us the opportunity to analyze the data of experience as they are presented to the thinking and experiencing mind.

This paper seeks to overcome the crises of relativism which paves the way for some kind of certainty with regard to human knowledge. It begins by discussing some basic themes in phenomenology before explication of the technique of Husserl. In order to achieve the aim of this paper, the work situates to what extent phenomenological reduction is a response to culture of relativism. The paper argues that we can achieve some height of epistemological certainty by applying the technique of phenomenological reduction.

### **Basic Themes in Phenomenology**

Before delving into phenomenological reduction, which is a technique of achieving certainty by combating relativism, it is necessary to briefly expose the basic ideas of phenomenology. Phenomenology is the study of that which appears as it is. It is also the study of the structure of experience and consciousness. It is a term that has been used in different senses in modern philosophy. Kant has occasionally used it to depict the study of phenomenon or appearances in contrast to the things-in-themselves. Hegel, on his part, used the term phenomenology to refer to the different stages which our consciousness has to pass through to arrive at absolute knowledge.

For Martin Heidegger, phenomenology is used to apply to the question of existence. This is found in his famous work *Being and Time*. He used it as a way to achieve the vision of consciousness. His version of phenomenology is hermeneutic, that is, interpretative. In the recent times, phenomenology has usually been understood as referring to the philosophy developed by Edmund Gustav Abrecht Husserl, a German Jew who lived between 1859 and 1938. For Husserl, who is regarded as the ‘father’ of phenomenology:

Phenomenology is a philosophy or a method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness. It is a presuppositionless inquiry or a critical research concerned with the descriptive delineation of what presents itself to consciousness as it present itself and in so far as it presents itself (Natanson, 1968, p. 9).

According to Husserl, objects of experience show themselves exactly as they are. What leads to distortion of reality are not the way things appear but the way and manner we position ourselves in relation to them.

### **Consciousness and Intentionality:**

Consciousness is viewed as the direct matter of Husserl's phenomenological investigations. According to him, "consciousness, lived experience, refers to an object by means of an appearance in which the object in its modal setting subsists".<sup>4</sup> The object for which the mind is conscious is an object "outside" of it but present to it. Consciousness involves a reference to something.

One can rightly say that the central theme of Husserl's phenomenology is the idea of intentionality. Husserl's phenomenology is founded on the idea of intentionality, which is seen as a necessary characteristic of consciousness. Ordinarily, intentionality refers to the active relation of the mind to a given object. It concerns the state of a thing as a projected entity. For Brentano, intentionality is the psychological relation of the consciousness to a given mental object including images, hopes, fears and desires (Iroegbu, 1995, p. 207). Intentionality should not be confused with the 'ordinary' intention referred to as "stretching out" and in this context it refers to consciousness "stretching out" towards its object. Intentionality is summed up as "aboutness" (Husserl, 1983, p. 245).

For Husserl, the basic fact about human experience is not simply the fact of consciousness rather that consciousness is always consciousness of something. Our perception of things, our experiences consist of our projection toward intended objects. According to Husserl, we understand under intentionality the unique peculiarity of experiences to be the consciousness of something (Husserl, 1983, p. 242). In line with this, Husserl views intentionality as the essence of consciousness.

**Noema and Noesis:** Husserl introduced the concepts of "noema" and "noesis" to elucidate perception further. The "noema" embodies the objective content of an intentional act whereas the "noesis" represents the subjective act of consciousness directed at the noema. In perception, the noesis and noema intertwine, which gives rise to the perceptual experience. As the correlate of intentional acts, the noema is the object side of consciousness. And this is couched in such expressions as "I think; I remember, I desire ... I wish" (Husserl, 1983, p. 255).

### **Phenomenological Reduction**

Phenomenological reduction is a methodological technique developed by Edmund Husserl to explore conscious experience. It involves systematically suspending judgment and assumptions to gain a more primordial understanding of phenomena. It aims to uncover the underlying structures and essence of conscious experience, revealing the fundamental nature of phenomena. It is basically of two interrelated steps: Epoché and Eidetic Reduction.

### **Epoché**

The phenomenological epoché is the transformation of naive acceptance into a withholding of acceptance. The epoché is aimed at eliminating from any object of investigation precisely that which is the root of contingency and of doubt. Writing on Husserl's use of the word epoché, Queetin remarks:

It is to be noticed, that the epoché was intended by Husserl to be an elimination of existence itself, since to eliminate existence would be to take a position in its regard, then exposing oneself to the danger of contingency. Existence, or as frequently calls "transcendence", is

simply bracketed (put in parenthesis), in the sense that no position is taken either for or against it, may be, that things exist outside consciousness, but since this existence can have no significance or whatever, with regard to the essence of things, it is simply left out of consideration (Unah, 1996, p. 217).

The term epoché is a Greek word which means “bracketing”. Husserl uses this term to describe his method of phenomenological suspension; it extends to the suspension of all phenomena, so that one is able to see things as they really are. Thus, one important requirement of phenomenology is that the inquirer should distance himself from the object of his inquiry and to let it manifest itself clearly as it is. The epoché (bracketing) is designed by Husserl to achieve this phenomenological aim. With the epoché we destroy all interest in order to reconstruct experience or to reconstitute the world. Epoché is the demolition exercise motivated by the genuine desire to reconstruct (Husserl, 1977, p. 21).

### **Eidetic Reduction**

This is the second stage in the phenomenological enterprise. It is a stage in which we intuit essence or see ‘pure phenomena’ as they really are. In the eidetic reduction, we achieve a higher level of clarity concerning the object of inquiry. The term ‘eidetic’ comes from the Greek word ‘eidos’, which means essence or form. Eidetic reduction reduces the problem of sense and meaning to that of essence (eidos). Edmund Husserl himself uses it to mean essence or pure essence. For this reason, his phenomenology is chiefly concerned with phenomenal objects in themselves. In his *Logical Investigation*, he defines his own science of phenomenology as a descriptive psychology dealing with the general essence of various structures of the things and not with their concrete existence as individual thing (Husserl, 1983, p. 112). Eidetic reduction basically enables us to focus attention on the essential structures of object in question as it offers itself to the experiencing and thinking mind when this is done. Eidetic reduction moves consciousness from the realm of facts to the realm of general essence. It consists in moving from the givenness of experience to essences, and from empirical particularity to essential universality” (Husserl, 1965, p. 24). It is therefore, Husserl’s solemn belief that with these methods of epoché and eidetic reduction, unbiased, unprejudiced, indubitable and above all certain knowledge could be achieved.

### **Phenomenology and Reconstruction of Human Knowledge**

As stated earlier, Husserl’s phenomenology is not about proving whether the external world exists as was the case with Descartes, but rather about achieving certainty by returning to the structures of conscious experience. This becomes possible by first of all combating the culture of relativism. Cultural relativism as a concept posits that truth, morality and the very meaning of experience are entirely contingent upon cultural context. This implies that there is no room for objective or universal truth. However, if certainty can be achieved, it must be rooted in objectivity which for Husserl is possible through intersubjectivity. There are three stages following Husserl’s phenomenology through which we can achieve the above objective.

The first stage has to do with bracketing our cultural presuppositions. According to Husserl, to attain certain and true knowledge, the philosopher should start from a presuppositionless position. In doing this, the very first essential step to undertake is what Husserl calls the phenomenological epoché, which consists in putting between brackets all previous beliefs, assumptions and presuppositions about the object of inquiry. In our quest for certain knowledge, the phenomenologist wants to confront objects of experience purely as they are in themselves. All his previous prejudices, biases and misconceptions about the objective world and its content must be subjected to epoché. By so doing, epoché helps the phenomenologist

to suspend judgment about his apperceived facts about the world. In line with this, Husserl remarks that “phenomenological epoché inhibits acceptance of any objectively apperceived facts, including those of internal experiences”(Husserl, 1977, p. 2). From this stance, Husserl seems to hold that prejudices and biases about object of investigation may lead to an inadequate result of what one is investigating. It is these biases and prejudices that give rise to relativism. Hence, through the technique of epoché, relativism gives way to more apodictic knowledge.

The second stage in combating relativism has to do with revealing universal structures that transcend any cultural particularities by introducing eidetic reduction. It is more of a deeper move than the epoché where an analysis on how consciousness constitutes experience is done. Phenomenological reduction therefore, provides a powerful framework for resisting relativism by uncovering universal features of human experience. Through the reduction, Husserl seeks to reach the “things themselves” – the pure phenomena as given in lived experience (Zahavi, 2003, p. 44). With this, philosophers can easily identify the essential features or eidetic structures of experience. These structures form the bases of a universal phenomenological science (Carr, 1974, p. 18). One arrives at these universal structures of consciousness by analyzing intentional acts. It is in this sense that phenomenology is said to reveal structures that are not contingent on individual or cultural perspectives (Moran, 2000, p. 189). However, only correctly intuited essences could yield absolutely certain knowledge. It must be stated clearly that phenomenology does not seek to justify knowledge claims in the traditional epistemological sense. On the contrary, the aim of phenomenology is to describe the conditions of possibility for experience, that is, how things show up for a subject. In doing this, we arrive at a different kind of certainty known as eidetic certainty whereby the essence of something is grasped through intuition. This kind of certainty is reached at the second stage of Husserl’s method having suspended all judgments about a phenomenon.

Key to Husserl’s phenomenology is the idea of intentionality. Husserl makes a case that consciousness is always about something. It is this concept that allows one to analyze experience without assuming anything about the external world. This is exactly what gives phenomenology a form of immanent certainty in the sense that one becomes certain about how something appears to him even without being certain about the object itself. With the above in mind, certainty is said to be grounded in the consciousness rather than in external verification.

Another important stage in combating relativism and achieving certainty is by grounding objectivity in intersubjectivity and lifeworld. Phenomenology is able to achieve some kind of epistemological certainty by starting with a return to lived experience instead of doubts about the world. Then, it treats experience itself as the foundation of knowledge instead of abstract propositions which leads to a first-person account of knowing. Hence, through phenomenology we have a kind of epistemological certainty that is rooted in direct givenness of experience rather than in inferential or foundationalist claims about the external world. What this entails is that phenomenology as propounded by Husserl does not aim to overcome skepticism by proving that the world exists but on the contrary it bypasses skepticism by directing its attention to the undeniable reality of experience itself. Rather than denying reality, Husserl brackets it to focus on how objects and experiences present themselves to consciousness (Husserl, 1983, p. 31). Husserl holds that through communication and shared intentional structures of consciousness, intersubjective agreement remains attainable. In other words, objective meaning emerges through intersubjectivity, notwithstanding cultural plurality as a result of multiple lifeworlds. It can be summarized that phenomenological reduction combats cultural relativism by suspending culturally rooted assumptions in favour of pure consciousness; uncovering universal essences of experience through eidetic reduction, and situating meaning

in transcendental intersubjectivity and the lifeworld which makes it possible to have a shared understanding that transcends cultural particularities.

### **Evaluation of Husserl's Technique**

Following the analysis above of Husserl's technique and how it helps in combating cultural relativism in order to achieve some kind of certainty with regard to human knowledge, the bogging question still remains: To what extent does the method of phenomenology ensure certainty of knowledge considering the fact that phenomenological description could be highly subjective? In other words, can phenomenology completely eliminate error in our epistemological venture? The techniques/methods of phenomenology and its concentration on essences and universal structures (phenomenological epoché and eidetic reduction) are specifically designed by Husserl to reduce the effect of personal idiosyncrasies, misconceptions and prejudices, but could the personal attitudes of the investigator or the phenomenologist not suffice in such description? Besides, could it be said without equivocation that there can really be a presuppositionless enquiry as Husserl has just pointed out in his phenomenology?

A cursory look at Husserl's phenomenology would reveal that he has the interest of philosophy at heart. His phenomenology shows a concerted attempt to wrestle the problem of certainty back to its ring. Husserl reasoned that for philosophy to be scientific and for it to be philosophy at all, and more for it to survive as philosophy, a systematized approach or method towards the discovery of reality is inevitable. It was from the above background that Husserl advocated for the phenomenological method aimed at checking our natural attitude since the human mind has the tendency to mistake illusions for genuine and certain knowledge. Phenomenology as a method is used to see the phenomenon in such a way that obstructions are removed and we are made to notice structures and interconnections that had hitherto been concealed.

Despite the numerous achievements of Husserl's phenomenology in the philosophical world, his technique has come under serious scrutiny on a number of grounds. Despite its philosophical rigor, the phenomenological reduction faces significant methodological and ontological challenges. The first major difficulty lies in the practical execution of the epoché. Critics, like Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, argue that it is nearly impossible to completely suspend one's belief in the reality of the external world. Our engagement with the world is so fundamental and pre-reflective that bracketing it appears artificial, if not impossible (Heidegger, 1962, p. 6). Heidegger sees the reduction as an abstraction rather than an achievable practice.

A presuppositionless inquiry seems to be methodologically, epistemologically and ontologically difficult. Man is a being-in-the-world as well as a being-with-others. He is bound by culture and lives in a given historical epoch. It is observed that man's environment helps in shaping and in moulding his thinking. Gadamer argues that prejudice is not something to be eliminated but rather a fundamental aspect of understanding. He maintains that prejudices are shaped by historical and cultural context, influencing our interpretation of texts and experiences. It is rather difficult, if not impossible to bracket out totally man's environment in our quest to know. To bracket out existence entails to go outside of existence to do the bracketing and this appears to be impossible.

Presuppositions, according to Owolabi, are means through which we carry out most of our activities, philosophical or otherwise (Unah, 1996, p. 225). A presuppositionless enquiry, according to Husserl, demands that we should overcome or put in parenthesis our natural ways of knowing. However, the idea of transcending our natural attitude is too much of a demand from Husserl. It is rather difficult. In fact, there is hardly any step in our quest to know without

some natural presuppositions motivating the step. Besides, Edmund Husserl advocated for a presuppositionless enquiry by putting aside all the influences and preconceptions about the object of investigation without himself putting in bracket the influences of Brentano, Kant, Descartes and Plato. The works of these scholars helped Husserl in the formulation of his phenomenology. From Brentano, he borrowed the theory of intentionality, a basic theme in his phenomenology. From Kant, Husserl borrowed the idea that knowledge is the product of our categories. The radicalization of epistemology where consciousness became the starting point of all knowledge was borrowed from Descartes. In other words, it was from Descartes that he got the need for epistemology to be radicalized and for all beliefs to be questioned and denied if need be.

Finally, Husserl's phenomenology can be criticized on the ground of idealism - transcendental phenomenology. His phenomenology started as a mere descriptive analysis of experience, but later developed into a transcendental phenomenology, a kind of Idealism. Husserl's initial aim was simply to describe and analyze experience exactly as it occurs without prejudice of any prior assumption or presupposition. Husserl moved from this descriptive phase of phenomenology to a transcendental turn as he puts more emphasis on the transcendental Ego. In the transcendental reduction, Husserl says that the phenomenologist must put the empirical world as well as his natural self in bracket, in suspension or in parenthesis. It is only when this is done that the transcendental Ego can emerge. Describing the transcendental reduction, Husserl says thus, "It is the process by which I reduce my natural internal psychological experience to my transcendental and phenomenological experience, the objective world with all its objects is drawn from my transcendental Ego" (Unah, 1996, p. 299). Since Husserl claims that the detached and uncommitted Ego gives meaning to the world, some see him as an idealist. What makes Husserlian phenomenology susceptible to the charge of idealism is that at the level of the transcendental reduction, Husserl dissociates or disinterests the Ego from the world, and deemphasizes the indissoluble link between the world and the phenomenological Ego. Sequel to the above, the existentialist philosophers criticized and rejected Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and confined themselves only to the descriptive phenomenology.

Having seen the analysis of Husserl's thought as well as various criticisms that accompanied his technique, it becomes necessary to submit that this paper reaffirms the possibility of certain knowledge in a postmodern age of skepticism. Contrary to contemporary interpretation of Husserl's project by epistemologists, this paper states that the reduction is not a retreat into solipsism. It is rather a methodological suspension of naïve objectivism which gives room for the disclosure of the conditions of possibility for meaning and truth. This work highlights Husserl's reduction as a critical tool for identifying and clarifying the presuppositions that underlie various forms of knowledge. This paper major contribution is on recasting the phenomenological reduction as a regulative tool and not a final epistemic ground. Moreover the paper advocates for a middle position between foundationalist objectivism and epistemic relativism. Going by Husserl's lifeworld and intersubjective constitution of meaning, one observes that knowledge claims are embedded within structures of intentionality that are both perspectival and open to revision through intersubjective engagement. Hence, there is nothing like absolute or arbitrary justification rather we have a kind of communal practices of sense-making that can be held to normative standards of coherence and dialogical accountability. With this, the legitimate concerns of relativist epistemologies are addressed without succumbing to epistemic incoherence.

### **Conclusion**

Husserl's phenomenological reduction remains a landmark in the history of philosophy, offering a profound method for investigating consciousness and the conditions for knowledge.

Its emphasis on intentionality, subjectivity, and descriptive rigor has had a lasting impact across multiple disciplines. The reduction remains a profound philosophical method with far-reaching implications. It offers epistemological clarity in an age of scepticism which has given rise to the culture of relativism by returning to the bedrock of conscious experience. The need to alter the natural standpoint for the phenomenological standpoint led to the introduction of the famous epoché or bracketing. Epoché is the method by which the natural standpoint could be transcended. Phenomenological epoché helps to keep our natural attitude in abeyance.

However, its practical challenges, potential for solipsism and controversial ontological assumptions invite critical scrutiny. While the reduction provides a useful philosophical tool, its limitations underscore the need for further development; a task taken up by later phenomenologists who emphasized embodiment, intersubjectivity, and historicity. There is no doubt that it is methodologically controversial; it enables a radical critique of naturalism, empirical assumptions, and naïve realism. Although complete bracketing may be idealistic, the aspiration to suspend biases remains a valuable heuristic in philosophy and research. Husserl maintains again and again that phenomenological epoché is the perfect method through which dubious and controversial cognition of the natural standpoint could be done away with. His contention is that having rid ourselves of prejudices, preconceptions and assumptions, our mind can attain knowledge that is certain, indubitable and apodictic. This is possible by systematically examining conscious experience in order to identify essential structures which provide a basis for certain knowledge. These essential structures of experience are certain because they are immediately and indubitably given to us having bracketed all our biases and assumptions in order to focus on things themselves.

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