

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EPOCHÈ CONCEPT IN THE HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

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Abstract: This paper discusses the concept of *epochè* in Husserl's phenomenology. *Epochè*, also known as 'Bracketting', is Husserl's prescribed method of ridding philosophy of pseudo-problems, biases or prejudices and uncertainties. The paper shows that this motif of Husserl is a derivation from his self-confessed aim at rehabilitating Descartes' 'methodic doubt'. It employs an expository cum critical-argumentative methodology to examine this idea. It concludes that despite the allegation by a majority of commentators that Husserl's idea veers off from an initial 'realist' position to a form of 'idealism', it remains pertinent that he be seen, on the one hand, as a 'perpetual beginner' whose thoughts was always being revised, and, on the other hand, as an original thinker who sought to rescue philosophy from the shackles of skepticism—especially with his idea of *epochè* and its attendant doctrine of 'intentionality'.

Keywords: *Epochè*; Intentionality; Phenomenology; Consciousness; Transcendentalism; Subject-Object dichotomy; Epistemic certitude; Prejudice.

I have been through enough torments from lack of clarity and doubt that wavers back and forth. Only one need absorb me: I must win clarity, else, I cannot live; I cannot bear life unless I believe that I shall achieve it.'

Edmund Husserl

1. Introduction

In this paper, I intend to take a critical look at one of the major planks on which the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) rests; that is, his idea of *epochè* or epistemological 'Bracketting'. Husserl posits that in order to get "to the things themselves" we need to suspend our prior conceptions of reality. The implication of Husserl's point here is that we first need to divest ourselves of our pre-suppositions by way of suspending our former judgments and putting them in 'brackets'

1 Quoted in Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, 2nd Edition (The Hague, Netherlands: Nijhoff Press, 1965), 1.82. Cited in William F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishers, 2001), pp.528-9

in order to arrive at the essence of things—or arrive at epistemic certitude. He thinks that if we employ this strategy, we will be able to ‘transcend’ our bias-tainted ‘natural attitudes’ or standpoints and proceed to the objective phenomenological standpoint.

In the final analysis, Husserl believes that philosophy will become a rigorous science as opposed to the skepticism that hitherto trailed it. But let us ask: what made Husserl to posit this some-what mechanical mode of apprehending reality—especially when it is quite apparent that this is not how we ordinarily live? What did he intend to achieve by this? Considering Husserl’s open confession that his philosophy was 20th century Cartesianism,² how does his phenomenological bracketing (*epochè*) compare or contrast to Descartes’ *Methodic Doubt*? Is it even possible for us to apply his theory in real life situations? If this is possible, what are the possible implication(s) this (or these) is/are likely to bring about? Answers to these critical questions, as adumbrated above, are what we shall be attempting shortly. But let us commence with Husserl’s reaction to the subject-object crisis in traditional western philosophy.

2. Husserlian phenomenology and the ‘subject-object’ crisis in Western philosophy

The over two millennia history of Western philosophy can be reduced to one chief question—with multifarious implications, interpretations and answers: How do we apprehend reality? For example, the Milesian cosmologist triad (Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes) wanted to *know* or apprehend what the primary stuff from which reality is made up of was. The preceding question of the Milesian triad boils down to asking this sort of question: How can an epistemic subject X (say, Thales) bridge the epistemic gap that exists between them (that is, know or apprehend or have cognition *that*) and an epistemic object P?; for if a ‘gap’ does not exist, they would have known that P (say, the primary stuff from which reality is made up of), logically.

The answer to this question, to continue with our example, for Thales, is water which is apprehended through sensual investigation of things in nature. My goal in this paper is not to treat the merit or otherwise of Thales’ argument or indeed those of scores of other philosophers, rather, it is to illustrate the point that the lengthy history of Western philosophy, on a critical study, reduces to a series of attempts to bridge the subject-object gap. To be sure, most philosophers—whom I have termed *epistemic optimists*—maintain that this gap can be bridged through a rigorous study or the method they each prescribe (as the example of Thales

2 Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy*, 2nd Edition (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1975), p. 488.

I earlier gave showed). Standing in contraposition to the epistemic optimists are those I also brand *epistemic pessimists* who are not necessarily the total skeptics (those who categorically deny the possibility of ever bridging this gap), but includes the epistemic optimists themselves who reject the idea of their colleagues or predecessors on the latter's prescription on how to bridge this epistemic gap. It is in this sense that I think that all philosophers are skeptics—in at least a mild sense.

To continue with the earlier example, contrary to Thales' thesis that sense experience is the bridge to *knowing that* water is the primary stuff from which reality is made up of (which in our syntax reduces to saying that in order to apprehend reality, 'water', we should simply investigate, through our senses, particular things in the universe and we would invariably discover water at their bases), Plato maintained a different position. For him (Plato), reality is in the world of Forms and so, the only way to *knowing* or apprehending (or bridging the epistemic gap), reality, is through 'intuition' and 'reasoning'. In the literature, this Platonic position is a form of *rationalism* whilst Thales' own is an early articulation of the idea of epistemic empiricism. The foregoing, thus, confirms my point that Plato's philosophy, in relation to Thales', is a model epistemic pessimist one.

The scenario above is an instance of the general history of traditional Western philosophy. Each of the concerned philosophers has, therefore, sought to combat the skepticism that a failure to 'bridge' this epistemic gap implies. Thus, there is an obsession to bridge the gap; for without knowledge possibility then the various arguments of the skeptics become unassailable and the entire philosophical project amounts to an exercise in futility. In the light of our apparent fallibility and the fact that we know *mediately* (that is, indirectly—through our five senses as empiricists, for example, *aver*) and not *immediately* (directly) —a seeming impossibility, or at least difficulty, as our analysis above has thrown up—can we honestly think we can *know* or do we announce to the epistemic optimists that it is high time they closed shop?

Far from 'closing shop', Edmund Husserl thinks otherwise. According to this mathematician turned philosopher, we can in fact bridge the so called epistemic gap through his transcendental phenomenological philosophy. According to him, this subject-object gap existed because we failed to realize that the epistemic subject and his/her object of cognition are inextricably linked together through what he calls 'Intentionality of consciousness'. In Husserl's view, once we 'peel' away the 'accidents' or layers covering an epistemic subject through the phenomenological method, we will realize that *consciousness* is at its base and this consciousness is necessarily 'intended' to the objects of cognition. We can arrive at this

conclusion, Husserl opines, by bracketing or suspending all our former judgments about the external world and ourselves in order to lay bare the contents of consciousness. The obvious question, flowing from the above, is to explain what this phenomenological method of *epochè* or bracketing is and to see how it relates to Descartes' Methodic Doubt.

3. Traditional philosophy and the quest for certainty: Husserlian phenomenological *epochè* and its relation to Cartesian 'methodic doubt'

Our subtitle above seems to suggest that Descartes' own singly influenced Husserl's philosophy. This is not entirely the case. Edmund Husserl's philosophy, as I have alluded to above, is, more or less, an aspect of a long discourse that has been going on for over two millennia. However, Rene Descartes' and a few other early modern philosophers' were truly impactful that these influences demand being highlighted, albeit briefly. Alongside Descartes, Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Georg W. F. Hegel and Frantz Brentano are some of the major influences on Husserl. But suffice to note that Descartes' own is more significant because as he himself said of his philosophy, it is a 20th century Cartesianism. Husserl took it as his task to continue from where Descartes, before him, stopped and to rehabilitate the moribund ideas of the latter. He has the following to say:

“... 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; rather I am exercising the ‘phenomenological’ *epoche* which also *completely shuts me off from any judgment about spatio-temporal factual being.*”³

From the slim passage above, we can begin to distill the tenets of the Husserlian phenomenological project. Three of these readily bears being pointed out, to wit: (1) it is a quest for epistemic certainty; (2) this certainty can only be gotten from self-introspection; and (3) in this quest for certainty that is grounded in the *self*, we must eschew all pre-suppositions—including the belief in the possibility of this goal.

Now, before Husserl, Kant held the view that reality can be bifurcated to a ‘knowable’ *phenomenal* half and an ‘unknowable’ *noumenal* ‘other’ which grounds the ‘reality’ of the former. I need to quickly point out that one motivation for Kant, in bifurcating reality in this way, was his desire to combat David Hume's thorough-going empiricism (which actually boiled down to skepticism) and which Kant himself confirmed awoke him from his ‘dogmatic slumbers’. Kant's resolution of Hume's

3 Quoted in Matheson Russell, *Husserl: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), p. 66.

skeptical verdict was this dual ontological worldview of noumenon and phenomenon. But post-Humean skeptics were quick to point out to Kant and his protagonists, and quite rightly, that in postulating an unknowable noumenal world, he causes more problems than he thinks he has resolved; either the noumenal world is knowable or else skepticism remains unassailable. And since Kant's position falls short of the first disjunct, it means the skepticism he intends to overcome has defeated him.

Husserl's reaction to this Kantian dilemma was to argue that the phenomenon *is* the noumenon. Put in other words, reality, according to Husserl, is one knowable stream, but not two. To him, a thorough cum 'scientific' (or rigorous) study of phenomena or 'things' as they appear to individual human subjects will ultimately yield a state of epistemic certitude on any and every aspect of reality they are concerned with apprehending. Furthermore, Husserl is agreed with Hegel on the definition of his (scientific) philosophy, phenomenology, as "a systematic study of the phenomena, or of what appears within experience".⁴ He also states that in order to arrive at certainty, we must therefore look to things as they present themselves to us—the self.⁵ This last point is what makes him similar to Descartes.

It will be recalled that René Descartes had also sought to arrive at an apodictic or certain postulate which can serve as an epistemic foundation for his entire knowledge edifice. In this respect, Descartes had employed what he called the 'Methodic Doubt' by which he meant the doubting of every of his former beliefs till, hopefully, he can arrive at a belief whose doubting or denial will be self-contradictory. Whilst employing this method, Descartes arrived at the indubitable belief that he exists because he thinks (doubts).

However, what is it that thing that doubts, wills, desires, and apprehends, in short, thinks? Descartes' answer is that it is the *mind*—a non-extended thing. Thus:

"The fact that one is involved in a process of doubt... cannot be logically doubted. The certainty of the doubting and the doubter is, therefore, self-evident. The mind which is effecting this self-evident activity and beliefs emanating from it, therefore, becomes apodictic and self-evidently justified."⁶

Since the mind and by implication all beliefs emanating from it are necessarily justified because of their interconnectedness to the original

4 W.F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery*, *op. cit.* p. 529.

5 W.F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery*, *op. cit.* p. 530

6 Kolawole Owolabi, "Edmund Husserl's Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis". In *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. XXII, No. 1 (January, 1995), pp.13-14.

indubitability of the mind, it followed, for Descartes, that the belief that he had a body and that God exists, among other beliefs, are self-evidently true. Confronted by the paradox of affirming that two distinct entities flow from each other, Descartes proposed that they both ‘interact’. This is the gist of Descartes mind-body dualism. The range of criticisms that have been levied against Descartes’ theory are so enormous that Husserl took it as one of his tasks to rehabilitate the former’s theory through what he takes to be the more rigorous philosophy of phenomenology.

For Husserl, we do not need to deny the existence of everything as Descartes erroneously thought. What we should do, rather, is to suspend all our beliefs since they are inherently tainted by what he calls our ‘natural attitude’. He explains the natural attitude as the ‘default’ mode each epistemic subject relates with things and events in their experiential worlds—*lebenswelt*. Through a rigorous investigation of that which is given in experience (that is, the natural attitude), Husserl thinks we can arrive at certainty. We do this by putting our beliefs out of action and instead put the world objectively before us in order to phenomenologically describe experience as it is given in consciousness. Thus:

“Phenomenological description explains the layers and strata within experience by making thematic what is operative and making explicit what is implicit, without adding to or subtracting from the phenomena.”⁷

To perform this phenomenological description systematically, we should bracket-off the world. He calls this procedure the phenomenological reduction or *epochè*.

Emerging from this phenomenological reduction or *epochè*, Husserl maintains that we will discover that at the base of all our experience—either that gotten from sense data or reflection—is consciousness or self-awareness which, though constitutes and orders all experiences, had hitherto been submerged while we were still in the natural standpoint or attitude. Consciousness, on Husserl’s showing, therefore, becomes the chief subject of phenomenological investigation. Flowing from this study, Husserl disagrees with Descartes that consciousness is a substance or thinking thing (*res cogitans*) rather, it is a *no-thing*.

If consciousness is *not a thing* then what is it and how do we characterize it? Husserl’s answer is that consciousness is merely a pattern or series of acts of self-awareness which are always necessarily tied or about an object of experience or reflection. As earlier pointed out, this is the gist of Husserl’s theory of intentionality (which betrays his indebtedness to his former teacher, Frantz Brentano). Hence, whereas “Descartes... em-

7 W.F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery*, *op. cit.* p. 530

phasized only the *Ego cogito* (I think), Husserl is of the view that a more accurate description of experience should be in three [not two] terms *viz*: ‘*Ego cogito cogitatum*’ (I think something).⁸ True to Husserl, all our psychological states are hardly ever empty of an object or content. For example, if we are afraid—a psychological or mental state—it is always of, or about, something, say, death—an experience.

This ‘aboutedness’ of consciousness that Husserl’s thesis of intentionality implies is also his answer to the skeptical challenge we earlier discussed that an epistemic subject cannot bridge the epistemic gap that exists between them and their object of cognition. On the showing of Husserlian phenomenological philosophy, this dichotomy does not exist since the subject and his/her object of cognition are inextricably linked together through the intentionality of their consciousness.

We have now explicated on the phenomenological bracketing method in Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy. One crucial task immediately emanates from the foregoing explication remains for us. This is an evaluative task. We turn now to asking critical questions about this aspect of his philosophy. We want to find out, for instance, how this is practicable, see its implication(s), how it relates to other basic concepts in his philosophy and how coherent our philosopher’s elucidation of the said concept is—especially at the ‘latter’ stage of Husserl’s philosophy. To this we turn now.

4. Critical assessment of transcendentalism – the highest stage of Husserlian phenomenology

Pursuing his phenomenological reduction of the contents of experience to its logical conclusion, Husserl asserts that the experiencing consciousness itself can be bracketed, too. It is in this spirit that he states that just as the contents of consciousness must be studied by the phenomenologist, so must the ‘case’ itself.⁹ This latter twist in the philosophy of Husserl is the gist of the ultimate stage of his phenomenological *epochè*/bracketing and he calls this ‘transcendental’ phenomenology. According to Oyeshile:

“At the stage of transcendental phenomenology, Husserl is of the view that the ego discovers its true self. It is in the being of the ego that the being of the world consists. The purely de-

8 Olatunji A. Oyeshile, “An Existentialist Critique of Husserlian Phenomenological Approach to Knowledge”. In R.A. Akanmidu (ed.) *Footprints in Philosophy* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2005), p. 49.

9 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, translated by Derion Cairns (The Hague, Netherlands: Nijhoff Press, 1960), p. 65. Cited in W.F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery*, *op. cit.* p. 531.

scriptive phenomenology of Husserl gradually developed into transcendental idealism.¹⁰

For Oyeshile and many other commentators, Husserl's phenomenology, at this transcendental stage, veers off its original realist position (the view that "things of a certain problematic sort exist independent of our minds, whether or not we know or believe them to exist"¹¹) and regresses to an idealist position (which is "the philosophical position claiming that ideas are the true objects of knowledge, that ideas are prior to things, and that ideas provide the grounds of being to things"¹²). Suffice it to note that critics find this latter philosophy of Husserl pretty "Scandalous", or implausible. It is scandalous, they submit, because "it is either that the ego is in the world and possesses the world as its intentional correlate or the ego will lose the world through its transcendence and equally lose the world as its intentional correlate".¹³ This dilemma that Husserl's 'scandalous' transcendental phenomenology behooves was first muted by Jean-Paul Sartre. For him, once the ego becomes transcendental following its transcendental reduction, it will no longer be legitimate to still insist that it can be 'intended' to, or apprehend, epistemic objects in the world again.¹⁴

By his talks of a transcendental/pure ego (consciousness), Husserl sought to move beyond the strictures of Cartesian philosophy. It will be recalled, from our earlier exposition, that Descartes' own 'ego' became apodictic by the mere chance that it survived the Methodic Doubt. Husserl's ego, on the contrary, is apodictic because it has been 'eidetically' reduced/purged and hence is pure. Thus, "while in Descartes' case, every ego is apodictic, with Husserl not all subjects (egos) are".¹⁵ Husserl posits that for an epistemic subject's ego to be apodictic or certain, it must be 'Pure' or 'Transcendental'.

The transcendental ego, for Husserl, is not the only apodictic or self-evident truth. Contra-Descartes, Husserl is of the view that *all* what

10 O.A. Oyeshile, "An Existentialist Critique of Husserlian Approach to Knowledge", *op. cit.* p. 50.

11 Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu (eds) *The Blackwell Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing House, 2004), p. 323.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 590.

13 K. Owolabi, "Edmund Husserl's Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis" *op. cit.* p. 19.

14 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego* (New York: Noonday Press, 1977). Cited in K. Owolabi, "Edmund Husserl's Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis" *op. cit.* p. 20.

15 K. Owolabi, "Edmund Husserl's Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis" *op. cit.* p. 16

the transcendental ego *constitutes*¹⁶ are necessarily self-evident. The logic here, for Husserl, is that a pure ego cannot but apprehend pure (that is, indubitable) objects of cognition. Put differently:

“If consciousness is truly consciousness of something, then every consciousness is a logical correlate of the object of consciousness. It is therefore, a logical conclusion, he maintains, to say that the apodicticity of the ego automatically implies the apodicticity of its correlate; that is the worldly objects.”¹⁷

As earlier broached, the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl, especially at the transcendental stage is fraught with problems. To continue with Sartre’s criticism of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology we earlier intimated, it is not the case that an epistemic subject *just* happens to have knowledge (by the mere fact that their ego has been purged or eidetically reduced through *epoche*—a non-provable claim), rather, “one bursts out in the act of knowing toward the object known”.¹⁸

A more trivial criticism of Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy in its entirety derives from the *telos*, end, of his work—a quest for epistemic certainty. Critics like W.V.O. Quine¹⁹ and Richard Rorty²⁰ opine that, with Descartes, Husserl is wrong to think he can achieve an infallible account or knowledge of reality. As a result, they maintain that his

16 According to Owolabi, “the notion of constitution in Husserl’s philosophy is akin to his earlier doctrine of intentionality (which, by the way, is the view that consciousness is necessarily *about* something). By the transcendental ego constituting the world, Husserl is saying that the ego is responsible for ordering and putting in meaningful order the whole epistemic facts in the world”. See K. Owolabi, “Edmund Husserl’s Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis” *op. cit.* p. 18.

17 K. Owolabi, “Edmund Husserl’s Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis” *op. cit.* p. 17.

18 Quoted by Maurice Natanson, “Phenomenology from the Natural Standpoint: Reply to Van-Ames”. In *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. XVII, 1956 p. 242. Cited in K. Owolabi, “Edmund Husserl’s Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis” *op. cit.* p. 20.

19 For a full treatment of his arguments here, see W.V.O. Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized”. In *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

20 Richard Rorty is famous for his idea of ‘Deconstructionism’, which is a motif for a radical advocacy for a ‘paradigm shift’ in traditional philosophy’s quest for certainty. His hugely influential book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), consistently defends his views as well details his trenchant criticisms of traditional philosophy. His latter criticism of traditional philosophy’s quest for certainty can, thus, be legitimately appropriated as a witting or unwitting rejection of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy.

philosophy is a mere exercise in futility. It is a futile exercise, they insist, because Husserl blatantly ignores the fact that humans *qua* humans are essentially fallible beings. Since (each human being) “is fundamentally a fallible being, it can be very difficult to seek to establish that (they) can have an absolutely infallible idea.”²¹ Let us, on a reflexive note, ask: in line with the critics’ fallibility thesis, is that claim itself a fallible or infallible position? If it is fallible, then their criticism of Husserl is jejune and if it is infallible then their argument is circular. But let it be noted: my argument in the preceding lines against the critics of Husserl should not be taken as a subtle endorsement of Husserl. I merely pointed out this quite apparent weakness of the critics’ criticism of Husserl as a manner of anticipating for Husserl what he might have said in response to them were he to be alive. The moral then, I think, is that his protagonists could employ the modest suggestion above.

But a more trenchant criticism of Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy derives from his latter transcendental phenomenology. Many, especially the original followers of his phenomenological movement, as a betrayal, perceived this latter philosophy of Husserl and so they broke away from following him. These disciples, namely Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), aver that Husserl should have remained at the earlier stage of his philosophy.²² As Kolawole Owolabi correctly expatiates, the earlier philosophy of Husserl, aptly captured by the slogan, “to the things themselves” is an implicit endorsement of the contextualist theory of knowledge—the view that “the act of justification demands the validation of a belief within the context that generates it”.²³ Unlike the moribund thesis of epistemological foundationalism—the view that “some beliefs are incorrigible and infallible and do not need to be justified”²⁴—he sought to defend by way of his transcendental phenomenology, this earlier (and implicit) contextualist stance is not only modest but, more significantly, sustainable. It is modest and sustainable because it does not fall to the charge of unfounded absolutism since it embraces the principle of fallibilism.

21 K. Owolabi, “Edmund Husserl’s Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis” *op. cit.* p. 21.

22 K. Owolabi, “Edmund Husserl’s Rehabilitation of Cartesian Foundationalism: A Critical Analysis” *op. cit.* p. 22.

23 Kolawole A. Olu-Owolabi, “The Nature and Problems of Epistemology”. In Kolawole A. Olu-Owolabi (ed.) *Issues and Problems in Philosophy* (Ibadan: GRO-VACS Network, 2000), p. 67.

24 *Ibid.* p 64.

5. Conclusion: On the possibility of *epochè* in everyday existence

From the above, we have been able to show that the idea of *epochè* plays a crucial role in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. As can be easily gleaned from our exposition above, it was his favored method of how we *ought* to overcome the skeptical charge that epistemic claims about reality or indeed all forms of cognition is impossible. Bearing in mind all the criticisms that have been leveled against our philosopher, my modest intervention on the raging polemic is that Husserl should be commended for his effort at ‘trying’ to ground human knowledge on the sure footing of human consciousness—in line with the Socratic injunction: “man, know thyself”. I think this is praise worthy. It is praise worthy because it further endorses the philosophic quest for rationally grounded explanation of all phenomena—spiritual or otherwise—and not authoritarian dogma that is inimical to human (intellectual) flourishing.

With the adoption of Husserl’s rigorous brand of phenomenological philosophy, many of the uncritical thoughts and practices around us would not only have been averted but also prevented from happening in future. Take the early European ethnocentric writers’ (like Lucien Levy-Bruhl) view of Africans as possessing a comparatively inferior—so-called ‘pre-logical mentality’—rationality as an example. Their prejudicial position on Africans, as it later emerged, derived from an uncritical comparison of African thought systems and practices with theirs; they branded the former as illogical because, on the surface, many components of it failed to pass the muster of Aristotle’s three laws of thought stricture. Of course, this ‘failure’ was merely superficial since the logical status of these beliefs and practices could only have been determined on its own internal cum linguistic canons (think Ludwig Wittgenstein’s discourse on language games here). Clearly, had these writers borne this in mind, they would not have come to arrive at such reckless conclusions about a class of their own specie of beings. These uncritical theories would later culminate into (avoidable) crises and disasters such as two world wars, trans-Atlantic slave trade, and colonialism, among others.

Moses Akinnade Jawo, also commenting on the implications of adopting Husserl’s method of *epoche*, believes that it can help curb many of the prejudices inhibiting nation-building in heterogeneous societies like Nigeria.²⁵ One interesting case that Jawo mentions is a statement credited to Mrs. Aisha Buhari, the wife of Nigerian president Mr. Muhammadu

25 Moses Akinnade Jawo. 2016. “The Possibility of Epoché or Phenomenological Reduction in (Our) Everyday Life. Unpublished Paper Presented Before the Graduate Seminar Series, Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria July 27 2016.

Buhari, in 2015. According to Aisha Buhari:

“I am here to let Edo women know that when my husband is elected; insecurity, girl-child trafficking and suffering of widows will end. They don’t need to go and prostitute somewhere to survive.”²⁶

As Jawo rightly pointed out, there is an unstated prejudice here which many people in Nigeria, including Aisha Buhari, have about Edo women—that they are always prostitutes. Had she (Aisha Buhari) suspended this bias by way of transiting to the phenomenological standpoint, these controversial statements would have been avoided.

Yet, a certain dilemma lurks behind the apparent beauty of adopting Husserl’s method of *epoche*; it can be sometimes unwieldy. As bad as prejudice or pre-judging events and people is, our very survival as humans could depend on such apparent ‘prejudice.’ Consider the case again advanced by Jawo: no amount of ‘epistemic bracketing’ or *epoche* would change the wildness of, say, a lion. Thus, it will only be prudent to carry on thinking that uncaged lions pose mortal threats to any human. It seems to me that what emanates from the foregoing considerations is the need to delineate the applicatory scope of *epoche*. Furthermore, a foundationalist theory of epistemology immediately suggests itself as it alone affords us the opportunity to ‘found’ our cognition of reality on certain prima-facie ‘basic’ beliefs. Such basic beliefs are immune from *epoche*; but the non-basic ones – which, at any rate, form the bulk of our beliefs—are still subject to the phenomenological test of bracketing/*epoche*.

And, finally, even when we arrive at the second and, generally agreed, more controversial aspect of Husserl’s philosophy, I think the criticisms are a little too hasty and unfair. This is the case, I maintain, because, as he himself wrote of his life and (phenomenological) philosophy: he is a “perpetual beginner”.²⁷ The implication of the preceding line, I think, is that Edmund Husserl’s views, especially at this latter and more controversial aspect, are still open to revision. Had he been alive today, he most likely would have revised them, not necessarily because of the critics’ arguments, but more because of the fact that he is a ‘perpetual beginner’—as I just alluded to above. The moral then, for us and his critics alike, is that if we bear this latest twist to Husserl’s philosophy in mind, we will be able to look beyond its apparent shortcomings but instead focus on its *heuristic* merits in that he gave a very strong answer to those who would rather have us give up on our quest to bridge the great epistemic

26 Statement credited to Aisha Buhari, in a campaign rally for the APC on March 20, 2015. Available online at www.newswirengr.com/ 2015/03/20 assessed July 7, 2016.

27 W.F. Lawhead, *Voyage of Discovery*, *op. cit.* p. 528.

(subject-object) divide, namely, the *skeptics*.

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