

The Essential Features of Everyday Lived Experience: Is There a Possibility to Accurately and Completely Describe It?

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Abstract

The fascinating phenomenological problem is that it would be an impressive challenge to exactly and comprehensively describe the day-to-day routines of lived experiences. Phenomenology is both a method and a Philosophy at the same time. Edmund Husserl's notion of "dim awareness" seems plausible alternative to address the phenomenological issue. The follow up phenomenological problem that was revealed or exposed because of Husserl's attempt to address the primary puzzle of phenomenology was taken as the foundation for both Heidegger and Ponty to begin their objection. However, that follow up phenomenological problem should not have been the startup of Heidegger and Ponty's objection to his work. Instead, they would have used it as opportunity to look for viable alternatives. Though Husserl did not totally subscribe to the kind of perception that was associated with the British empiricists (Berkeley, Hume, and Locke), he takes some elements of it. The first idea that he took from that tradition of empiricists is that perception is very rudimentary and model or standard mental state. The second idea that he took from that tradition is the heart of perspectival. By merging these two ideas, Husserl tried to establish a kind of phenomenological intentionality that accepts perception as the model intentional mental state, instead of belief or judgment.

Keywords

Intentionality, Lived Experience, Mental State, Perspective, Phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

This article critically exposes a chapter contributed by Sean D. Kelly, to the book edited by Robert C. Solomon and David Sherman, *The Blackwell Guide to Continental Philosophy* [1]. The chapter is entitled "Edmund Husserl and Phenomenology". After a thorough and critical reading of the part under consideration, and presentation of the earlier version of this paper to the Ph.D. class; I gave my essay the title: The Essential Features of Everyday Lived Experience: Is There a Possibility to Accurately and Completely Describe It?

This study consists of six parts. The first part presents phenomenology's fundamental and fascinating philosophical problem, and why it is worth discussing. That is the issue of adequately and exactly describing the distinctive characteristics of day-to-day routine lived experiences.

The second part deals with the need to avoid the two extremes. On one hand, there is an extreme that claims "full conscious awareness" of the distinctive characteristics of day-to-day routine lived experiences. On the other hand, there is an extreme that assumes "complete lack of awareness" of the distinctive characteristics of day-to-day routine lived experiences. This shall be followed by the discussion of an alternative to these extremes, which is a reconciling stance that Edmund Husserl calls "dim awareness."

The third part is devoted to the discussion of Husserl's notion of experience's "perspectivism and intentionality." This part also covers how his attempt to address the phenomenological problem gave rise to another philosophically fascinating puzzle, which laid the base for Heidegger and Ponty's objection to Husserl's claim.

The fourth part sheds light on the respective objections to Husserl's view of "perspectivism and intentionality of every day lived experiences" from Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau Ponty. This shall be followed my critical reflection of their objection there by defending Husserl's claim.

The fifth part covers Husserl's version of empiricism or his view of "perception as the paradigmatic intentional state." This would be done by discussing what he borrowed from the prominent empiricists (Locke, Berkely, and Hume), and the way his version differs from theirs.

Finally, the sixth part or conclusion sets forth the main arguments of this essay, concluding remarks, and some possible suggestions for further discussion on the issue at stake. That is the philosophical problem of adequately and exactly describing the distinctive characteristics of routine day to day lived experiences.

THE FUNDAMENTAL AND FASCINATING PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM OF PHENOMENOLOGY

I would like to begin this section with my personal actual story associated with the issue under consideration; the same

was done during my presentation of the earlier version of this essay to the Ph.D. class. One day, after a busy night with no proper and adequate sleep (as it was my last minutes to submit the final version of my master's thesis), I had to wake up early to meet the deadline! As usual I was supposed to have at least a cup of coffee, right after the breakfast, since I was almost addicted to it.

However, unfortunately, though my wife, Chaltu Abdeta Barkessa (I prefer to call her Biikkoo) was there providing me with two cups of coffee right after having my breakfast, I had no idea of the two cups of coffee; except that we had breakfast together. Then, before it is about to leave home, I complained to my spouse that she did not present the coffee as usual. That is the time she was surprised and could not stop laughing at me, and she kept asking me whether I was serious as well!

This actual story could be best articulated with what Sean D. Kelly calls **"Eye, Hand, and Head Coordination."** In that actual case, my eye and hand were working in coordination while I was grasping and picking up the coffee cup to sip it; however, being absent minded. However, I cannot say that I was either fully cognizant of the act (sipping the coffee) or totally unconscious of it, since my eye and hand were perfectly at work in what amounts to hidden mental state and thought. And this exemplifies what Husserl calls "dim awareness." The notion of "dim awareness" seems plausible when examined in relation to (within the context of) the actual cases/real life situations and day to day routine lived experiences like the actual story of mine discussed above.

During the presentation of the earlier version of this essay to the Ph.D. class, we had a specific discussion pertaining to the idea that phenomenology is both a method and a Philosophy at the same time. Even though the issue of whether an African Philosophy is still in need of a separate method to approach the subjects of study remains open for further academic discourse, I think phenomenology would help us to some extent in this regard. Most of African indigenous knowledge and practices were/are available in the form of oral exchange of views and systems and learning by doing in everyday real-life challenges that had being handed over inter-generationally. And the main concern of phenomenology is how to exactly and comprehensively describe this day-to-day routine lived experiences. Hence, it would be helpful in this regard in revitalizing the indigenous knowledge in Africa by paying attention to the details of the customs and practices, which might in turn reveal the primary reasons behind their very existence. Simon Glendinning says:

Other philosophical movements either were not around to figure or if they were around simply didn't figure on the analytic radar most of the time. This might suggest that there is after all a clear methodological core to the idea of 'Continental philosophy' – namely phenomenology. However, as we have seen, that would not by itself serve to distinguish it in the right kind of way from the analytic movement since parts of that movement also belong to the

movement of phenomenology at large. The idea of 'Continental phenomenology' might do the trick, but then it is the addition of the tag 'Continental' that matters [2].

At this point, it would be imperative to bring to attention the interdisciplinary nature of Philosophy in general and that of Phenomenology in particular. For example, academic disciplines such as Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, and the like could be mentioned when it comes to the subjects of study that they all share. The issues they cover might include mental states, cultural practices and values, indigenous knowledge, dynamism of human behaviors as related to their lived experience, and so on and so forth. Therefore, a combination of all or most of these interrelated subjects might possess the potential or the hope of providing the realm of African Philosophy with a more appropriate method to approach the nature of African Philosophy.

AN ATTEMPT TO AVOID THE TWO EXTREMES IN ADDRESSING PHENOMENOLOGICAL ISSUE: "DIM AWARENESS"

The fascinating phenomenological problem is that it would be an impressive challenge to exactly and comprehensively describe the day-to-day routines of lived experiences. In the endeavor to describe these day-to-day routines of lived experience, there are two extremes that seem possible resolutions to the phenomenological issue at first glance. However, up on careful contemplation of these seemingly working resolutions would not actually address the issue at stake.

For instance, in the actual story of mine that has been discussed under the last sub-topic, I could not claim that I had neither "full conscious awareness" of grasping the coffee cup mug and sipping it, nor "complete lack of awareness" of that morning's routine lived experience. The reason is that I was not fully unconscious of the experience as my hand has perfectly grasped the coffee cup and directed it to my mouth to sip it. And I was also not fully cognizant of the experience as I had to request for the first cup of coffee. Hence, Edmund Husserl's notion of "dim awareness" is plausible alternative to approach the phenomenological issue under discussion.

And surprisingly, I immediately recalled that experience of having two cups of coffee right after being told that I had it. Now, let us look at this actual case from the point of view of Husserl calls "intentionality and perspectivism of experience." Accordingly, in that actual case, my sipping the coffee was intentional since my hand and eye were in coordination with my consent to make the experience happen. And by the same token, I could observe the object (a cup of coffee) from a perspective.

Moreover, Husserl believes that objects of day-to-day routine experiences exceed our actual experience of them or these every day lived experiences "transcend or go beyond" our perceived experience of them. And here is the point where both Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau – Ponty embarked on their criticism of Edmund Husserl's assertion that "objects are presented in experience as transcending __

or “going beyond” — the experience we have of them.” Their critics was grounded on the main question “But how can experience be essentially perspectival and at the same time present objects to us as transcending the perspective that we have on them?”

The next section presents the claims of Heidegger and Ponty in rejecting Husserl’s assertion that “intentional states immanent.” I would like to discuss that in line with my own critical reflection of their views, there by defending Husserl’s claim that “objects are presented in experience as transcending — or “going beyond” — the experience we have of them.”

HUSSERL’S NOTION OF EXPERIENCE’S PERSPECTIVISM AND INTENTIONALITY

This notion of perspectivism and intentionality of the day-to-day routine lived experiences was developed by Edmund Husserl as a possible resolution to the phenomenological problem. The phenomenological problem is the puzzle of exactly and adequately describing the distinctive characteristics of every day lived experiences. He developed this as attempt to address the basic questions posed in relation to the correspondence between mental state and objects of experience and that of intentional connectivity of the “linguistic utterances” that follow. Previous studies also show that phenomenological problem must be approached from the perspective of and within the context of vernacular languages and real-life cases [3] [4].

There are two questions worth mentioning at this point, that are posed by Husserl and taken as foundations or grounds for developing “intentionality and perspectivism of everyday experiences” as a resolution to the phenomenological problem. In other words, his idea of “intentionality” was emanated from his attempt to respond to the first question; and by the same token, his idea of “perspectivism” was motivated by his attempt to address the second question. Sean D. Kelly states:

Husserl began his phenomenological inquiry by asking how linguistic utterances come to be the kinds of intentional structures that they are; how they come to be, in other words, mental states that are characteristically of, about, or directed toward objects and states of affairs in the world. The key to answering this question, according to Husserl, lies in an analysis of the experiences that, in the most basic cases, make our linguistic utterances about the world possible. This analysis reveals two important facts. In the first place, everyday experiences, like the linguistic utterances they make possible, are intentional. The second important fact about experiences, according to Husserl, is that they always reveal their object from a perspective. This perspectivism is natural for bodily perceivers like us who are restricted to spatiotemporal points of view on the world [5].

As it could be understood from the above quote, Husserl’s notion of “intentionality and perspectivism of every day lived experiences” is interesting for two main reasons. The first is that he did not simply pose the questions, however, he

analyzed the possible responses and suggested two answers whose combination resulted in this approach. The second is that his attempt to address the phenomenological problem by this approach has revealed another fascinating phenomenological problem that attracted the attention of Heidegger and Ponty in their critics of Husserl’s work. The follow up phenomenological problem is that accepting the fact that an object of an experience could be merely revealed from its perspective, how does an experience present objects to us as going beyond our perspective of them.

HEIDEGGER AND PONTY’S CRITICS OF HUSSERL’S NOTION OF INTENTIONALITY AND PERSPECTIVISM

The follow up phenomenological problem that was revealed or exposed because of Husserl’s attempt to address the primary puzzle of phenomenology was taken as the foundation for both Heidegger and Ponty to begin their objection. The phenomenological issue uncovered by Husserl’s work is that accepting the fact that an object of an experience could be merely revealed from its perspective, how does an experience present objects to us as going beyond our perspective of them. Sean D. Kelly says:

Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty reject Husserl’s claim that intentional states are immanent in this sense. In Heidegger’s language, Husserl’s commitment to this idea reflects his inability to ask the question of the being of intentional conscious-ness. In other words, it reflects his inability to puzzle over the way in which experiences themselves are presented to us. By simply assuming that experiences are presented to us all at once in their entirety, Husserl leaves out the possibility that we could discover facts about an experience that we weren’t aware of explicitly when we were amid it [5].

However, there are also points of departure between Heidegger and Ponty in their objection to Husserl’s claim that “intentional states are immanent.” On the one hand, Ponty’s objection to this view of Husserl was grounded on critical assessment of the phenomenology of everyday experiences that are bodily and not reflective at the same time. He states, “grasping and other visual–motor activities” as instances of such “unreflective bodily experiences.” On the other hand, Heidegger’s was grounded on Husserl’s raising proper question with no relevant answer. To put this in the words of Heidegger, “Husserl had learned to ask (though not necessarily to answer) the question of the being of entities.”

I contend that Husserl’s work would not have been criticized on these grounds for three main reasons. In the first place, he was successful in posing the two very important questions that laid the base for his view of “intentionality and perspectivism of everyday lived experiences.” Then he tried to apply this claim to address the phenomenological problem of “accurately and completely describing the essential features of everyday lived experiences,” which was a bold intellectual endeavor and an icebreaking in this regard.

Secondly, he was able to answer the two questions discussed above that are posed by him, there by developing an approach the phenomenological puzzle. That means he did not shy away from addressing the proper questions he posed as unlike what Heidegger argues.

Thirdly, Husserl's bold attempt to resolve the primary phenomenological puzzle has clearly revealed or exposed the follow up phenomenological problem. Hence, that follow up phenomenological problem should not have been the startup of Heidegger and Ponty's objection to his work. Instead, they would have used it as opportunity to look for viable alternatives.

HUSSERL'S VERSION OF EMPIRICISM OR PERCEPTION AS THE PARADIGMATIC INTENTIONAL STATE

Though Husserl did not totally subscribe to the kind of perception that was associated with the British empiricists (Berkeley, Hume, and Locke), he takes some elements of it. And he took those ideas, to merge them to come up with his own version of perception. That is relying on perception, instead of belief or judgment to bring about phenomenological kind of intentionality. According to Andrew Cutrofello:

Husserl's principle of principles—the claim that phenomenology must rely exclusively on senses that are revealed in pure intuition—would be compromised by the role that writing plays in the constitution of presence [6].

The first idea that he took from that tradition of empiricists is that perception is very rudimentary and model or standard mental state. The second idea that he took from that tradition is that is the heart of perspectival. Accordingly, by merging these two ideas, Husserl tried to establish a kind of phenomenological intentionality that accepts perception as the model intentional mental state, instead of belief or judgment.

However, Husserl was against the empiricist image theory of perception, though he shares the above-mentioned elements of their view. Unlike the empiricists, he believes that we do not receive raw, an image that is not translated while we are aware of the experience; however, an information that has been given some interpretations as an image of certain object.

Ponty and Brentano developed slightly different accounts of intentionality upon rejecting the version of Husserl's empiricism. Brentano, like Husserl, believes that "mental states are intentionally directed toward objects." However, Brentano's version of intentionality differs from that of Husserl's in that it is not a must for the object toward which intentionality must be directed to exist.

Ponty further modifies the idea of intentionality by crafting the name "motor intentionality," to emphasize the circumstances in which bodily intentional tasks that distinctively take spatial characteristics. Moreover, Ponty, revised Husserl's notion of "indeterminate" as "positive indeterminate." Indeterminate, for Husserl, refers to a

condition where each and single distinctive characteristic of an object do not plainly and "determinately" reveal to us in all our experiences. But for Ponty, it is possible that "motor – intentional activities" like handling something by parts of our body in a way that is "unreflective" could be clearly presented to us.

CONCLUSIONS

The fascinating phenomenological problem is that it would be an impressive challenge to exactly and comprehensively describe the day-to-day routines of lived experiences. Phenomenology is both a method and a Philosophy at the same time. Even though the issue of whether an African Philosophy is still in need of a separate method to approach the subjects of study remains open for further academic discourse, I think phenomenology would help us to some extent in this regard.

Edmund Husserl's notion of "dim awareness" seems plausible alternative to address the phenomenological issue. The phenomenological problem is the puzzle of exactly and adequately describing the distinctive characteristics of every day lived experiences. He developed the notion of "intentionality and perspectivism" as attempt to address the basic questions posed in relation to the correspondence between mental state and objects of experience.

The follow up phenomenological problem that was revealed or exposed because of Husserl's attempt to address the primary puzzle of phenomenology was taken as the foundation for both Heidegger and Ponty to begin their objection. The phenomenological issue uncovered by Husserl's work is that accepting the fact that an object of an experience could be merely revealed from its perspective, how does an experience present objects to us as going beyond our perspective of them.

I contend that Husserl's work would not have been criticized on these grounds for three main reasons. In the first place, he was successful in posing the two very important questions that laid the base for his view of "intentionality and perspectivism of everyday lived experiences." Then he tried to apply this claim to address the phenomenological problem of "accurately and completely describing the essential features of everyday lived experiences," which was a bold intellectual endeavor and an icebreaking in this regard. Secondly, he was able to answer the two questions discussed above that are posed by him, there by developing an approach the phenomenological puzzle. That means he did not shy away from addressing the proper questions he posed as unlike what Heidegger argues. Thirdly, Husserl's bold attempt to resolve the primary phenomenological puzzle has clearly revealed or exposed the follow up phenomenological problem. Hence, that follow up phenomenological problem should not have been the startup of Heidegger and Ponty's objection to his work. Instead, they would have used it as opportunity to look for viable alternatives. According to Richard Cobbs-Stevens:

Edmund Husserl was the founder of phenomenology, one of the principal movements of twentieth-century philosophy. His principal contribution to philosophy was his development of the concept of intentionality. He reasserted and revitalized the pre-modern thesis that our cognitional acts are intentional, i.e., that they reach out beyond thought to things in the world. When we think or speak about things, and when we perceive them, we deal with those things and not with mental intermediaries. Intentionality is our openness to the world, our transcending mode of being [7].

Though Husserl did not totally subscribe to the kind of perception that was associated with the British empiricists (Berkeley, Hume, and Locke), he takes some elements of it. The first idea that he took from that tradition of empiricists is that perception is very rudimentary and model or standard mental state. The second idea that he took from that tradition is that is the heart of perspectival. By merging these two ideas, Husserl tried to establish a kind of phenomenological intentionality that accepts perception as the model intentional mental state, instead of belief or judgment.

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