

'Paradigm Shift' in European Epistemology

by Seiji Takeda

translated by K. Isobe

'Paradigm Shift' in Epistemology

In the discipline of philosophy, phenomenology has generally been considered as a pursuit for foundation of rigorous objective knowledge and subjected to numerous criticisms in this context. However, the fundamental motive of Husserl's phenomenology is actually not in foundation of objective knowledge but lies in elucidation of the question of knowledge. We should start our philosophical project from this important realization. This motive for solving the epistemic problem is closely associated with his aspirations for restoring philosophy as a science of universal knowledge. This is explicitly stated by Husserl himself in his *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (hereinafter *Crisis*), as will be discussed below. However, contemporary European philosophy have disregarded, obscured, and obliterated this profound motive. This has led to grave malfunctions of European philosophy as a result of its near-complete abandonment of the mission to philosophically pursue universal knowledge. This is the main point I should particularly like to illuminate. I will now give a general outline of the arguments in this essay.

What is the question of knowledge in the first place?

This question originally arose in ancient Greek philosophy, in which Gorgias emblematically presented three proofs concerning *being* and *knowledge*: 1. *Being* does not exist as no one can prove; 2. even if something exists, no one can know it; and 3. even if something can be known, no one can communicate it to others by language.

I call these Gorgias' theses, and they are definitely the original source of all the arguments of philosophical relativism and skepticism prevalent throughout European philosophy. Gorgias' arguments are, in a sense, totally correct. <Quote> (reference source unlocated) That is to say, existence, knowledge and language are definitely **different in essence** so that they cannot be totally identified with each other. Gorgias' theses are thus briefly schematized by the following inequality:

$$\text{Existence} \neq \text{Knowledge} \neq \text{Language}$$

If it is impossible to ascertain or prove that existence and knowledge are the same and coincide with each other, there can be no true knowledge, nor objective or universal knowledge, leaving knowledge altogether relative. This would severely undermine the *raison d'être* of philosophy as the pursuit of universal knowledge.

This conundrum was identified by René Descartes as a question of the impossibility of accordance between *subject* and *object* in modern philosophy.* Most subsequent philosophers with an understanding of the gravity of this question have struggled with the attempt to provide a foundation for universal knowledge. (Note that, in my usage of words, the term *objective knowledge* is mainly used in the natural sciences where objective entities are assumed to exist, while *universal knowledge* is used to refer to knowledge in the humanities.)

It was Immanuel Kant who most resolutely confronted this problem in modern philosophy. The eclectic solutions Kant ultimately reached are widely known. He claimed that, while the *noumenon* (the thing-in-itself) is never known to us, humans broadly share their cognitive faculties in the field of nature, and hence, objective knowledge is possible inasmuch as the physical world is concerned. However, other German philosophers ranging from Fichte to Hegel were not content with the conclusion that the *thing-in-itself* was **unknowable**. They sought to find a breakthrough with the notion of the Absolute based on the premise of European theism, naturally in vain. The question of knowledge was thus left unsolved up to our own generation.

In contemporary philosophy**, this problem has been investigated in terms of language, as a quest for the possibility of accordance between knowledge (thought or meaning) and language. This move was pioneered by the endeavors of logical positivists such as Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell and the members of the Vienna Circle, who sought to counter the metaphysical quality of modern philosophy. This logical positivism then declined as it was refuted by the logical relativism advocated by Willard Quine, Wittgenstein in later life and others. Logical relativism merged with the somehow late-coming post-modern thought that used philosophical relativism as a weapon in its arsenal, which has brought to contemporary philosophy the conspicuous features of inclination toward anti-philosophy and relativism. Keywords here are “relativity of value” and “diversity”, inducing thinkers to give up, abandoning their efforts to solve the question of knowledge.

In my view, the question of knowledge, considered the greatest enigma in European philosophy, has already been **completely resolved** by Nietzsche’s “dismantling of noumenalism” and Husserl’s approach of phenomenological reduction. The present-day philosophy of Europe has however altogether misunderstood and neglected the

* It has been a persisting philosophical enigma whether a thing, for instance, an apple I am looking at now could be the same as the apple in itself. If the knowledge (owned by my subject) of the world reaches or accords with the world itself, my knowledge must be true, but no one can ever prove this accordance. This bothered Gorgias as mentioned above and many other philosophers including Descartes.

** “Contemporary philosophy” in this essay generally refers to the Western philosophy of the 20th and 21st centuries which is not to be confused with the modern philosophy from 17th to 19th centuries.

philosophical achievements of these two philosophers, which is directly linked to the serious disarray and stagnation of contemporary philosophy.

I believe that the resolution of this problem of knowledge is a milestone which deserves to be called the “paradigm shift” defined by Thomas Kuhn. In the circumstances that insoluble contradictions arose to become apparent to anyone concerned within the existing framework, or “paradigm” of the way of thinking, a completely new solution has been proffered with the decisive shift of perspective, but there was scarcely anyone who was aware of this great “paradigm shift”. This was by and large what was happening to the philosophies of Nietzsche and Husserl.

Now we have to examine the following points: (1) the serious misunderstanding and disregard of phenomenology on the part of contemporary philosophy; (2) how phenomenology succeeded in resolving the question of knowledge that had been considered the most difficult for European philosophy to answer; and (3) why such misconceptions of phenomenology have persisted so long.

Status Quo of the Criticisms of Phenomenology

Phenomenology has been criticized by two separate philosophical camps, relativism (skepticism) and positivism (realism). Those who belong to the former are post-modern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and analytic philosophers including Richard Rorty; the two major realistic or objectivistic critics in the latter camp are typically given as Jürgen Habermas and Hubert Dreyfus.

Derrida is the prominent post-modern thinker who dominated the philosophical scene in many countries including Japan in and after the 1980s. He presented his novel concept of *deconstruction* with his major work *Speech and Phenomena*, which focused on criticizing Husserl. He meticulously analyzed Husserl’s writings, such as *Logical Investigations* and *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, and contended that there was a “metaphysical” aspiration for the foundation of rigorous objective knowledge.

We have thus a prescription for the most general form of our question: do not phenomenological necessity, the rigor and subtlety of Husserl’s analysis, the exigencies to which it responds and which we must first recognize, nonetheless conceal a metaphysical presupposition? Do they not harbor a dogmatic or speculative commitment.....? (Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison and Newton Garver. Evanston: Northwestern UP. 1973. 4)

Michel Foucault also criticized Husserl’s phenomenology, in addition to Heidegger’s

ontology and Freud's psychoanalysis, in his work *The Order of Things*. According to Foucault, Husserl sought to elaborate the transcendental that ensures the possibility of knowledge of objects, Heidegger pursued the ultimate origin of human beings, and Freud explored what cannot be spoken of, that nonetheless sustains the subject (cogito) eventually. For Foucault, however, all of these are **unachievable enterprises** to seek access to the absolute primordial of human beings, and have been embraced within the modern epistemic paradigm concentrating on the exploration of humans.

One of the leading analytic philosophers of the 20th century, Richard Rorty, states:

The paradigmatic figures in this attempt to recapture the mathematical spirit were Husserl and Russell. [...] Driven by the need to find something to be apodictic about, Russell discovered "logic form" and Husserl discovered "essences," the "purely formal" aspects of "bracketed." (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP. 2009. 166)

Rorty's account of Husserl's phenomenology as a sort of "foundationalism" for objective knowledge, somewhat akin to Bertrand Russell's logicism, seems deeply inappropriate to me, but this view is commonly accepted among today's relativistic philosophers.

Furthermore, even the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who was broadly in line with Frankfurt School philosophers like Adorno and Horkheimer and who distanced himself from the relativism of postmodern thought, expressed views that were critical of phenomenology:

Husserl sets pure phenomenology the goal of explaining and bringing under conscious control everything merely implicit, prepredicative, already sedimented, not actually present — in brief, the un-thought and hidden foundation of the performing subjectivity. These hybrid attempts at emancipation from what is unconsciously in the background fall prey to the utopia of self-transparency and hence flip over into nihilistic despair and radical scepticism. (Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: Polity Press. 1987. 263)

There are a host of other critics of phenomenology, such as Adorno from the Frankfurt School, Jacques Lacan who inherited Freudian theory of psychoanalysis in his own way, and hermeneutists such as Ricoeur and Gadamer. Most contemporary **phenomenologists** (with a few exceptions like Dan Zahavi) also raise profound questions and objections in terms of the contradictions and limitations involved in Husserl's

phenomenology.

Notwithstanding, what if the truth is that the misconceptions of phenomenology, so prevalent among contemporary philosophers, and the accompanying criticisms thereof, are simply due to their failure to grasp the critical “paradigm shift” in the question of knowledge brought about by Husserl’s phenomenology, as discussed above? What if this failure is responsible for the now widely spreading, totally mistaken understanding and explanations of the key concepts of phenomenology such as phenomenological reduction, eidetic seeing, constitution, and intersubjectivity?

Phenomenological Reduction as the Sole Solution to the Question of Knowledge

As is known, there is a dominant opinion that phenomenology should be the theory of foundationalism for rigorous objective knowledge or of solipsistic subjectivism. I would now discuss why these views ought to be dismissed as sheer mistakes. This will also prompt me to demonstrate how the radical “paradigm shift” from the conventional framework of epistemology was caused by Husserl’s approach of phenomenological reduction. Let me give this account in a broader picture at the moment for easier understanding of general readers, without going into intricate textual interpretations.

First let me give an example of the generally accepted apprehensions of the concept of *phenomenological reduction* as one of the basic key terms of phenomenology. A noted Japanese phenomenologist, Gen Kida, wrote the following article for *Heibonsha World Encyclopedia*:

We see our consciousness as a fact within the world, but this is merely a customary way of thinking developed with the accumulation of daily experiences. The truth is that both human and natural sciences are simply an extension of our “natural attitude” resting on this habitual way of positing the world. Husserl proposed that we cease assuming such natural attitudes devoid of self-reflections and suspend the way of viewing our mental process as mere facts inside the world. He proposed to shift to a new view, in which consciousness is regarded as an absolute field where such assumptions of the objective world are generated, with diverse ontic meanings of beings in the world arising with them, namely as a pure consciousness (this shifting operation is called “phenomenological reduction”). Husserl then attempted to analytically describe the process in which those meanings are created. He contemplated that, by so doing, the category of meanings could be revived in the human sciences that had somehow been in a stalemate due to the positivistic approach, thereby effecting a fundamental reformation of the human sciences. (Gen Kida, “phenomenology” entry in the

Heibonsha World Encyclopedia, published only in Japanese. 2007. translated by Isobe only for this essay)

To paraphrase the above, *phenomenological reduction* is the method by which our un-reflected way of viewing the world (our *natural attitude*) is suspended to assume a self-reflective attitude to reduce everything to our subjective consciousness (i.e., *pure consciousness*), which allows us to see how the objective world and the meanings in it are **constituted** within consciousness. This is an approach enabling us to grasp how “meanings” in the human world are generated, which is not feasible by the method of positivistic sciences.

This may be acceptable as a general account, but from our standpoint that the method of phenomenology is definitely a “paradigm shift”, this explanation lacks two elements essential for the concept of phenomenological reduction: first, that phenomenological reduction is the most **fundamental method for resolution of the epistemic problem**; second, that reduction of everything to consciousness must be understood as a radical and profound shift of perspective, in which **all knowledge of the world should be considered as a belief (indubitability) held by a subject about a certain object**.

I have long since asserted that the very core of the method of phenomenological reduction is in considering all knowledge **as a belief** of the subject and analyzing how this belief is constituted in the subject. This is the decisive “paradigm shift” brought about by Husserl that would lead to the ultimate solution of the conundrum of knowledge.

To briefly review, the old framework (paradigm) of European epistemology was such that **true knowledge, objective knowledge or universal knowledge is established when the subject reaches the object to accord therewith. Yet no one can logically prove this accordance**. European epistemology has thus confined itself to the “paradigm” of endeavors to **speculatively corroborate such accordance**, in spite of the theoretical impossibility of solving the epistemological puzzle.

Now we should give an overview of the revolutionary paradigm shifts achieved by Nietzsche and Husserl. Nietzsche **destroyed** the noumenological worldview based on **Europe’s inherent** Christian monotheism by means of his unique conception of “power-correlativity”*. Specifically, the traditional European epistemology, which maintained that there exists the world in itself that is ruled over by a single, eternal, perfect Providence, and that divine omniscience therefore gives assurance of perfect knowledge, was completely dismantled by Nietzsche.

* According to Nietzsche, the world (phenomena) appears and is known to any living thing only in correlation to its body=desire (which Nietzsche calls power); there is no such thing as the world itself or the world as a noumenon.

Husserl, with no direct influence from Nietzsche, then pointed out how irrational the idea of an objective world and perfect knowledge thereof should be, and established a completely new epistemology, stating that we cannot attain absolute or perfect knowledge of the world, but universal knowledge can be attained.

Since Husserl's "paradigm shift" in epistemic problems was so innovative and radical, contemporary philosophers have failed to understand how it **succeeded in resolving** the enigma of knowledge. This had led to great confusions in terms of interpretation of major phenomenological concepts. Before looking at such confusions, however, we must perform a general review of Husserl's "paradigm shift" itself and see how it provided the solutions to be investigated.

Phenomenological reduction was indeed the method dedicated to dealing with this problem, and the following points must be given particular note in this respect.

First, reduction is certainly conducted to suspend the general supposition that the objective world exists, but the point here is in the imperative of completely abandoning the dualistic scheme of *subject versus object*. What will happen then? The object will be deleted to leave the subject behind alone, to be investigated as a pure or phenomenological consciousness (it is not that it remains to exist, but rather to be observed).

Second, *eidetic seeing* is another key term of Husserl's phenomenology. It is the process of both observing how a "belief" (or an indubitability) that some objective world or entities exist is formed or constituted within a subject or consciousness and describing the conditions for and the structure of this process (*pure description*).

The "paradigm shift" in epistemology is thus: all knowledge should be understood as a belief in objects being formed within the subject. This will make clear why we cannot have absolutely true knowledge but may be able to have universal knowledge, and in what conditions we can have such "universal knowledge".

Fortunately, this radical paradigm shift achieved by Husserl is, in my belief, intelligible to any reader of philosophy without abstruse arguments, as long as it is appropriately expounded. However, I concede that there are two serious difficulties. One is that, since no one doubts the existence of physical entities, it is quite difficult to assume the methodical attitude of suspending such natural beliefs, unless one can grasp the entire picture of this phenomenological scheme. The other difficulty is in that Husserl's enterprise of epistemology proceeds, so to speak, in two steps, the first of which is to investigate the essential conditions for formation of a belief in objects within a transcendental subject, while the second is to analyze the essential conditions for the constitution of intersubjective beliefs. In principle, no phenomenological study of knowledge could be brought to a completion until this second step (not only the first one) is accomplished. These difficulties are, however, definitely surmountable unless the

crucial core of Husserl's conception is distorted with futile scholastic arguments.

The Three Categories of Constitution of Beliefs

In order to explain the matter in the broadest possible framework, I would like to show what results from the "paradigm shift" that any knowledge is to be considered as a belief in objects constituted within a subject. Knowledge is then divided into the following three categories:

- (1) knowledge as an individual belief;
- (2) knowledge as a communal belief; and
- (3) knowledge as a universal-intersubjective belief.

Knowledge in category (1) is a mere inner (subjective) belief of an individual not to be shared with others. Category (2) is an intersubjective belief that could be shared with more than one person. As such, it can be shared among a large number of people, with typical examples being religious beliefs including ethnic and world religions. Yet no matter how many people share the belief, category (2) is in principle ineligible to be universal knowledge. Only the knowledge in category (3) is qualified as universal or objective knowledge, the patent examples thereof being mathematical or natural-scientific knowledge (with, of course, some unidentified marginal boundary areas).

The alert reader may have noted that this classification offers a crucial shift of perspective in terms of epistemology. The approach of defining all knowledge as an inner belief in a subject by no means constitutes the denial of objective existence as suggested by a number of thinkers. The natural view that the physical world must objectively exist and the theory that this belief is what is firmly established inside anyone's subject are perfectly compatible with each other. The classification of the three categories also shows us the essential distinction between the knowledge to be called universal or objective and the knowledge to be treated as subjective or relative.

Furthermore, this phenomenological classification provides the following four secondary categories that are involved in all cognitive activities:

- (1) knowledge that can be shared by all those concerned (scientific objective-universal knowledge);
- (2) knowledge that is not identified as universal yet, but may turn to universal knowledge when some renewed data are available (theoretical hypotheses);
- (3) knowledge to be abandoned because some more universal, generally applicable information has emerged (erroneous information, theories, etc.); and

(4) hypothetical theories or suppositions with no possibility of universal application (metaphysical or dogmatic theories)

It would be readily understood by anyone engaged in scientific or academic studies that this categorization of cognitive structure is of crucial importance for scientific investigations. Karl Popper subsumed items (1) and (2) under his category of falsifiable scientific knowledge. The epistemological aspect of Popper's philosophy of science is rather close to phenomenology in that he maintained, though not very expressly, the impossibility of absolute verification of human knowledge.

With the said classification into four categories, we further have an essential outlook on how we should view the world in general: the world we live in is largely divided into two spheres, one is where universal belief=knowledge can be established and the other not. To the former sphere belong such disciplines as the natural sciences, mathematics, and basic or rudimentary logic. Especially in mathematics and the natural sciences, accurate knowledge (though still belief) has broadly been established and is still being developed. In contrast, it would be impossible to attain truly universal belief=knowledge in the sphere encompassing diverse senses of value about aesthetics, morals and ethics, religion, human dispositions, etc.

Evidently, there is no absolutely valid knowledge of the whole world in principle, but, as we have learned above, there are some areas where universal and objective knowledge is available, and if this is the case, we must be able to work out the essential conditions for the possibility of such universal, intersubjective knowledge.

Although it might be surprising for those who have racked their brains over the question of knowledge, this difficult puzzle, having long haunted European philosophy, **has been completely solved** by this "paradigm shift" of transcendental phenomenology, with which overall knowledge should be considered as a conviction or belief of a subject.

For those who cannot escape the firm preoccupation that universal, or objective, knowledge is possible only when human cognition wholly overlaps the world existing in itself (*noumenon*), it may be extremely difficult to see the significance of this paradigmatic solution of the epistemic problem. Yet this "paradigm shift", or the renewed framework of epistemology, is simply indisputable and will cause the old subject-object scheme to be thoroughly abandoned.

I have thus presented a general overview of Husserl's phenomenology, with a particular focus on its central task of resolving the question of knowledge and how the method of phenomenological reduction can achieve this task. This also leads us to another set of conclusions.

If my assertions are acceptable, firstly, all the criticisms and interpretations of phenomenology being prevalent among contemporary philosophers and thinkers ought

to be judged as totally wrong. Secondly, investigations and explanations of phenomenology as a whole should be innovated and revised in line with this justified account of phenomenology. And, lastly, should the fundamental motive of Husserlian phenomenology have nothing to do with the solution of the epistemic problem and the revival of philosophy as a pursuit of universal knowledge, we had better relinquish his phenomenology as an outdated philosophy of epistemological constitution.