

**Three Pillars of Phenomenology:  
Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates phenomenology approaches from three perspectives: Husserl's transcendental phenomenology; Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology; and Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception. Phenomenology provides a general comprehension that demonstrates the relationship between the mind and the world. This relation is reflected in Husserl's phenomenology as a transcendental act by subject in relation to the object. Heidegger's phenomenology mostly being in the concept of "Dasein" which is influenced by a link with time and history. Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception sees being existing prior to thought as an 'inalienable presence. Unlike Husserl; Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty perceive being as the inseparable part of the world itself and individual.

**Key words:** Phenomenology, transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutical phenomenology, idea of perception

**Introduction**

The interpretation of theory has been an ongoing topic of discussion since time immemorial. Ontological, epistemological and methodological concerns bring out two main camps in the evaluation of theory. Positivist and post-positivism camp sees theory as systematic views of abstracted ideas with empirical research that identify hypotheses via reliable tests. A positivist inquiry investigates basis of causal relationships which are linked to theory. The epistemology of this camp seeks the explanation of phenomenon through natural science. A phenomenon is measured by utilization of samples and is trying to be reduced to the simplest form. Likewise, the ontological stance of positivist and post-positivism assume that a social reality is independent from humanity. On the other hand, treating individuals as separate from

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the social context, ignoring people's perceptions, constraints stemming from highly structured research design and difficulty to explain complex phenomena in a single measure garnered much criticism from some corners. These constraints may lead to important variables being missed in a social inquiry.

Alternatively, phenomenology rejects the empiricist perspective and utilizes a subjectivist approach via interpretive perspectives of theory. Phenomenologists deal with action and behaviour developed from discourse within the mind. From epistemological view, the relationship between the researcher and the inquiry is impossible to separate. The knowledge is produced via interpretation of the subject and interaction of the subject and the object. Besides, ontological perspective is derived from the mind, hence reality is subjective and multiple in phenomenology. Mostly, inductive research design is preferred the focus of small data sample. Instead of falsification, verification is being used and utilization of different methods and getting different perceptions are encouraged. Phenomenology develops an interaction between mind and the world and interprets the distinctions between the internal and external world as well as levels of objectivity and subjectivity (Howell, 2013). Phenomenologists believe that 'being-in-the-world' improves the understanding of experiences and the meaning of the subject and the object (Howell, 2004). This research limits itself by focusing on three main approaches in phenomenology: Husserl's transcendental phenomenology; Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology; and Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception.

### **Transcendental Phenomenology**

Husserl as a mathematician shows reaction to the positivism and develops methods for the study of conscious experience in order to overcome objectivism's limitations in the positivism. However, his intention is not only limited with the concern of research motives but also obtaining perceptions into cognition, judgements and the life of reason (Moran, 2013:44). He names his phenomenological stance as transcendental phenomenology:

*"In its purely eidetic attitude, which 'brackets' all transcendence, phenomenology necessarily reaches on its own ground of pure consciousness this entire complex of transcendental problems in the specific sense and therefore deserves the name transcendental Phenomenology (Husserl, 1969:198)."*

Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is derived from the concept of "intentionality" (Moustakas, 1994). McIntyre and Smith (1989: 147) defined intentionality from a philosophical perspective: "*A characteristic feature of our mental states and experiences, especially evident in what we commonly call being "conscious" or "aware"*". Husserl gave importance to the intentionality of consciousness relating to other objects, including ordinary things and imaginary creations (Wertz et al., 2011). He defined intentionality as "*the unique peculiarity of experiences to be the consciousness of something*" (Husserl, 1969:242). His definition of intentionality seeks the relationship between subject and object through background, content, act and horizon and investigates as subjects how we experience objects (McIntyre and Smith, 1989).

Different from his contemporary philosophers, he brings transcendental understanding to subjectivity. Husserl (1936:19) infers that his "*transcendental subjectivism is not a chaos of intentional experiences, but rather a unity of synthesis, a many-layered synthesis in which ever new object-types of individual objects are constituted. Yet every object signifies a rule-structure for transcendental subjectivity.*" As a first step to reach transcendental subjectivity, an immediate reflective self-experience should take the conscious of life without prejudice (Husserl, 1970).

In order to provide this, he developed the method of phenomenological reduction and transcendental reflection. The phenomenological reduction begins with "bracketing" which means suspension of lived experience. Herein, "the term of "epoché" emerges. The epoché is abstaining from beings' judgements and a priori knowledge in the existing world. However, the epoché does not mean getting suspicions about the essence of knowledge such as occurred in the cartesian philosophy of Descartes. It is a state of neutrality against epistemology and prepares self to see clearer picture of being's essence. This neutrality with structure of the noesis (the act of consciousness intentionality) and the noema (intended object) corresponds to transcendental reduction through separating intention and existence and thus, being begins to realize the existence of transcendental ego. The separation of ego and intentions provide going back from existence to presence. After this moment, transcendental reduction turns into a transcendental reflection which prompts self towards the essence of phenomenon.

## Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Heidegger like his tutor Husserl stays in the camp of Phenomenology however, he mainly differentiates his phenomenology from Husserl through rejecting transcendental reduction. He criticizes Husserl's transcendental phenomenology as being too subjective and abstract. His phenomenological journey begins with a basic question "What is being?". In order to find a response to this question, unlike Husserl in lieu of bracketing, he focuses on interpretation and meaning of being (Giorgi, 2012). He also rejects Cartesian philosophy which sees only self as a subject and other all as objects including being and other subjects in his seeking of being.

His phenomenological understanding has been influenced by the methodology of 'hermeneutics'. Hermeneutic is derived from the Greek word "hermeneuin", which means to interpret. The origin of the word is inspired from the Greek mythological character, Hermes, who was tasked with delivering messages of Greek Gods to the people (Gadamer, 2006). Hermeneutic is about interpretation and focuses on historical and social contexts that surround actions when interpreting a text (Gadamer, 2008). Heidegger uses his hermeneutic phenomenology to discuss meaning's direct link with time. "Being" is systematic, historical and temporal. In order to understand temporal structure of being, it is required to scrutinize hidden meanings embedded to historical developments. Caputo (1999: 225) states that,

*"Hermeneutic phenomenology makes explicit the implicit clues that organize understanding, identifying the horizon of Being that allows entities to appear as they are, and then explicates the implicit clue around which that horizon is organized and by which it is nourished, which is the "meaning", of the Being of those entities."*

Heidegger (1962) emphasizes the necessity of interpretation when studying social beings and questioned the meaning of being from the concept of Dasein. He defines Dasein as "an entity which in its very being comports itself understanding toward that being" (Heidegger, 1994: 78). The essence of Dasein cannot be separated from the living world and lies in its existence (Heidegger, 1962).

As Nenon (2013:196) inferred Heidegger sees life an achievable object not an object of knowledge. He uses a slightly different form of intentionality which is based on a priori cognition in his phenomenological stance. Heidegger (1982:20) defines a priori

cognition as *“The a priori character of being and of all the structures of being accordingly calls for a specific kind of approach and way of apprehending being-a priori cognition. The basic components of a priori cognition constitute what we call phenomenology.”*

Heidegger investigates meaning of being in the existing world from intersubjective ontological perspective. While Husserl focusing on reflections of the noesis and the noema on the living world, alternatively Heidegger interprets human existence over time. This interpretation is shaped by a hermeneutic circle which moves back and forth again from an individual's experience to whole of experience in all living occurrences (Lavery, 2003).

### **Idea of Perception**

Merleau-Ponty as inspired by Gestalt psychology questioned science's capacity for providing humanity with a complete picture of itself vis-à-vis a world picture. He desired to use knowledge without limits and identified inquiries that do not begin with positivist methods. Merleau-Ponty rejects Husserl's transcendental reduction and intentionality and distinguishes his philosophy from Heidegger's through the concept of "Being". The question of being has many different aspects, hence it cannot be responded or described from one perspective such as time and intentionality. A holistic method covering manifold actors such temporality, spatiality, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, language, sexuality and will should be directed to the essence of perception. Then, the perception and body together forms being in the world (Carman and Hansen, 2006). Merleau-Ponty defines phenomenology as the study of essence which seeks to find out definitions of consciousness or perception. According to him,

*“The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind, I have tried, first of all, to re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and in its world (...) the insertion of mind in corporeality, the ambiguous relation which we entertain with our body and correlatively, with perceived things” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964:3-4).*

He brings back essence into existence and identifies a world that already exists prior to reflection and has an inalienable presence (Howell, 2013). Merleau-Ponty (1962:22) infers *“that the task of phenomenology is to reveal the mystery of the world and mystery of the reason.”* Perception shows that self and world are two sides of the same coin. Self with the body becomes part of the world.

## Conclusion

The essence of conscious is the focal point of subject and object's interaction in the phenomenology. Each act of consciousness is stemming from experiences of the subject with objects. Phenomenology focuses on manifold feature of conscious experience. Interpretation of the phenomenon is being applied to the area of Phenomenology from three main perspectives such as Husserl's transcendental phenomenology; Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology; and Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception.

Transcendental phenomenology leans on conscious experiences in the daily life. The essence of consciousness is being formed by the interaction of subject and object. This interaction brings an implicit recognition of the object by the subject. The transcendental subjectivity makes the comprehensible of real world's existence by the mind. Husserl mostly followed a constructivist approach in his phenomenology which seeks to understand how humans interpret or construct something in social linguistic. Likewise, the interpretation of theory is shaped by minds' experiences, views and background. The epistemology is transactional and subjectivist while creating knowledge through interaction of subject and objects.

Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology leans heavily on the idea of Dasein which is an abstract idea of human existence during the ongoing life time between 'birth and death. Heidegger criticized Husserl as being too subjective in his phenomenological stance and developed a more holistic approach that cover conscious and existence as a whole entity that structures themselves and being structured as well. Whilst Husserl's intentionality connects mind and object through epistemology, Heidegger's intentionality reflects to the understanding of ontology and be seen a part of time concept. His ontological stance is close to "Historical Realism". A reality can be understood through historical analysis and subjective humans develop theory in a historical context

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological stance is closer to Heidegger's phenomenology than Husserl's phenomenology. Both of them follow a holistic view of the fusion of world itself and individual. However, Merleau-Ponty mainly differentiates his philosophy from Heidegger's through the concept of "Being". According to Merleau-Ponty: "Being can

be grasped only in deviation from beings and their order, as a “wild being” which cannot be exhausted by any culture” (Waldenfels, 1999: 289). His main focus is the essence of perception rather than time concept. Merlau-Ponty’s paradigm of inquiry is more participatory. His epistemology requires critical subjectivity which is formed with experimental, presentational, propositional and practical knowing. According to him, practical and theoretical knowledge co-create findings in the becoming context

In a nut shell, these three pillars of phenomenology examine the phenomenon of “being” from three main perspectives as “transcendentalism”, “dasein” and “inalienable presence”. In line with their differences and common points, they break strict rules of positivism and bring to social science inquiry an enriched and critical perspective via subjectivity.

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