

# Cartesian Foundation of Husserlian Phenomenology: A Critical Appraisal

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## **Abstract**

*The inquiry into Husserl's phenomenology develops out of the philosophical concern that includes the fundamental problems of ontology, epistemology and philosophic methodology. However, the larger motivations for the subject matter of Husserl's phenomenology lie with matters of epistemology and methodology. This could be traced through the philosophies of Descartes, Hume and Kant. Husserl shares the view of Descartes that the fundamental task of philosophy is that of providing the right epistemological method. It is against this background that this paper proposes an examination of Descartes epistemology as providing the ultimate foundation for Husserl's phenomenology. It intends to show that there is a very strong affinity in the most basic core of Descartes and Husserl's philosophies. It further posits that the ultimate interest of both philosophers is that of articulating a universal method that would guarantee the establishment of an absolute foundation of knowledge.*

## **Introduction**

The immense persuasion and influence of Descartes on Husserl's phenomenology cannot be overemphasized. This is because Husserl did not only admit his philosophical indebtedness to Descartes, but also that the fundamental motivation of the phenomenological enterprise would be devoid of genuine meaning, if adequate acknowledgement of the Cartesian precedent is not made, as Michael Shim rightly remarked that "almost every exegetical approach to Husserlian phenomenology has at least mentioned the relevance of the Cartesian tradition" (Shim, 2000:593). The influence of Descartes on Husserl is so remarkable that Husserl himself, who is regarded as the

founder of the phenomenological movement described Descartes as the patriarch of phenomenology.

No philosopher of the past has affected the sense of phenomenology as decisively as Rene Descartes. Phenomenology must honour him as its genuine patriarch. It must be said explicitly that the study of Descartes' *Meditations* has influenced directly the formation of the developing phenomenology and gives it its present form; to such an extent that phenomenology might almost be called a new twentieth century Cartesianism. (Husserl, 1970:3)

Descartes and Husserl shared similarities in historical circumstances and thus shared similar aims and motives for their radical beginnings in terms of reforming philosophy, overthrowing and rebuilding an all new science that is grounded on an absolute foundation. In view of the above, it is considered appropriate to discuss some of their similarities and areas of divergence under the following sub-themes in order to demonstrate how Descartes' philosophy gradually and systematically laid the foundation for the phenomenology of Husserl.

### **The Project of Radical Philosophy**

There is a parallel in the philosophies of Descartes and Husserl concerning the role of philosophy, and also that, in order for philosophy to carry out its critical role, it must be reformed. According to Husserl, the basic aim of Descartes in the *Meditations* "is a complete reforming of philosophy into a science grounded on an absolute foundation" (Husserl, 1999:1). That means for Descartes, a corresponding reformation of all the sciences because it is only within the systematic unity of philosophy that the sciences can actually develop into genuine disciplines.

Descartes was writing at a time when the sciences of his day were in crises. He realized that those sciences that are meant to be grounded on absolute certainty by the *Meditations*, have paid little attention to them. Through the last three centuries, the sciences are finding themselves with obscurities in their very foundations. The need to purge scientific knowledge of methodological and conceptual

obscurities motivated his radical philosophical response. The aim was to restore that “scientific genuineness which would consist in their complete and ultimate grounding on the basis of absolute insights, insights behind which one cannot go back further” (p.2). Hence the need for “a radical rebuilding that satisfies the idea of philosophy as the all-inclusive unity of the sciences, within the unity of such an absolutely rational grounding” (p.2)

Husserl shares this sentiment with Descartes, he was convinced that the contemporary natural sciences suffered a critical foundational crisis of methodology. Husserl found a deep affinity with Descartes distinctive combination of pessimism and optimism. That is, pessimism about the current state of science and optimism about the unlimited prospects for a reformed science and more importantly about the role of philosophy in making this possible. Husserl explicitly agreed with Descartes that the project of securing brighter prospects for the natural sciences could be actualized only by evolving a radical new beginning in philosophy.

However, in the view of Husserl, Descartes was not able to unify philosophy as a science. In the critical analysis of Husserl, the failure, emanating from the *Meditations*, can be seen in present-day western philosophies: Instead of a unitary living philosophy, we have a philosophical literature growing beyond all bounds and almost without coherence... we have philosophical congresses where the philosophers meet but, unfortunately, not the philosophies. The philosophers lack the unity of mental space in which they might exist for and act on one another (p.5). Descartes failed in his ambition; he was unable to create the mental space of a unifying philosophy. In Husserl’s view therefore, Descartes had a radical will to free himself from prejudices, unfortunately he allowed himself to be swayed from his ultimate goal by scholasticism to the extent of approving the prejudices which he wanted to originally doubt. In view of the failure observed in the *Meditations*, Husserl realized the need to renew the radical spirit of self-responsibility that Descartes *Meditations* had lost. He must clarify and avoid the prejudices and preconceptions that underlie Descartes’ work to be sure his project does not lose its’ spirit as well in order to be able to achieve a genuine science.

## **Epistemological Foundation of the Subject**

It is the contention of Husserl that modern science is epistemologically unjustified and groundless; this is because all branches of the specialised sciences conceal the epistemological origin of the possibility of any science to exist as a science. Therefore to secure a brighter future for science, Husserl did not only agree with Descartes on the formulation of a radical new beginning in philosophy, he also found affinity with Descartes conviction on the methodology of attaining such a novel objective. Descartes was of the conviction that if indeed science were to be erected on new and secure foundation, then the starting point of the new philosophical inquiry should be the subject.

Husserl agreed with Descartes that the absolute foundation of knowledge lies in the meaning – giving acts of subjectivity. That is, for both of them, meaningfulness has its origin in subjectivity (p.26). Although, Husserl accepts the Cartesian *ego cogito* as the absolute foundation for all knowledge and meaning, there is however an important variance of nuance in his and Descartes' conceptions of how the destruction of former beliefs is to be carried out. Whereas Descartes speaks of methodological doubt, Husserl speaks of methodological bracketing. This methodological variance notwithstanding, a crucial point of what Husserl sought to appropriate from Descartes was the conviction that the much proposed secure foundation for science and for a foundational philosophy was to be located not in God or in Being or in Logic but first and foremost, in an investigation of the inquiring subject. Husserl undoubtedly followed the steps of Descartes in affirming that only such an investigation has the pedigree to justifiably provide the requisite epistemic foundations upon which a claim to scientific knowledge could be mounted and defended.

The philosopher's quest is for a truly scientific knowledge for which he can assume... complete responsibility by using his own absolutely self-evident justifications. I can become a genuine philosopher only by freely choosing to focus on my life on this goal. Once I am thus committed and have accordingly chosen to begin with total poverty and destruction, my first problem is to discover an absolutely secure

starting point and rules of procedure, whom in actual fact, I lack any support from the existing disciplines (Husserl, 1999:41).

On the basis of the above submissions, it can be moderately discerned that Husserl's philosophy is thoroughly Cartesian, both in spirit and in letter: In spirit because of the desire to combat skepticism by evolving a radical philosophy, and in letter because of his attempt to turn towards subjectivity as a means to disclose a source of foundational truth. In essence, Husserl established his phenomenology on the model put forth by Descartes in the *Meditations*.

### **On the Question of Methodology**

Descartes in the *Meditations* maintained that the appropriate strategy for the actualization of a radical new beginning in philosophy can only be found in the method of radical doubt. Descartes began by doubting everything, including all phenomena, saying that, "because I wished to give myself entirely to the search after truth, I thought it was necessary for me to adopt an apparently opposite course and to reject as absolutely false, everything concerning which I could imagine the least ground of doubt" (Descartes, 1998:32). His intention was to sweep away all his former opinions and replaced them with others which conform to the uniformity of a rational scheme. "If much of what I have trusted as true has shown itself to be false, I will now set aside as false anything which admits of the least doubt... I came to regard as false whatever merely looks like the truth". (pp.41-42).

Descartes comes to doubt the testimony of his senses, the existence of the world, even the simplest mathematical truths except his thinking self: the *cogito*, the absolute basis of knowledge. Husserl found this method and the discovery of *cogito* as the greatest achievement of Descartes and therefore chose to appropriate it as the prototype for his own phenomenological procedures. "We can no longer accept the reality of the world as a fact to be taken for granted... As radically meditating philosophers, we now have neither knowledge that is valid for us, nor a world that exists for us, we can no longer say that the world is real" (Husserl, 1970:7).

Under the influence of Descartes, Husserl became more convinced of the need to appropriate the phenomenological method. Whereas,

Descartes speaks of methodological doubt, Husserl speaks of methodological bracketing or phenomenological reduction or *epoche*. Husserl's method consists neither in the doubts nor in the denial of existential beliefs, instead the claims to bracket and neutralize all acts that posit an object as existing. In this way, he will be able to examine and describe how objectivity receives meaning from consciousness. Thus objectivity must always be understood as the correlate of transcendental subjectivity (Zahavi, 2001:10-11).

In our everyday life and that of empirical science, our outlook is naïve. We usually employ a natural attitude of taking for granted that our experience presents us with an independent world. Phenomenology according to Husserl makes no assertion about the actual existence of the object of its analysis, its task is simply to analyse and describe experience exactly as it occurs without the prejudice of any natural attitude or prior assumption or presupposition. If we want to know how conscious experience presents us with the world, then we must turn our attentions to that experience itself, so that we can study the structures which sustain the natural attitude (Husserl, 2006:87).

To accomplish such a task, Husserl advocates that we approximate the methodology of Descartes' *Meditations*. In the *Meditations*, Descartes suspended his usual beliefs (natural attitude) in the search for secure epistemic foundations. On the part of Husserl, he advocates that the phenomenological brackets should be our new method. This means that we have to carry out a phenomenological reduction or *epoche*, to abstain or disregard one's convictions, to put all beliefs and theories about the world "out of play" (Husserl, 2010:31). The world is bracketed not for the purposes of insuring it against error but essentially to bring into view that domain of consciousness which according to both thinkers must ultimately serve as the secure epistemic foundation for all our worldly beliefs.

It is important to identify two crucial differences between the Cartesian method and the Husserlian method. While the first pertains to the inner workings of the epistemic suspension, the second pertains to its application in pursuit of philosophical results. In the inner workings of the epistemic suspension, the aim of Descartes is

accurately captured in what could be described as the skeptic resolution or the maxim of the doubter. In his first meditation, Descartes resolves as follows “so in future, I must withhold my assent from those former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehood, if I want to discover any certainty” (Adam & Tannery, 1996:21-22). So also, at the beginning of the second meditation the maxim of doubt is cast in these terms. “Anything which admits of the highest doubt, I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain” (p.24). From both formulations, we find that the inner workings of Descartes epistemic suspension emphasize setting a belief aside and finding a belief to be false.

The paramount objective of Husserl’s act of epistemic suspension is to investigate the phenomenon of believing itself. He wanted to know what it means to have a belief, what the experience of believing and other intentional states amount to. Putting beliefs in brackets, means for Husserl, putting them out of play for the purposes of phenomenological investigation. The phenomenological mediator must not allow the act of belief to go away as that would amount to losing the very thing one seeks to investigate.

On the second crucial difference, which pertains to the application of their methods in the pursuit of philosophical results, whereas for Descartes, the point of the method of doubt is to discover some indubitable fact which can then serve as a premise of some sort for securing further knowledge, for Husserl the point of the *epoche* is to bring into view the contents and acts of consciousness in order to uncover and investigate their distinctive character.

### **The Cogito and the Ego**

The question may be asked: what is the outcome of the phenomenological procedure, that is, Descartes Methodic doubt and Husserl’s phenomenological *epoche*, in the search for apodictic epistemic foundation? For Descartes, it is the *cogito* (consciousness), and from the *cogito*, he discover’s his existence. *Cogito ergo sum* (I think; therefore I exist). The *cogito* for him is the fundamental truth. “I came to the conclusion that I could accept it (*cogito*) without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy for which I was seeking”

(Descartes, p.40). Husserl describes the discovery of *cogito* by Descartes as a landmark achievement such that it secured a unique formulation in the language of his phenomenology.

This phenomenological *epoche* and parenthesizing of the objective world therefore does not leave us confronting nothing. On the contrary, we gain possession of something by it: and what we (or to speak more precisely, what I, the one who is meditating) acquire by it is my pure living, everything meant in them, purely as meant in them: the universe of 'phenomena' in the (particular and also the wider) phenomenological sense. The *epoche* can also be said to be the radical and universal method by which I apprehend myself purely as *Ego*, and with my own pure conscious life, in and is precisely as it is for me (Husserl, pp.20-21).

Husserl celebrates Descartes for the discovery of the subjectivity, that is, the thinking *ego*, he however did not spare him (Descartes) for failing to see the full implication of the *cogito*. This Cartesian accomplishment in the opinion of Husserl would have served as the ultimate and apodictically certain basis for judgements, the basis on which any radical philosophy must be grounded if made in the right manner (p.18).

In these matters, Descartes was deficient. It so happens that he stands before the greatest of all discoveries in a sense, he has already made it - yet fails to see its true significance, that of transcendental subjectivity. He does not pass through the gateway that leads into genuine transcendental philosophy (Husserl, 1970:9).

Husserl's disagreement with Descartes has to do with Descartes understanding of the *ego cogito*. Husserl opines that, Descartes characterization of the *ego* as "a thing that thinks" is a fundamental misrepresentation. According to Husserl, if we carry out the method of epistemic suspension with critical and meticulous thoroughness, we



would discover that any claims about things should properly be held in abeyance: the mediator should confine himself to the description of phenomena.

As Husserl sees it, Descartes mistakenly thinks he has discovered “a little tag-end of the world”, and that the remaining task is to infer the rest of the world by rightly conducted arguments according to principles innate in the ego” (Husserl, 1999:24). In the analysis by Okoro, Descartes understanding of the *cogito* is deficient; it creates the problem of solipsism by making thought the object of thought. Thought cannot be the object of thought because as an outward moving vector, other things in the world constitute the object of thought (Okoro, 2008:51-52).

Husserl and Descartes both acknowledged the fact that experience obviously revolves around the self, the *ego*, and that the *ego* is the source of all knowledge. However, while Descartes considers the *ego* as the first axiom in a logical sequence which enables him to deduce a series of conclusions about reality, Husserl sees the *ego* simply as the matrix of experience. Husserl therefore puts emphasis upon experience instead of logic (Stumpf, 1994:495). Undoubtedly, his concern is to discover and describe the given in experience as it is presented in its pure form and found as the immediate datum of consciousness. Husserl further criticizes Descartes for moving beyond the conscious self, the *ego*, to the notion of extended substance, a body, which ties the subject to an objective reality producing thereby the mind-body dualism. Instead Husserl believed that “pure – subjectivity” more accurately describes the actual facts of human experience (p.496).

The point we are trying to emphasize is that once the *epoche* has been thoroughly carried out, the *ego* that we discover is not an empirical *ego*, not even the *ego* of a particular individual; indeed it is not properly speaking a part of the world at all. Following Kant, Husserl calls it “the transcendental *ego*” (Husserl, 1999:26), which comes to fore with transcendental phenomenological *epoche*. It is the transcendental *ego* that we might call “thinking” rather than “a thing that thinks”. To use Husserl’s preferred formulation and characteristic

technical prose: it is “the validation ground of all objective validations and grounds” (p.26).

Another fundamental criticism of Descartes on his understanding of the *ego* derives from Husserl’s complain that Descartes erred in appreciating and comprehending the ontological status of the *ego* and also neglected the structure of its thought. Whereas, Descartes emphasized the two terms in his *ego cogito*, Husserl believed that a more accurate description of experience is expressed in the three terms *ego cogito cogitatum*.

Descartes neglected to describe the *ego* in the full concretion of its transcendental being and life, nor did he regard it as an unlimited work project to be pursued systematically. Had he pursued this project, he would have discovered that the expression *ego cogito* must be expanded by one term. Every *cogito* contains a meaning; its *cogitatum*... consciousness is always consciousness of something. ... The guiding schema for our exposition and description is [accordingly] a three sided concept: *ego cogito cogitatum* (Husserl, 1970:12-14).

According to Omoregbe, Descartes failed to see the full implications of the *cogito*, he only discovered and affirmed only his existence from the *cogito* but failed to see that *cogito* reveals not only *noesis* but also the noema; that is, it reveals not only the thinking subject, but also the object of the thinking activity: Thus both subject and object are simultaneously given in the *cogito*.

Husserl therefore extends Descartes *cogito* into *ego cogito cogitatum*, showing that the subject (*ego*) and the object (*cogitatum*) are both revealed in the *cogito* (Omoregbe, 2007:31). Based on the foregoing, Husserl is right when he rightly observed that Descartes neglects or overlooked the phenomena of intentionality. Consciousness is always consciousness of something. To every I think (*cogito*), there belongs a something thought (*cogitatum*) as its intrinsic accusative. If for example I say that I am thinking, I simply imply that I am thinking of something. Likewise belief, desire, hope, fear, etc., all have some

objects or state of affairs toward which they are directed. As Unah puts it, it is a kind of symbiotic relationship between thought and object of experience (Unah, 1998:211). The subject – object link is what Husserl calls intentionality.

### **The Return of the World**

The point of severance between Descartes' indubitable cognition and Husserl's epoche though remarkable still ends up in an attempt to make us cognize the initially jettisoned knowledge of world experiences. Descartes in his *Meditations* proceeded by introducing radical doubt into everything experienced and ended up returning. Similarly, Husserl in his phenomenological reduction process put in abeyance all previous intentions of experience so as to be able to truthfully experience the world. Both resulting experiences brought about a transformed notion of experiencing the world.

Descartes stated of the self that it is not a mere being existing in space but a thinking cognitive being. Husserl also sees the self as capable of cognizing the world but not as Descartes thinking being within it, even the self needs to transcend the world to be able to truly cognize it. What this portends is that “we must suspend, or 'bracket', the 'natural attitude' to the world. The reason for this is that Husserl, like Descartes, advocated 'philosophy as rigorous science' philosophy as the indubitable basis of our dubitable, if for the most part correct, beliefs about the empirical world” (Inwood, 2002:383). But differences also abound.

Husserl's phenomenological inquiry was not just about recovering the world but a reconstruction of the principle under which a cognizable world can be cognized by us. Husserl disagreed with Descartes in one crucial respect. Descartes moved swiftly from the proposition that 'I think' to the conclusion that I am a 'thinking thing'. The belief that I am a thinking thing is itself, Husserl claims, to be bracketed. I, who am conscious of objects, am neither a thinking substance, nor an embodied person, nor even the stream of my experiences—for I am conscious of, and in that sense distinct from, my experiences; I am the pure or transcendental ego, what Kant called the 'I think' which 'must be able to accompany all my representations'.

The transcendental ego or 'transcendental subjectivity' cannot itself be bracketed; any more than Cartesian doubt can extend to the existence of the doubter (p.383). This principle of cognizing experience then leads to a recovery of the world. Husserl's goal was to develop a new philosophical science as the radical critique of the possibility of experience, a science that did not take the possibility of cognition for granted. However, because any science existing on the same plane as the natural and psychological sciences already presupposes both the possibility and the general validity of the experience of the world, this new science must exist on a different foundation.

This new foundation, the foundation of transcendental subjectivity, is disclosed by the methodological technique of the phenomenological reduction. Reminiscent of the universal Cartesian doubt, it is nevertheless different therefrom. Whereas the distinguishing characteristic of Cartesian doubt is that it annuls the positing of an object's existence or the validity of a judgment, the distinguishing characteristic of the phenomenological reduction is that it withholds participation in the positing of the existence of objects and the general validity of experience that characterizes one's natural experience—a positing Husserl characterizes as the general thesis of the natural attitude (Drummond, 2006:522-523). This maintains the *epoche* throughout the reduction process. The phenomenological reduction engenders an enduring experience of the world from our immediate perception of experience. Husserl with his reduction, does not like Descartes aim to debunk skepticism but to show that objective experience can be attained through the phenomenological conscious process

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined in details the affinity between Descartes and Husserl's philosophies. It has revealed how Descartes' *Meditations* can be seen as setting in motion the origin of Husserl's phenomenology. In particular the fundamental ideas of phenomenology are seen in Descartes attempt to found the sciences on absolute certainty, his emphasis on discovering existence through self-reflection and in his skeptical method of doubt. This paper has shown that the origin of phenomenology as giving a foundation to the natural science arise from Deacartes. Considering Husserl's

phenomenological *epoche* and Descartes skeptical doubt, it is easy to see how the former originated from the latter. In spite of their differences, the inquiries into the development of phenomenology have shown that Descartes can be seen as a philosopher whose ideas were ahead of his time. Phenomenology is indebted to Descartes since it grew out of the very doctrine it was criticizing.

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