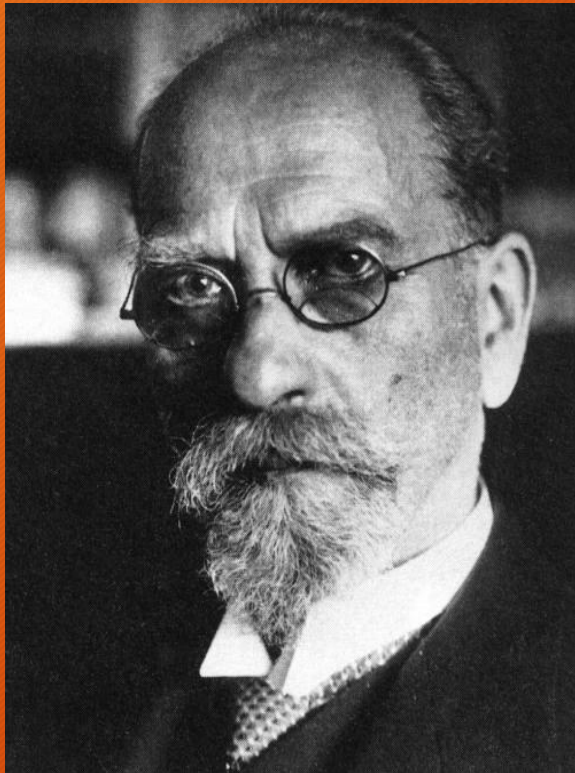


Existentialism and Phenomenology

(HPPH5034/HPPH6034)

Vuthy Hastings

Edmund Husserl and The Project of Phenomenology



- Born: 1859-1938 | Moravia
(Smith, Husserl, 2007, pp. 1-4)

- Educated: Vienna & Berlin
(Smith, 2007, pp. 1-4)

- Widely regarded as the founder of phenomenology
(Smith, 2007, p. 1) (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2025, Introduction)

- Phenomenology as a rigorous philosophical method
(Smith, 2007, pp. 5-9) (Husserl, The idea of Phenomenology, 1907/1999, lecture 1, pp. 15-21)

- Focus text: *The idea of Phenomenology (1907)*
(Husserl, The idea of Phenomenology, 1907/1999)

The problem Husserl is reacting to

Brentano: Mental acts are directed (thinking, desiring, judging are always of something)
(Warnock, Existentialism, 1970/2005, pp. 26-27)

Husserl's shift: Don't reduce this to psychology, describe how things appear in experience
(Warnock, 1970/2005, pp. 26-27) (Reynolds, Understanding Existentialism, 2006, pp. 11-13)

Meaning: Phenomenology studies the object as experienced/object as meant, not just the object out there
(Warnock, 1970/2005, pp. 30-31)

Husserl's method: the epoché (bracketing the “natural attitude”)

Natural attitude: ‘I am conscious of a world endlessly spread out in space, endlessly becoming and having endlessly become in time’ (Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, 1983, pp. 51, §27)

Epoche/Bracketing: ‘I am not negating this ‘world’ as though I were a sophist; I am not doubting its factual being as though I were a skeptic’ (Husserl, 1983, pp. 61, §32)

What left to study?: experience + meaning (how the object is *given*), without importing science/psychology explanations yet.

Mug example



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Does Husserl's method work? What it achieves—and what it risks

Pro (pay off)

- Clarity about experience: Epoche forces you to describe how things appear before rushing to explanations (Husserl, *Ideas I*, p. 60-61, §32).

- Makes meaning central: It highlights experience as more than raw data; its structured as “this as something” (Warnock, 1970/2005, pp. 30–31)

- A disciplined method: It gives philosophy a repeatable way to investigate phenomena (Warnock, 1970/2005, pp. 34–35)

Con (first worry)

- Can we really bracket? It's hard to genuinely suspend belief and not smuggle assumptions back in (Warnock, *Existentialism*, 1970/2005, p. 34-36) (Reynolds, *Understanding Existentialism*, p.13)

- Risk of inward turn: Critics argue it can look as though you're trapped in consciousness and lose the world (Warnock, 1970/2005, p. 44-45) (Smith, Husserl, 2007)

- Abstracts from embodiment/history: by purifying experience, it could downplay the role of the body, social practices, language, and culture (Warnock, 1970/2005, p. 44-45)

Can we really bracket?

‘A complete bracketing away of the outside world, is impossible’
(Reynolds, Understanding Existentialism, 2006, p.13)

‘we are necessarily what Heidegger calls beings-in-the-world,
inextricable from our social situation’ (Reynolds, Understanding
Existentialism, 2006, p.13)

‘We can attend to experience in order to discern essential
conditions, but any kind of sustained bracketing away – or
epochal reduction in Husserl’s terms – is impossible’ (Reynolds,
Understanding Existentialism, 2006, p.13)

*‘We put out of action the general positing
which belongs to the essence of the natural
attitude; we parenthesise everything which
that positing encompasses with respect to
being’* (Husserl, 1983, p.61, §32)

*‘I am not negating this “world” as though I were a sophist; I am not
doubting itsfactual being as though I were a skeptic’* (Husserl, 1983,
p.61, §32)

Inward-turn (Solipsism/Idealism)

‘In *Ideas I* (1913) transcendental phenomenology led into a transcendental idealism that seemingly grounded all reality (not just knowledge, but being itself) in pure consciousness’ (Smith, 2007, p. 34)

‘Husserl worried, that this approach led into a “transcendental solipsism”’ *He shifts focus to* ‘the subjectivity of our own consciousness (in pure or transcendental phenomenology), and onto a focus on the intersubjectivity of our collective experience of things’ (Smith, 2007, p. 39)

‘If anyone reading our statements objects that they mean changing all the world into a subjective illusion and committing oneself to a “Berkeleyan idealism,” we can only answer that he has not seized upon the *sense* of those statements’ (Husserl, 1983, p. 129, §107)

‘They take nothing away from the fully valid being of the world.... The real actuality is not...denied; it is rather that a countersensical interpretation...Is removed’ (Husserl, 1983, p. 129, §107)

Phone example



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Conclusion

Natural attitude: 'I am conscious of a world endlessly spread out in space, endlessly becoming and having endlessly become in time' (Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, 1983, pp. 51, §27)

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