

# Brief Introduction to Phenomenology

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## The Search for a Theory of Knowledge

One of the major obsessions of western philosophers has been the problem of knowledge. Influenced by the dramatic technological and theoretical achievements of modern science, philosophers since Descartes (1596-1650) have formulated theories about what knowledge is and what conditions must be satisfied in order for a human being to know that  $2+3=5$ , that all emeralds are green, that human aggression is a genetic trait, or that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Descartes was not the first philosopher who tried to formulate a theory of knowledge. The western preoccupation with knowledge goes back to the ancient Greeks. So, for example, in Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates attempts to formulate an adequate definition of knowledge. What seems clear to Socrates is that to know something, a number of conditions have to be met:

1. I must believe it, and
2. It must be true.

Suppose, for example, I believe that the President's wife has been helping him make foreign policy decisions by consulting a Ouija board, but that I believe this only because I saw it in the headlines on the cover of the *National Enquirer*. Now, even if it is true that she's doing this, you may want to say that I can't really know it for a fact because I have no legitimate basis for believing such a claim. Surely, believing the headlines of the *Enquirer* is not sufficient for having real knowledge. What Plato concludes is that we must have a "justified true belief" in order to have real knowledge. The problem then is to determine what is sufficient to **justify** a true belief.

Modern epistemologists, beginning with Descartes, came to think that to really know a thing, the very possibility of being mistaken had to be ruled out entirely. Thus, I could not claim to know that the Yankees will win the World Series next year unless it is absolutely impossible for me to be mistaken. As you might have guessed, this is not a condition that can be easily satisfied. How many things could any one of us claim to know with absolute certainty? Probably very few, if any at all. (To claim that no one knows anything for sure is to be a skeptic. But to be consistent the skeptic has to admit that even the belief that no one knows anything may itself be false.)

However, the hope was that if we could find a basis or foundation built of a few certain truths, and armed with the correct principles of logical reasoning, a firm and unshakeable edifice of knowledge could be constructed on top of that foundation. Descartes' primary concerns were to find a firm basis for both his theological and scientific beliefs. (Descartes was a devout Catholic and wanted to provide a rational proof for the existence of God and for the claim that the mind and soul are distinct entities. At the same time, he was convinced that Galileo's scientific method, which emphasized mathematical description and close observation, had finally put western science in a position to provide human beings with knowledge of the natural world and the "ways of God". But what Descartes needed was the foundation for such knowledge.) He felt that he had it in his derivation of the cogito. According to Descartes, the one thing that we know for sure is that whenever we are thinking, we must exist. This indubitable truth was derived from his "method of doubt", i.e. by arguing that you cannot claim to know a thing if it is possible, without contradiction, to imagine that it is false. With his method of doubt, Descartes set out to examine every one of his most fundamental and cherished beliefs to see if it was possible to doubt them. Eventually, he worked his way down to doubting his own existence. But in doing so he realized one thing for sure, viz. that he must exist. Descartes reasoned as follows: I cannot fail to exist, for even when I doubt that I really exist and think that I may only be dreaming that I exist, there must be something that

dreams or doubts that it exists. Whatever that thing is, I know, (a) that it must exist in order to doubt or dream that it does, and (b) that I am that thing that doubts or dreams. Thus, whenever I think I exist (or that I don't exist), at that moment I must exist.

Now, from the knowledge of his own existence and from the mere idea of God as a perfect being, Descartes went on to formulate a proof for God's existence. And with his own existence and that of God's assured, Descartes attempted to show that all sorts of knowledge would follow.

### **Edmund Husserl and Phenomenology**

The German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) felt that all previous attempts to formulate a theory of human knowledge were fundamentally misguided due to the fact that they all began with a set of assumptions about knowledge and the knowing subject. And by starting with a set of assumptions, one was already making use of a theory and thus adopting a foundation of sorts. Husserl felt that philosophy needed a pre-theoretical position from which to study the nature of the human being and its place in the world.

So, taking his cue from Descartes, Husserl claimed that one had to reject what he called the natural or common sense attitude that (a) objects have an existence independent of us, i.e. outside the mind, and that (b) our beliefs about these objects and the world are generally reliable. According to Husserl, such "common sense" is loaded with assumptions that prevent a pure and direct investigation of the world.

Thus, Husserl recommended that we put all our assumptions about the existence of things and what they might be like in brackets, not in order to really doubt their existence, but just to get them out of the way so that they would not influence our description of things. This bracketing was supposed to free the observer so that she could attend solely to her immediate experience and provide a systematic and thorough description of it. Husserl felt that such a descriptive analytical method is legitimate because it depends on the only thing that we can be certain of, viz., how things seem to us. So, for example, while I may not be absolutely certain that what I'm seeing is Maria coming down the hall, I can be certain of one thing—that I **think** I see Maria down the hall. In other words, I may be wrong when I say, "There's Maria", but I can't possibly be wrong about the fact that I **think** I see Maria. Whether Maria is there or not, I can't be wrong about the nature of my own experience.

Husserl takes this kind of certainty about the nature of our own conscious experiences as the basis of his phenomenological method. The objects, or phenomena, studied by phenomenologists are the immediate objects of consciousness—what we find when we look at the contents of our own minds. By rigorously eliminating or bracketing all of our opinions and preconceptions about what a thing is like or whether it really exists or not, we can arrive at a pure descriptive science of the essences of things. That's because, according to Husserl, when we attend to our immediate experience, unpolluted by theories or presuppositions, what is made present to consciousness is the "real nature" of the thing being examined.

This method can also be used to investigate the essential types of human acts and experiences. Thus, by paying attention to and carefully describing what it is like for me to see a table, a pear, a tree, my arm, a sheet of paper, the moon, etc., I can discover the essence of seeing. By comparing all the various experiences that I have of being angry, I can uncover the essence of anger, and so on. By means of these phenomenological investigations, Husserl felt that science and philosophy would get "back to the things themselves" and ground the study of human nature in the raw experiential data of life rather than on mere abstractions and concepts. According to Husserl, Phenomenology would be the science of sciences, which would lay bare the essences of things and reveal the fundamental structures of human consciousness.

Finally, it should be noted that Husserl came to believe that phenomenological investigation depends upon the notion of a transcendental subject, i.e. an “I” which stands outside of experience and human awareness and is able to look at it from a God’s eye point of view. This positing of an *a priori* or transcendental subject was to lead to a split among phenomenologists, half of who felt that this transcendental subject was not something met with in experience, but was simply presupposed by Husserl. By introducing such a presupposition, they claimed that Husserl had departed from his own basic tenet of Phenomenology, which is to describe the things one experiences without assuming anything including the existence of the thing.

### **The Problem of Language**

Other problems arise when you try to relate Husserl’s theory of consciousness to a theory of meaning, which brings us to the second major obsession of western philosophical thought, viz., language.

It seems that language, for the phenomenologist, is independent of consciousness. In fact, Husserl claims that language is little more than a vehicle for describing pure experiences. On this view, meanings are associated with prelinguistic experiences or intentions, i.e. the contents of consciousness.

For Husserl, meaning was an “intentional object”. By this he means that it was neither reducible to the psychological acts of a speaker or listener, nor completely independent of such mental processes. Meaning was not objective in the sense that an armchair is, but it was not simply subjective either. It was a kind of “ideal” object in the sense that it could be expressed in a number of different ways but still remains the same meaning. On this view, the meaning of a literary work is fixed once and for all: it is identical with whatever “mental object” the author had in mind, or “intended”, at the time of writing. [Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 67]

Thus, Husserl imagines a language that expresses nothing but objects as they appear in consciousness, untainted by anything outside the mind of the speaker, writer or artist. [Note that I use the term “object” as Husserl does, i.e. to refer to a component of experience regardless of whether it is material (a rock, chair, hat, etc.) or immaterial (the memory of my father, a unicorn, justice, etc.)] This view of language, as a private affair, has been largely discredited by, among others, the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). To imagine a language, he argues, is to imagine a whole form of social life and conventions that preexist us and to which we must conform if we are to be competent speakers of the language. For Wittgenstein and for many others, language is understood as a social, not a private, phenomenon. As we shall see, this notion of the public dimension of language will play an important part in the theories of the structuralists and the poststructuralists.

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