

An Analysis of Husserlian Foundationalism and Its Implication to Epistemology

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Abstract

The history of philosophy reveals that philosophers are not in agreement regarding the method of acquiring epistemic certainty. While the rationalists elevate and argue for the primacy of reason, the empiricists on the other hand argue for the infallibility of sense experience. As opposed to the rationalist and the empiricist is the position of the skeptics who questioned and doubted the possibility of knowledge. This controversy stands at the background of the thoughts of Edmund Husserl and agitated his philosophising about knowledge. He attempted to purge philosophy of all uncertainties and sought to ground philosophy on a foundation that is indubitable. Against this backdrop, he developed the Phenomenological method as the means to epistemic certitude. For him, our first outlook is that of natural human beings from the natural standpoint where we assume that the world exists outside our mind. What is given from the natural standpoint is characterized by Husserl as prejudice. He contended that a radical alternation of this natural standpoint is brought about by the method of phenomenology. Essentially, phenomenology is a philosophical strand that lays claim to foundationalism which maintains that other beliefs can be inferred from basic, self-evident beliefs. He argued that with transcendental reduction and epoche one's ego can become transcendental and this transcendental ego, pure consciousness, becomes the agent of indubitable foundation of knowledge. Since, consciousness is always conscious of something, then other secondary beliefs can be apprehended through the intentionality link. This paper attempts to analyse Husserl's foundationalism and bring to fore its epistemological implication.

Keywords: Foundationalism, Phenomenology, Epoche, Ego

Introduction

Generally, epistemologists believe that there is no isolated knowledge because our knowledge forms a body which has a structure, but they disagree as to what the proper structure of one's knowledge is. While coherentism believe that knowledge is inferentially justified if and only if it is a member of a coherent system, the Infinitism claim that a belief is inferentially justified if and only if it is a member of an infinite series of the right kind. Foundationalism, however, conceives beliefs as constituted into a structure with foundations. The foundations are regarded as a substructure made of beliefs that are self-evident. These beliefs therefore, do not depend upon the justification of any other beliefs. Other beliefs that are described as the superstructure rest on the foundation provided by the basic beliefs. Descartes registered himself as the first modern foundationalist with his *cogito ergo sum* as the indubitable belief upon which all other beliefs rises. However, owing to the plethora of criticisms labelled at Descartes' foundationalism and the paradox of his dualism, Husserl attempted to, with his phenomenological method, rehabilitate the Cartesian foundationalism on better foundation.

The Person of Husserl

Edmund Husserl is one of the most influential contemporary philosopher. He was born in the Moravian province of Prossnitz in 1859. After his early education in Prossnitz, he went to the University of Leipzig. There, from 1876 to 1878, he studied physics, astronomy, and mathematics. Husserl continued his studies at the Friederich Wilhelm University in Berlin. Later, in 1881, he went to the University of Vienna where, in 1883, he acquired his Ph.D. During 1884 to 1886, he attended the lectures of Franz Brentano (1838-1917), who became one of the most significant influence on Husserl's philosophical development. Some of his notable works include: his Lectures on Phenomenology (1904-1905), *The Idea of Phenomenology* (1906-1907), *Cartesian Meditations* (1931) and *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man* (1936). He died of pleurisy at the age of 79 in 1938 at Freiburg in Breisgau.

The Background of Husserl's Foundationalism

Quest for Certainty

Philosophers since antiquity have sought to combat how an epistemic subject can bridge the epistemic gap that exists between them (the aspiring knower) and an epistemic object. Philosophers over the centuries, therefore, sought to combat the skepticism that a failure to 'bridge' this epistemic gap implies. Husserl rejected the traditional philosophies of his time and sought for certainty. He proposed a completely different way of analysing the relationship between perception and knowledge. According to him, epistemic subject and his/her object are inextricably linked.

Cartesian Foundationalism

Cartesian foundationalism began with the radical quest of Descartes to attain the apodictic certainty which can serve as an epistemic foundation for his entire knowledge edifice. In this respect, Descartes had employed what he called the "Methodic Doubt". While employing this method, Descartes arrived at the indubitable belief that he exists because he thinks (doubts). Since the mind and by implication all beliefs emanating from it are necessarily justified because of their interconnectedness to the original indubitability of the mind, it followed, for Descartes, that the belief that he had a body and that God exists, among other beliefs, are self-evidently true. However, Descartes dualism was vigorously criticized. Husserl *then* took up the task to rehabilitate the Cartesian theory through what he takes to be the more rigorous philosophy of Phenomenology. *Husserl foundationalism program is a neo-cartesian theory. He agreed with Descartes that the evidence that precedes all others is the evidence of the subjective ego. However, he rejected the methodic doubt and replaced it with epoche.* He did not presuppose that there is a genuine science that will work as a foundation for grounding all sciences because this presupposition is a prejudice.

Franz Brentano's Concept of Intentionality

Franz Brentano lectures on intentionality was a significant influence on Husserl's philosophical development. Brentano characterized intentionality in terms of the mind's direction upon an object.¹ For him, intentionality is what distinguishes the mental, intuitive and physical phenomena. It is what characterizes mental acts, such as: judgments, beliefs, meanings, valuations, desires, loves, hatreds. Husserl considered consciousness as the foundation of his phenomenological approach to knowledge. From Brentano's concept of intentionality, Husserl held that intentionality is a discovery about the nature of consciousness. Husserl, following Brentano's argument, believed that intentionality is the essence of consciousness. In this light, For Husserl, the clearest fact about human experience is not simply the fact of consciousness but rather that consciousness is always consciousness of something. In phenomenology, Husserl considered that the subject (the conscious person) is always in relation to something (the object that reveals itself to the knower).

Husserl's Foundationalism: The Phenomenological Method

Husserl conceived phenomenology as the study of the structures of consciousness as experienced from the first person point of view. His phenomenological method, basically, has two kinds of the phenomenological reduction: the *epoché* reduction applied to the subject and the *eidetic* reduction applied to the object.

The Epoche Reduction

This is applied to the self and it is the first stage to Husserl's foundationalism. Husserl ventured into to the rigorous task of reconstructing philosophy on a solid foundation by *employing the method of epoche* which is the act of suspending or bracketing all beliefs. He suspended all *ideas that seemed to be self-evident or obvious in our everyday experience.* This is because all our beliefs are inherently tainted by what Husserl calls our 'natural attitude'. The natural attitude is the 'default' mode through which each epistemic subject relates with things and events in their experiential worlds. The "bracketing" implies suspending all beliefs characteristic of the "natural attitude;" the beliefs of the

¹ Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems*, 5th eds (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. 1971), 496.

sense and science. Since the object of investigation is phenomenologically within the mind, we need to move from the natural attitude to the transcendental attitude.² With the natural attitude, we assume that the world exists outside our mind, but with the transcendental attitude, we are aware of the objects within our mind. This transcendental attitude disconnects us from all prejudices and presuppositions that pertain to the natural standpoint. On this ground, Husserl noted:

“I disconnect them all, I make absolutely no use of their standards, I do not appropriate a single one of the propositions that enter into their systems, even though their evidential value is perfect, I take none of them, no one of them serves me for a foundation.”³

Beyond bracketing all beliefs, isolating the transcendental ego by bracketing the ego is the fundamental aim of phenomenology. This occurs at the last stage in the Husserlian series of bracketing (epoche) processes which Husserl calls the “Transcendental reduction.”⁴ This process involves the act by which the subject abandons the world and becomes transcendental and completely independent of the worldly limitations. Emerging from the transcendental reduction is pure consciousness, intentionally purified of all psychological and all worldly interpretations and inherent natural hindrances that can inhibit it from having correct and exact epistemic facts. To Husserl, it is here that transcendental subjectivity is arrived at. The transcendental ego or pure ego is a necessary principle. It is the agent of truth, the cognitive owner of the world, not simply a part of the world. As Husserl posited: “The posited Ego means that the world is no longer given to me in advance and outside there, but the positing world is within the transcendental Ego.”⁵

This transcendental ego can perceive the world in an independent manner, without the natural worldly limitations that have hitherto prevented it from having objective knowledge. At this stage, the transcendental ego becomes equidistant to all aspects of reality. This is what Husserl referred to as the *Archimedean point*.⁶ This implies that there is an equal apprehension of the truth which at this level is infallible. That is, despite the varieties of the social contexts of the perceivers, there is an objective knowledge of reality.⁷ For Husserl this is possible because the transcendent self, at this level, is self-evident and apodictic; hence, the basis for absolute certainty and infallibility. The self would then serve as the basis for certainty and clarity in judgment. Knowledge derived from this region is reliable and infallible owing to the wresting of the self from the empirical world wrapped with biases and prejudices. Hence, the transcendental ego is the incorrigible and absolutely certain basic foundation.

Apart from reconstructing the Cartesian presentation of the certainty of the ego, Husserl also discussed the second paramount issue in foundationalism. That is, how to justify the secondary beliefs on the basis of the primary beliefs. Having attained the certainty of the ego, Descartes, in his *Meditations*, went on to justify the certainty of the other beliefs by deducing them from the ego. Many observers have questioned this deduction. Husserl's stand is that the whole attempt is unnecessary. As against Descartes deduction, he used his theory of intentionality of consciousness as an answer to the question of how to justify secondary beliefs. The transcendental ego according to Husserl is not the only self-evident truth. He averred

The bare identity of the I am is not the only thing given as indubitable in transcendental self-experience. Rather there extends through all the particular data of actual and possible self-experience even though they are not absolutely indubitable in respect of single details a universal apodictically experienceable structure of the ego.⁸

²Rudolf Bernet, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Ingo Farin and James G. Hart (Springer: Indiana University Press, 2006), 40.

³ Husserl Edmund, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 111.

⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, 155

⁵ Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, 118.

⁶ Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, 118.

⁷ K. Owolabi, “Edmund Husserl’s Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis,” *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* 23, (1995):16.

⁸ Edmund Husserl, *The Paris Lectures*, trans Peter Kostenbaum (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 12.

Husserl's point is that the ego is not the only apodictic fact, but also the entire world that the ego is experiencing. For it is through it that the external world is structured and ordered, it is the ego that gives foundation and meaning to objects in the world. The certainty of the ego, according to Husserl, will always guarantee the certainty of the world the ego is experiencing. The reason for this claim is because Husserl believed that the ego or pure consciousness is not only transcendental but also intentional. Following Brentano's intentionality, Husserl posited that intentionality is the link between the ego and the world. The self is not only conscious of itself but conscious as well of things other than itself. Husserl, therefore, argued that if consciousness is consciousness of something outside it, then every consciousness is a logical correlate of the object of consciousness.⁹ He concluded that the apodicticity of the ego automatically becomes the apodicticity of its correlate, that is, the external world. Invariably, if the ego is justified, then other beliefs that are its correlates are justified. Hence, with intentionality, the apodicticity of the primary beliefs will also confirm apodicticity on the secondary beliefs, since the two are interlocked. Unlike Descartes who focused on "the existence of the subject alone" (*Cogito ergo sum*), Husserl focused on "the existence of the subject in relation with something in the world." Hence, he postulated his dictum, "*Ego cogito cogitatum*" which means "I think the object of thought". In simple terms, Husserl held that in being certain that the self is thinking, the self is equally certain that it is thinking of something.

The intentional theory of consciousness that Husserl's thesis of intentionality implies is also his answer to the sceptical challenge of an epistemic subject bridging the epistemic gap that exists between them and their object of cognition. On the showing of Husserlian phenomenological philosophy, this dichotomy does not exist since the subject and his/her object of cognition are inextricably linked together through the intentionality of their consciousness. Through the Transcendental ego and the intentionality of consciousness, Husserl attempted to give an ultimate foundation and rehabilitation of the Cartesian Foundationalism

The Eidetic Reduction

The second methodological step that is central to phenomenology is the eidetic reduction. While the *epoché* reduction deals with "putting things aside" in order to avoid any prejudices and presuppositions, the *eidetic* reduction deals with the meaning or essence of what appears to us. The eidetic reduction attempts to identify the essential structures of human consciousness, rather than the ephemeral content of individuals' consciousness. In eidetic reduction, the individual existence of the object is bracketed to arrive at the character in common or essence of the object through the process of 'imaginative variation'.¹⁰ The eidetic reduction is a method of imagining possible variations of the phenomenon under study. Although all the variations of a given phenomenon could not be realistically imagined in a phenomenological study, since they are probably infinite, as many of these as possible are imagined. What the phenomenologist looks for throughout this process is the essence or eidetic structure of the phenomenon includes all of its features that cannot be eliminated by imaginatively varying the phenomenon.

This method of eidetic reduction is an experimental method in the sense that a working phenomenologist must actually imagine a large number of variations of the phenomenon, without knowing ahead of time how the phenomenon will appear in all of these variations, or which of its features will be resistant to variation.

The Epistemological Implication of Husserlian Foundationalism

Analytically, some epistemological implications can be drawn from Husserl's foundationalism. From his foundationalism, it follows that epistemological certainty is attainable unlike some philosophers who argue that objective knowledge is not attainable. In this connection, since he identified the phenomenological method as the only method to epistemic certainty, it implies that all other epistemological method should be jettisoned and only phenomenology be embraced in all

⁹ Edmund Husserl, *The Paris Lectures*, 23.

¹⁰ Joseph Omorogbe, *Epistemology: A Systematic and Historical Study* (Lagos: Joja Press, 2005), 52.

epistemological inquiry. This implies that certainty cannot be gotten from the senses, or from a worldly ego, but from only the transcendental ego.

Another implication of Husserl's foundationalism is that we can arrive at the essences of things only from a presuppositionless position. For him, it is possible for one to be completely strip of all worldly assumptions and experience through the process of epoche until the ego becomes transcendental and pure, completely detached from the world. This implies that before one undertakes an epistemological inquiry one has to strip himself completely of all presupposition and transcends the world.

In addition to Husserlian foundationalism comes the possibility of a universal science which will now make philosophy a comprehensive grasp of all nature. Unlike Hume who contended that we cannot talk about the world as a totality because there is no connection underlying our experience that link up something that can be called a world and Kant in his metaphysical agnosticism asserted that we cannot know anything about the cosmos, Husserl is asserting that it is possible to have a universal science.

Husserl foundationalism implies that the ego is the source of knowledge. However, unlike Cartesian foundationalism where we logically deduce the existence of all other thing, in Huserlian foundationalism, we proceed from the transcendental ego to the knowledge of other things through the process of intentionality. For him, the transcendental ego, pure consciousness, is always conscious of something. Similarly, his method implied that our object of investigation is within the ego and not something that exist independently in the world. Hence, we need to transcend this world and tap into the transcendental ego to gain knowledge.

Evaluation

From the above, it is apparent that the certainty of the basic foundation in Husserl's theory seems to be more established than that of Descartes'. While Descartes ego is certain because it is able to survive the doubt, the ego of Husserl can lay claim to certainty not only because it is the residue of the process of epoche, but because the ego is completely purified absolutely free from the limitations of the world by its being transcendental. However, could it be said that Husserl has achieved what was impossible for Descartes and other previous philosophers, that is, sustaining a fool-proof theory of foundationalism?

Although Edmund Husserl tried to solve the problem of the transcendental ego in his phenomenology yet his thoughts have met with some pitfalls. He believed that if we employ this strategy, we will be able to 'transcend' our bias-tainted 'natural attitudes' and proceed to the transcendental objective phenomenological standpoint. Nonetheless, can any man really succeed in putting the world in abeyance? This seems highly unlikely.

Be that as it may, how can an ego that is transcendental still claim that the world is an intentional correlate? This dilemma that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology behooves was first muted by Jean-Paul Sartre. For him, once the ego becomes transcendental, it will no longer be legitimate to still insist that it can be 'intended' to, or apprehend, epistemic objects in the world again.¹¹ More so, we can even ask this question: Can one even legitimately conceive of a source of knowledge that is pure and transcendental? Is it even logical for Husserl to say that the foundation of his own knowledge is the pure and transcendental ego? The answer, I think, is in the negative. Husserl's position is an obvious contradiction of the natural acquisition of knowledge which involves interaction between the object and

¹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego* (New York: Noonday Press, 1977) Cited in K. Owolabi, "Edmund Husserl's Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis," 20.

the subject of knowledge. In the act of knowing, the subject seeking to know cannot afford to be independent of the object to be known.

Furthermore, Husserl's foundationalism also falls short in the light of current anti-foundationalist challenge. Anti-foundationalist argues that the assumption that there are some beliefs that are absolutely incorrigible is a misconception of a man's true nature as a fallible being. prominent figures such as W.V.O. Quine and Richard Rorty opine that, with Descartes, Husserl is wrong to think he can achieve an infallible account or knowledge of reality. The quest for the ultimate foundation, according to them, is a pseudo-quest. Quine posited that Husserl blatantly ignores the fact that humans *qua* humans are essentially fallible beings.

Conclusion

As can be easily gleaned from our exposition above, phenomenology was Husserl's approach on how to overcome the sceptical charge that epistemic claims about reality or indeed all forms of cognition is impossible. Bearing in mind all the criticisms that have been levelled against him, he should be commended for his effort at 'trying' to ground human knowledge on the sure footing of human consciousness which is in line with the Socratic injunction: "man, know thyself". With the adoption of Husserl's rigorous brand of phenomenological philosophy, many of the uncritical thoughts and practices around us would have been averted. In addition, his phenomenology was one of the major source of contemporary existentialism.

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