

Self-Awareness and the Meaning of Existence from Phenomenological Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between self-awareness and existential meaning from a phenomenological perspective. By analyzing the fundamental theories and methods of phenomenology, this paper reveals the central role of self-awareness in elucidating individual existential meaning and emphasizes the importance of engaging in self-reflection and experience in daily life. The study finds that self-awareness and existential meaning are mutually constitutive under a phenomenological perspective, which provides guidance for modern individuals in seeking and establishing their personal values. Although the research has limitations, it offers a theoretical foundation for further exploration of phenomenology in the fields of self-awareness and existential meaning.

Keywords: phenomenology, self-awareness, existence meaning, self-reflection, personal value

1. Introduction

1.1 Origin and Development of Phenomenology

The origin of phenomenology can be traced back to the early 20th century, founded by German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Hume. Between 1900 and 1913, Hume published a series of works, particularly “The Study of Logic” and “The Concept of Phenomenology,” laying the foundation for phenomenology. As a philosophical methodology, phenomenology advocates revealing the essence of things through the direct description of experience, emphasizing a research attitude of “returning to the things themselves”. The term ‘Hume’ mentioned here is incorrect because David Hume was an 18th-century British philosopher, not the founder of phenomenology. The founder of phenomenology should be Edmund Husserl (Hans & Huang, 2024).

The development of phenomenology has gone through several stages. Early Husserl’s phenomenology mainly focused on consciousness and the structure of consciousness, introducing the concept of “intentionality” and believing that consciousness always points to an object (Peng, 2024). Husserl’s theory is known as “a priori phenomenology”, which attempts to suspend all preconceived judgments through phenomenological reduction methods, thereby achieving a pure description of conscious experience (Xun, 2024).

From the 1920s to the 1930s, phenomenology began to influence more philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Martin Heidegger introduced the phenomenology of being in *Being and Time*, shifting the focus from consciousness to “being” itself, exploring human modes of existence and temporality. Maurice Merleau-Ponty developed bodily phenomenology, emphasizing the foundational role of the body in cognition and being.

During the time following World War II, phenomenology grew in influence in France, forming a school of so-called French Phenomenology, with Jean-Paul Sartre and Paul Ricoeur as its leading members. Applying the methods of phenomenology, these philosophers spread their fields to existentialism, hermeneutics, and structuralism (Wang & Li, 2024).

Phenomenology continued to develop and has continued to do so today, not only in the realm of philosophy but within fields as disparate as psychology, sociology, and literary criticism. Phenomenology's core idea grounds it in experience itself, and so furnishes contemporary thinkers with many things to reflect and explore.

1.2 Research Background of Self-Awareness and Existence Meaning from the Perspective of Phenomenology

The phenomenology self-awareness and existential meaning research background are profound and complex, having their roots in the current society's modern questioning of individual subjectivity and life significance. As we enter into the era of industrialization and technology, human lifestyles also change profoundly, which revalues traditional values and self-identity (Zou, 2024). The crisis of modernity has taken place in the field of philosophy with the questioning of rationalism, and great reflection on human existence. Phenomenology is a response to this crisis. The phenomenology Husserl proposed a new way of philosophizing which consists in the intuitive description of the essence of things, offering a new mode for inquiring self-knowledge and the meaning of existence.

In the 20th century, the surge of existentialist philosophy has given new impetus to this subject based on a phenomenological approach to self-awareness and the meaning of existence. Phenomenology tends to place its emphasis on subjective experience which is consistent with the existence in existentialism of emphasis on individual freedom, choice, and responsibility. Human existence and self-awareness can be understood richly through the philosophical works of Heidegger and Sartre (Jiang, 2024).

On the other hand, the development of the fields of psychology and sociology, as well as some comparative and generalization studies, has contributed to the research of the self and the sense of existence in a phenomenological way. These disciplines have begun to emphasize individual internal experience, social interactions, and cultural background, which is just what phenomenology is all about. These disciplines use the methodology of phenomenology to understand human behavior and human experience more deeply.

Globalization and diversification cause people to experience confusion regarding their identity as well as values conflicts and lack of life meaning. From the phenomenological perspective study of self-awareness and existential meaning is the new way for individuals to reflect on their existence and search for meaning in life (Ma, 2024). Therefore, along with philosophical theoretical value, this research has important practical meaning allowing people to be placed in our society and achieve self-worth.

2. Basic Theory of Phenomenology

2.1 Definition and Core Concepts of Phenomenology

Phenomenology, as a philosophical methodology and school of thought, was founded by German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century. Phenomenology can be defined as a philosophical exploration focused on direct experience and conscious phenomena, aimed at revealing the essence of things through intuitive descriptions (Wang & Lin, 2024).

The core concepts of phenomenology include: returning to the thing itself: phenomenology emphasizes the principle of "Zu den Sachen selbst" (returning to the thing itself), which means that philosophers should suspend their preconceptions and directly face things in experience, making things present themselves in their own way. Intentionality: Husserl's concept of intentionality is a key concept in phenomenology. It refers to consciousness always pointing towards an object or meaning. Intentionality reveals the intrinsic connection between consciousness and objects.

Intuition and Description: Phenomenology holds that intuition is the source of knowledge. Through intuition, we can directly experience the essence of things. Description is a faithful record of this intuitive experience, aiming to clearly express the content of experience.

Suspension (Epoche): This is a methodological technique of phenomenology, which refers to temporarily putting aside or suspending the natural attitude and judgment of things to observe the experience itself more purely.

Reduktion: In phenomenology, reduction refers to the transfer of attention from the object under natural attitude to the consciousness experience itself, including the reduction of phenomenology and the reduction of a priori, aiming to reveal the a priori structure of things.

These core concepts of phenomenology collectively form its unique philosophical perspective which does not pursue abstract conceptual systems but focuses on concrete life worlds and human actual experiences. Phenomenology has a profound impact not only promoting the development of philosophy but also exerting significant influence on multiple disciplines including psychology sociology literature and more (Su, 2021).

2.2 Phenomenological Methodology: Back to Things Themselves

The core of phenomenology's methodology lies in "returning to things themselves," a principle that requires researchers to abandon all preconceived biases, theories, and assumptions, and to face the phenomena in

experience directly, allowing them to present themselves in their most original and direct form. This methodology posits that the task of philosophy is not to construct complex theoretical systems but to reveal how things manifest in consciousness, i.e., how things appear to us. To achieve this goal, phenomenology employs several key techniques or steps.

First, phenomenology requires “Epoche,” which means temporarily putting aside judgments about the existence of things and focusing attention on how they present themselves to consciousness (Li, 2019). This suspension does not negate the existence of things but rather temporarily refrains from making any assumptions about their state of existence, thereby allowing the essence of things to manifest intuitively.

Second, phenomenology emphasizes the importance of “intuition” (Intuition), considering intuition as a direct means of acquiring knowledge. Through intuition, researchers can directly access the essence of things rather than through intermediary concepts or symbols. This intuition can be sensory or a priori, requiring researchers to have a high degree of sensitivity and insight.

Next, the methodology of phenomenology also includes “description” (Description), which means describing the intuitive experiential content in as clear and precise language as possible. The purpose of description is not to construct theories but to enable others to reconstruct the researchers intuitive experience through language, thereby achieving a common understanding of the essence of things.

2.3 The Main Representatives of Phenomenology and Their Theoretical Contributions

Phenomenology, as an important philosophical school, has produced many outstanding representatives whose theoretical contributions have laid a solid foundation for its development. Among them, the most famous is Edmund Husserl, who is hailed as the founder of phenomenology. Husserl put forward the slogan of “returning to things themselves” and systematically developed the methodology of phenomenology, including intuition, pause, and description (Huang, 2017). His works “Logical Investigations” and “Phenomenological Thoughts” have had a profound impact on future generations.

Martin Heidegger is another important representative figure of phenomenology. Building on Husserl’s work, he further explored existential issues, introduced the concept of “Sein und Zeit,” emphasized the structure of human “Dasein,” and conducted phenomenological analyses of fields such as technology, art, and language. His seminal work “Being and Time” is a classic in the philosophy of phenomenology.

Jean-Paul Sartre is a representative figure of existential phenomenology who combined the methods of phenomenology with existential philosophy proposing the famous assertion that “existence precedes essence.” In “Being and Nothingness,” Sartre explores themes of human freedom choice and responsibility through the distinction between “pour-soi” and “en-soi.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty applied phenomenology to the domains of bodily experience and perception, his “Phenomenology of Perception” revealed the central role of the body in understanding the world, emphasizing the interwoven relationship between the body and the world, which had a significant impact on later bodily philosophy and cognitive science.

In addition, Emmanuel Levinas is known for his ethical phenomenology of the “Autrui”. His thought emphasizes the responsibility to the other and infinite sense of responsibility, which has had a profound impact on contemporary ethics.

Through their theoretical contributions, these major representatives of phenomenology not only enriched and developed phenomenology itself, but also had a wide and far-reaching influence on other fields of philosophy, such as existentialism, hermeneutics, structuralism, etc. (Sun & Li, 2012).

3. Self-Awareness from the Perspective of Phenomenology

3.1 The Connotation and Hierarchy of Self-Awareness

Self-awareness refers to an individual’s understanding and insight into their own existence, characteristics, thoughts, emotions, values, and other aspects. It is a multi-level, dynamic process involving an individual’s exploration of their inner world and interaction with the external world. The connotation of self-awareness can be understood from the following three levels:

The most elementary level is self-awareness, that is, an individual’s conception about his/her own being. This form of understanding enables us to know some basic characteristics of a person such as gender, age, and physical features as well as a general perception of our own being and behavior. The development of self-awareness begins with self-awareness, the ability to separate oneself from others and the environment.

Then the second level is self-reflection, which, unlike awareness, is a much more cognitive process. When individuals reflect on their actions, motivations, emotions, and thoughts, they offer a better picture of how their psychological state and intrinsic motivation work. It helps a person realize his/her patterns, and behavioral habits

and makes him/her grow in terms of psychological well-being.

To sum up, the meanings of self-awareness are very diverse; it involves not only a person's psychological state but also relations of a person with society and the person's locating in a world that is consistently changing. It can be done by different suspensions.

3.2 Phenomenology's Critique of the Traditional Concept of Self-Awareness

Phenomenology's critique of traditional self-knowledge concepts primarily manifests in its challenge to the simplification, static nature, and subjectivity of these concepts. Traditional views often regard self-knowledge as a linear and objective process, overlooking the complexity and diversity of individual experiences. Phenomenology argues that this perspective fails to adequately reveal the deep structure and dynamic characteristics of self-knowledge.

First phenomenological critique challenges the traditional conceptual simplification of self-awareness. Traditional epistemology tends to view self-awareness as a singular and divisible mental activity while phenomenology emphasizes that self-awareness is a multidimensional and continuous process involving multiple levels such as emotion body memory and social interaction. This simplification overlooks the actual complexity of self-awareness leading to misunderstandings about the inner world of individuals.

Second, phenomenology points out the static nature of traditional self-awareness concepts. Traditional concepts often view the self as a fixed and unchanging entity, whereas phenomenology posits that the self is constantly generated and changing. Self-awareness is not a process that reaches a final destination but is an ongoing and open process, with individuals experiencing different self-experiences at various stages of life and in different environments.

Finally, phenomenology critiques the subjectivity of traditional concepts. Traditional epistemology often confines self-awareness to the individuals inner world, overlooking the influence of the external world on self-awareness. Phenomenology emphasizes "returning to things themselves," which means paying attention to the direct contact and interaction between the individual and the world, believing that self-awareness is formed within the relationship with the world, rather than being an isolated monologue within the external world.

To sum up, the phenomenology's criticism of the traditional concept of self-knowledge reveals the limitations of the latter in understanding self-knowledge, emphasizes the dynamism, complexity and contextuality of self-knowledge, and provides new perspectives and methods for a deeper understanding of individual self-knowledge.

3.3 The Process and Method of Self-Awareness from the Perspective of Phenomenology

Suspension and Reduction Suspension (Epoche) is the first step of phenomenological self-awareness, which requires individuals to temporarily set aside their preconceived notions, assumptions, and theories to achieve unbiased observation of experience. Reduction (Reduction) refers to shifting attention from the object under natural attitude to the conscious experience itself, encompassing both phenomenological reduction and transcendental reduction. Through these steps, individuals can strip away non-essential factors attached to experience and return to the original state of experience, thereby gaining a clearer understanding of the self.

Intuition and Descriptivism Intuition (Intuition) is at the core of phenomenological methods referring to the direct and non-conceptual perception of experience itself. Phenomenology emphasizes that self-knowledge must be grounded in the intuitive grasp of ones own experience rather than through indirect reasoning or others interpretations. Descriptivism, on the other hand, involves the precise linguistic expression of the content of intuition. The purpose of description is not to construct theories but to convey the intuitive experience as faithfully as possible so that others can understand and reproduce this experience.

Intersubjectivity and Empathy Intersubjectivity (Intersubjectivity) focuses on the relationship between the self and others, arguing that self-awareness is not merely an internal activity of the individual but is formed and developed through interactions with others. Empathy (Empathy) is a crucial concept in phenomenological self-awareness, involving the ability of individuals to understand and feel others experiences. This ability is essential for self-awareness as it helps individuals understand others while also deepening their own understanding.

4. The Meaning of Existence from the Perspective of Phenomenology

4.1 Background of the Discussion on the Meaning of Existence

The exploration of the meaning of existence is an ancient and profound issue in the field of philosophy. From Socrates of ancient Greece to modern philosophers, there has been relentless questioning about "why humans exist" and "what is the meaning of life." In modern society, with the development of technology and the enrichment of material life, people increasingly feel the emptiness at the spiritual level and the confusion about

existence. Therefore, the exploration of the meaning of existence not only has theoretical value in philosophy but also practical significance in real life. In this context, phenomenology, as a philosophical method that focuses on human direct experience and the essence of existence, provides a new perspective for exploring the meaning of existence.

4.2 Phenomenology of the Interpretation of the Meaning of Existence

Phenomenology's interpretation of the meaning of existence differs from the abstract speculation of traditional philosophy, emphasizing the return to things themselves, that is, returning to people's actual life experiences and existential feelings to explore meaning. Phenomenologists believe that the meaning of existence is not preconceived or external to human existence, but is a process of continuous discovery and creation by individuals in specific existential practices. Heidegger's "Being" is a typical example, where he posits that human existence (Dasein) is "being-in-the-world," and its meaning lies in how individuals interact with the surrounding world and realize their potential.

5. The Association Between Self-Knowledge and the Meaning of Existence from the Perspective of Phenomenology

From a phenomenological perspective, there is a profound intrinsic connection between self-awareness and the meaning of existence. Phenomenology emphasizes "returning to things themselves," which in the process of self-awareness means that individuals must delve into their direct experiences of existence to reveal the essential elements that constitute self-consciousness. Self-awareness is not a static accumulation of knowledge but a dynamic and ongoing process that requires individuals to continuously reflect and experience in order to achieve a deep understanding of their own existence.

Self-awareness is the prerequisite for the meaning of existence. Only when an individual can clearly recognize their emotions, thoughts, values, and connections with the world can they explore the meaning of life on this basis. Phenomenology posits that self-awareness is not an isolated self-examination but gradually unfolds through interaction with the world and others. In this process, individuals continuously "reveal" and "understand," gradually clarifying their position and role in the world.

At the same time, the existence of meaning reacts upon self-awareness. When an individual realizes that their life has a certain significance and value, this awareness further deepens their understanding of themselves. The discovery of the meaning of existence enables individuals to examine their lives from a higher perspective, thereby achieving new depths in self-awareness. His mutually reinforcing relationship forms a virtuous cycle between self-awareness and the meaning of existence.

Therefore, the self-awareness and existential meaning from a phenomenological perspective are intercausal and mutually constructive relationships. Self-awareness drives individuals to explore the meaning of existence, while the clarification of existential meaning deepens self-awareness. In this process, individuals not only achieve an understanding of their own existence but also continuously reshape their modes of existence and value orientations through ongoing life practices.

6. Conclusion

By delving into the self-awareness and existential meaning from a phenomenological perspective, this article reveals the close and complex relationship between the two. The phenomenological approach provides us with a unique pathway that allows us to explore the inner world and essence of existence of individuals through intuitive experience. Self-awareness is no longer an abstract concept but has become a living, continuously unfolding process that requires us to engage in constant self-reflection and experience in the concrete practices of daily life.

This article points out that self-awareness is the foundation for exploring the meaning of existence and the clarification of this meaning further deepens self-awareness. This interactive relationship not only helps us better understand human existence but also provides theoretical support for finding and establishing personal value in modern society. However, self-awareness and the exploration of the meaning of existence from a phenomenological perspective are not easy tasks as they require individuals to possess a high degree of consciousness and reflective ability.

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