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A Conceptual Analysis on Transcendental Idealism: Kant and Husserl

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Abstract:

Husserl and Kant, both of their theories are known as transcendental idealism. The similarity they have is that both of the philosophers are dealing with the a priori contribution of mind to knowledge. The difference is that, Kant is dealing with the categories; on the other hand Husserl is dealing with the intentional structure. Both of their philosophies are idealism, because, for them, we perceive this world in accordance with the structure of mind. Both Kant and Husserl have their authentic view about the knowledge within the limits of human capacities. This article is an attempt to discuss both of their views on transcendental idealism from phenomenological perspective.

Key Words: Phenomenological; Transcendental; Idealism; Intentionality; Scientific; Consciousness.

Husserl and Kant, both are pioneers of modern western philosophy. Now, undoubtedly the modern era was very much initiated by Rene Descartes, and more to say, these two philosophers were very much influenced by him. Kant was very much historically and culturally significant as his theory was structurally presented: knowledge, morality and art. Husserl did the similar thing in the domain of continental philosophy as no continental philosopher after him presented their work without mentioning Husserl. I think Descartes, Kant and Husserl, all of them have one common subject matter on which they have concentrated: the problem of knowledge. Their contribution is not only relevant in their time but continue to be essential now.

Phenomenology is a tradition within the domain of continental philosophy that studies the nature of consciousness from the first person point of view. Phenomenology is said to be the study of experience and this experience is not passive but active. It not just includes sensory perception, but also emotion, thought, volition, imagination and action. Phenomenology as a movement started around 1900 with the publication of Husserl's Logical investigations. But the history of phenomenology in the present sense of the term may be said to begin with the publication of Immanuel Kant's Critical philosophy in

1780's. Kant constructed a theory to explain how synthetic a priori cognition is possible. By doing so, he made a distinction between phenomena and noumena.

Kant names his critical philosophy as 'transcendental idealism'. Husserl too calls his philosophy, transcendental idealism. However, the two have similarities as well as differences. My intention in this article is to have a critical reflection and analysis on both Husserl and Kant's phenomenology. Kant and Husserl both have different understanding on the origin and genesis of phenomenology, their conception of transcendental idealism also seems different. I will be mainly concentrating on both of their notions of 'transcendental idealism'.

Kant and his notion of Transcendental Idealism: In Critique of Pure Reason Kant compared his philosophy with the Copernican Revolution. Nicolas prevailed the idea of earth as the centre of solar system. He established that it is the sun which is at the centre and all the planets revolve around it. Similarly, Kant placed the human mind into the centre of the knowing process. He proposed a very bold statement or hypothesis: the mind is active in the knowing process; knowledge does not only come from the external world that we experience through our senses. Sensory data are systematised by our mind. The organisation is possible because of certain concepts present in our mind. The mind is active in such an epistemological hypothesis that led Kant into that process where he made a distinction between phenomena and noumena. Phenomenon is what we experience or what we construct, but noumenon is something that is beyond experience. In other ways we can say that noumena refer to the 'thing in itself', we can have no knowledge of it, at least not with the help of any scientific method. Kant's discovery of the active human mind was definitely a path for the autonomous self. This provided the enlightenment period with the significant characteristics of a human being. For him, human being is fundamentally, rational and that is why he presented with a theoretical description of limits of reason.

Kant was very much influenced by Leibnitz, Descartes and Hume. But in spite of that, in Critique of Pure Reason, he presented something which was very unique in the realm of Philosophy. In order to understand Kant's theory, we have to look at the position of science during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Science declared itself as school of method of enquiry which is certain, universal and free from subjectivism. But science uses nothing but empirical methods in order to arrive at its final goals. Science somehow took the place of metaphysics, so in that time philosophy had very little to offer. The very possibility of metaphysical questions became a thread at that time.

Kant has explored all beliefs as he wanted to build a systematic criticism for reason. Pointing to the limits of reason was not just a scientific discovery for him and that is why his metaphysics is designed as a foundation of meandering thought. For Kant, science deals with the actual experience and that is why scientific proposition rely on some universal principals, because these axioms for Kant are analytic and others are synthetic, which are fundamentally empirical. Kant's philosophy is a reconciliation between empiricism and rationalism; he wanted to criticise the dogmatic nature that both of the domains have.

Before Kant there used to be a distinction between analytic and synthetic judgements. Analytic judgements were a priori and synthetic judgements were a posteriori. But he introduced another type of judgement named synthetic a priori judgement, and for him scientific knowledge consists of synthetic a priori judgements. Let us take an example, $3+3=6$. It is a synthetic a priori judgement. 6 are not contained in $3+3$. So, the judgement is synthetic. Further, it is a priori because the validity of $7+5=12$ does not need any experience. According to Kant synthetic a priori judgements can be found in mathematics (and also in Physics). Kant has proved that this type of knowledge can be found in arithmetic and geometry because space and time are pure forms of intuition. Synthetic judgements are possible in physics also because of the twelve categories of understanding.

Kant distinguishes three fundamental faculties from one another- sensibility, understanding and reason. Sensibility in Kant's philosophy is the faculty that provides sensory representations stands with consciousness. Understanding on the other hand generates conceptual representations without advertence to affection. Reason provides us with special sorts of concepts known as regulating principles and whose objects can never be met within experiences. So, critique of pure reason holds that knowledge is a product of a priori contribution of mind from its faculties of sensibility (transcendental aesthetic) the faculty of understanding (Transcendental analytic) and sense data.

The above discussion initiates the next theme, which is, Kant's transcendental Idealism. Kant's notion of transcendental idealism holds some crucial interpretation. While describing about experience or consciousness Kant has always used the term, 'our', as our experience, our understanding etc. Now, this 'our' is something that should be understood objectively or impartially or is it some specific type of engagement of I, with this world, is ambiguous and a matter of discussion. Kant's transcendental idealism is definitely not subjective as Kantian philosophy has ruthlessly criticised Berkeley's subjective idealism. In order to understand Kantian transcendental idealism, first we have to understand the differentiation between phenomenon and noumenon. For him, noumena is some abstract concept that transcends the limits of human understanding. So, the knowledge of noumena is 'thing in itself', it is unknown and unknowable. So, he has described his domain of knowledge of reality only as phenomenon. That is why his philosophy is transcendental idealism because it emphasizes on the validity of knowledge within the domain of human experience. Berkeley's idealism had to deal with the problem of solipsism but Kant's notion of transcendental idealism will be rescued from that problem because of his distinction between phenomena and noumena.

Transcendental Idealism of Husserl: The term phenomena means 'things' as they appear in our experiences. Kant has explained phenomenology as the study of phenomena. Following Kant, Husserl also says that phenomenology is the sense that human experience has. Husserl's phenomenology is no doubt transcendental, as it deals with the lived experience within the domain of space and time. Many readers and phenomenologists claim that this transcendental phenomenological approach has made his philosophy much more

systematic and methodological. There is also no doubt that Husserl has extended the view of Kant's theory of transcendental philosophy as they both belong to the same tradition.

His transcendental philosophy is not a metaphysical but transcendental theory of knowledge. Husserl's goal of transcendental idealism was to establish philosophy as a rigorous or strict science. And that is based on his theory of intentionality. Philosophy has to be the science of all other sciences that would demonstrate their foundation principle. That is why in *Cartesian Meditations* Husserl affirms that philosophy has to be based on a phenomenon known as 'evidence'. A philosophising mind has no prejudice; it is free from any kind of presuppositions. So what Husserl calls evidence, is un-prejudicial perception of what is given in consciousness. This phenomenon according to the philosopher is immediately presented or directly evident in the reflecting consciousness. Husserl calls it, intentionality which says consciousness is always directed towards an object via content. The above point actually justifies Husserl's notion of presupposition less philosophical theory. Now, how do we reach to that position? The answer to this question leads to one of the most important concept of Husserl named phenomenological reduction. The task of phenomenological reduction is to make sure that description is pure and nothing but the essences are described. Husserl has talked about many levels of phenomenological reduction such as the eidetic, the transcendental, and the phenomenological reduction. Husserl already said that philosophy must begin from the standpoint which is pure. Because of that Husserl insists on rejecting a natural standpoint in order to create a presupposition-less philosophy. This involves *epoche*, which is not only a methodological device but also a permanent performance on behalf of transcendental phenomenological reduction.

Phenomenological statements must be necessarily true. Husserl's search was finding the absolute truth or the foundation of knowledge. Therefore phenomenological statements must be such, from which actual existence of any objects is derivable. Thus, his concern was about the structure of consciousness. While describing the attitude of *epoche* Husserl has specifically mentioned that this reduction is neither ontological nor epistemological, rather it is the study of consciousness where we come to a position by bracketing all the existential positions concerning human beings.

We have mentioned this so many times that Husserl's phenomenology is the study of pure phenomena. The study of phenomenology is nothing but the study of what is given in pure reflection. The philosopher has successfully rejected the natural attitude and provided us with a new form of transcendental attitude where we reject all the natural phenomena through reduction and solely concentrate on what is given in pure consciousness. Husserl established phenomenology as a pure a priori science, science of sciences, which opened further possibilities for the future philosophers in this tradition.

We have discussed Husserl's idea of phenomenology and his notion of transcendental phenomenology or idealism. Throughout his works, Husserl has explained his detachment from Kant as Kant's philosophy was not free from a kind of naturalism. But the Husserlian

and Kantian conflict does not stop here. Many more layers of conflicts are present, which I will try to show next.

Transcendental idealism: Husserl and Kant: Husserl was very much influenced by his anti-Kantian teacher Brentano. It is obvious that Brentano, who was a psychologist, was critical of Kant for his lack of interest in psychology. Husserl later on distanced himself from psychologism and began to study Kant and felt the need to understand his ideas because, to be very honest, Kant is such a thinker who is unavoidable for philosophers of all times. On May 1, 1924, at the university of Freiburg, Husserl presented a paper called “Kant and the Idea of transcendental philosophy”, where he talked about Kant’s position and then decided to delineate his own view. Let us focus on a comparative discussion between Kant and Husserl’s theory of transcendental idealism.

If we take a look at the Critique of Pure Reason, it is clear that Kant does not deny the existence of external reality independent of human mind. But according to him ‘noumena’ (reality as such) is thinkable but not knowable. As we know, Critique of Pure Reason holds that knowledge is a product of a priori contribution of mind from its faculties of sensibility (Transcendental Aesthetic) and faculty of Understanding (Transcendental Analytic) and sense data. We can think of the noumenon because the categories of mind try to speculate, but without knowledge as any data come from Reality. From the stand point of transcendental aesthetic, a person can define reality as natural; and from the stand point of transcendental analytic, the ‘noumena’ corresponds to the theory of human being and his soul. Finally, in the transcendental dialectic, ‘noumena’ represents itself as the divine reality. However, Kant has concluded that reason has its own limitation; it cannot go beyond the domain of the possible experience, so the world of nature will have to have a new investigation process other than classical metaphysical systems. Husserl questions this very noumenal aspect of Kantian reality. According to Husserl, our life, the thing which we experience as a human being, comes under the totality of realities. Of course, Husserl believes that our experience always remains incomplete, but that does not mean that this is invalid. Even if there is no ultimate justification we have to always push ourselves. Husserl’s theory does not promote scepticism or radicalism; he says, “That which is known, is known vividly and really.” This happens, according to Husserl, in an intersubjective fashion, because human structure possesses communal structures of knowing. Every subjective process is not exhausted in that very process. Actual state of knowledge indicates further possibility. Actuality and possibility are marked by a horizon beyond which there is vast field of knowledge to be actualized. Thus, not just this or that but every subjective state of knowledge indicates to further possibilities. So, there is always a process horizon in each and every act of knowledge. With actualization of the possible, the horizon changes and so on.

Husserl is not speaking about scientific knowledge of the world, but of daily knowledge. His concept of knowledge is more inclusive. According to him, the theorization depends on us, not on the existence of the world. In Cartesian Meditations, Husserl says that What we

in this manner, purely subjectively, produce in ourselves and our ‘insightful’ thinking, on the ground of actual and possible experience, serves us as the norm of our world-cognitions—as the norm of truth for the world itself, as it is and for itself, whether we live or die, whether we cognize it or not. This position is known as ‘transcendental realism’. His concept transcendental realism cooperates with the other notion given by Husserl, ‘transcendental idealism’. Transcendental idealism is idealism because the world we know is always in accordance with the a priori structure of mind or consciousness. The most fundamental structure is –‘intentionality of consciousness’. On the other hand, it is also realism because there is no hidden world-in-itself as opposed to the world we know. Known world is the real one; only our knowledge is necessarily incomplete and will always remain so. In this way, Husserl rectifies Kant’s transcendental idealism by saying that the idea of the world is fine but the knowledge of the things of the world is true.

Lastly, we can say that Husserl himself admitted that his conception of transcendental idealism was very much influenced by Kant, and by that he was not just talking about the words that are taken from Kantian philosophy but the very notion of Transcendental Idealism. The only problem Husserl finds is about the presupposed categories in Kantian Philosophy.

This was an enquiry into the philosophy of Kant and Husserl from phenomenological perspective. My intention in this article was to extend the horizon of phenomenology itself. The article’s aim was to discuss phenomenology not only from the Husserlian point of view but also to show that Immanuel Kant is much more relevant in our times than we think.

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