

Defending Husserlian Phenomenology from Terry Eagleton's Critique

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This article develops, illustrates, and defends Husserlian Phenomenology from a critique in Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* second edition (1996). Husserlian Phenomenology is construed as a methodology of philosophical hunt for certainty and universal essences by pure perception through "phenomenological reduction". Eagleton's charge that Husserlian Phenomenology is a form of methodological idealism necessarily committed to a science of subjectivity and an imaginary solution to the world that leads to the sacrifice of human history. But Husserlian phenomenology insists that meaningful and potentially efficacious certainty must be connected to relevant entity and consciousness internal to the culture or social order at which the criticism is directed. Thus, to our defense, the complaint that phenomenological demand will likely limit actual historical background where criticism is denied, and the ability of Husserlian Phenomenology to develop from pure phenomenon to unphenomenological thinking is defended and demonstrated.

Keywords: Terry Eagleton's Critique; Historical Construct; Husserlian Phenomenology; Unphenomenological Thinking

Introduction

Terry Eagleton (born 22 February 1943, Salford) (hereinafter E) is perhaps the most influential British literary theorist of the living literary critics. For over 30 years he has unveiled a steady stream of publications developing his particular take on social or historical theory that was informed by works of Marxists, as well as his mentor Raymond Williams who was a left-wing literary critic at Cambridge. In literary critiques, E's thought seems to have become especially influential, often critically, in a number of literary and theoretical works. This article sets out to examine and critically evaluate E's critique of phenomenology as presented in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* second edition (1996). Since it is not possible to properly understand E's critique without situating it within the context of his broader theoretical orientation, the introduction begins with a brief exploration of some of the key concepts underpinning his version of Marxism-flavored critique. Of particular importance for this article is his notion of social and historical stance utilized in 1996 book. E recognized social and historical background as what is continuously offered as neutral, natural, universal and obviously proper form of expression as writing or cultural production. As he announces this theme that dominates his first chapter, *The Rise of English*, thus: the so-called literary canon, the unquestioned great tradition of the national literature, has to be recognized as a construct, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time (p. 11).

Having reviewed E's central social or historical construct, the article turns to discuss his critique of phenomenology in the next two sessions. For E's critique, to be brief, it concludes

with two points: a simplified review of how Husserl's phenomenology, while at times richly significant, can itself be criticized for being an overly deterministic rendering of human thought, i.e. idealism; and a call for phenomenologists to rethink the doomed drawbacks referred as "sacrifice of human history". Following this to begin our argument, some of the problems with his critique are examined in light of the work of Edmund Husserl. Thus, to develop our defense against E's critique, the following sections are to focus on: 1) essence of phenomenology (a more detailed and thorough literature review of Husserlian Phenomenology); 2) defending Husserlian Phenomenology (a step-by-step defense from E's elaborate critique).

Essence of Phenomenology

Phenomenology is portrayed as the study of essences (Merleau, 1962), the science of phenomena (van Manen, 1997), and the exploration of human experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). Spiegelberg (1982) opined that phenomenology is a moving philosophy with a dynamic momentum, determined by its intrinsic principles and the structure of the territory it encounters, composed of several parallel currents, related but not homogeneous, with a common point of departure but not a definite and predictable joint destination. Discussions of the work of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau Ponty, must recognize that phenomenology changed considerably within each philosopher's work, as well as across the different philosophers (Cohen, 1987). However, when examining phenomenology, one particular point we need to pay attention is though phenomenological philosophy melds into methodology in many above dis-

cussions, it may not be completely delineated from method. And the methodological consideration is especially typical within basic argument in Husserl's pioneer attempt, which attracts loads of continuing criticism. And this article focuses thus on the main components of the phenomenological stances of Husserl.

Husserl rejected the extreme idealist position (the mind creates the world) and the extreme empiricist position (reality exists apart from the passive mind). He sought to forge a path that would ground and confirm the objectivity of human consciousness as it relates to the life world (Kearney & Rainwater, 1996). He stated that sciences of experience were sciences of fact in his effort to develop a science of phenomena, of essences as they appear through consciousness (Husserl, 1913/1952). For Husserl (1913/1952), the World existed prior to consciousness and his phenomenology encompassed notions of pure consciousness: "It is then to this world, the world in which I find myself and which is also my world-about-me, that the complex forms of my manifold and shifting spontaneities of consciousness stand related" (p. 103). Husserl's goals were strongly epistemological, and he considered experience the fundamental source of meaning, of knowledge. Three key concepts of Husserlian phenomenology included essences, intentionality, and phenomenological reduction (bracketing). He stated that phenomenology should return "to the things themselves", to the essences that constitute the consciousness and perception of the human world, the very nature of a phenomenon that makes a some "thing" what it is—and without which it could not be what it is (Husserl, 1913/1952). Husserl spoke of a division without any real separation "between two different sections of our inquiry, the one bearing on pure subjectivity, the other on that which belongs to the constitution of objectivity as referred to its subjective source... the intentional reference of experiences to objects" (p. 234). In Husserl's transcendental approach, he believed that the mind is directed toward objects, consciousness was to be the "consciousness of something", and he called this directedness intentionality (Koch, 1995). Husserl devised phenomenological reduction or bracketing as a technique to hold subjective, private perspectives and theoretical constructs in abeyance and allow the essence of the phenomena to emerge.

Defending Husserlian Phenomenology

From the above introduction, we might clearly sense what phenomenology, particularly Husserlian phenomenology, is. Husserl, the father of phenomenology, primarily concern phenomena as the passage to understanding phenomena itself even the essence lying deep or behind them. One way to achieve the goal is basically relying on human consciousness, which can ideally combine the outside "thing" with the inward "thinking". In one word, Husserlian phenomenology is never constructed upon mere thinking without verifying specific phenomena outside in the material world. It is no idealism at all. Nevertheless, it is once or more being attacked again and again as idealism with all gun power centered on it in E's critique.

E starts with a background introduction, where WWI broke out and a wave of social revolutions rolled across Europe. All insurgency and social disorder shook the ideologies which turned to be in deep turmoil. When further leading to Husserlian phenomenology, E precisely explains its aim and working mechanism because such understandings and principles are widely shared, they are commonly invoked in ordinary discus-

sion and conversation, argument, and debate. But to our argument, "against natural attitude" and "seek for essences" serve, often contradictorily, on one hand to explain or justify its unintuitive nature, while on the other hand to criticize it by arguing its fatally intuitive characteristic which results in irrationalism, an authoritarian theory, and a consoling doctrine. Such explanations and normative arguments take for granted the rationality and/or normative worth of the assumptions, beliefs, and principles he deploys. Hence apparently, E's critique is inherently conventional and conservative because it regards his target as valuable, but deploys directly, historically dominant understandings and norms to pinpoint the so-called drawbacks. As noted earlier, Husserl's phenomenology is to some point resistant to E's form of critique, for his project is focused upon explicitly using the phenomenological reduction (epoche) to penetrate the unquestioned acceptance of the "natural attitude" in order to reveal the fundamental structures of consciousness that underlie it. In other words, Husserl attempts to use the phenomenological reduction in the service of determining the generative structures of consciousness that underpin an individual's taken-for-granted world of lived experience. It is therefore theoretically and practically inserted well into E's opposite opinion, thus E's argument is actually self-blinded. When valuable connotation in norms like essences and intentionality are violated, or when worthwhile practices like phenomenological reduction are debased, appeals to just historical arguing—to self-prevailing Marxism values and standards. The ideas in Marxism are often helpful reminders, and effective correctives to E's argumentation.

In order to address E's critique, and mostly importantly, in order to develop an adequate account of Husserlian Phenomenology, it will prove helpful to begin by drawing once more on the salience of social and historical consideration bracing all E's deduction. "Historical roots" is identified at the preface of E's first-order critique. In phenomenological critique, social or historical context justify almost all argument by claiming that it conforms to, embodies, or serves prevailing charge to phenomenology. These arguments either include or presuppose interpretations of those practices that identify and describe their social meaning, purpose or point, an intrinsic and/or instrumental value. Exaggerated claims about essentially idealism to genuinely intuitive thinking and change are often given as reasons for recommending putatively social or historical modes of normative reasoning. The underlying premise is that such historical modes of reasoning enable escape from the always confining and usually essential ground of unphenomenological thinking in Husserlian phenomenology, and the underlying promise is that one (favored) mode of such reasoning will secure ultimate truth or wisdom sufficient to do what Husserlian phenomenology fails to do, namely, induce non-evaluative even pure idealistic reflection. Now, that the truth might make us free is not an unfounded idea, and it is certainly possible to argue that just as truth about the natural world are likely to alter human thinking and conduct, so too normative truth can engender change in the ignorant and misguided. In this regard, E's critique is just a typical case.

After concerning the front-back contradictory premise of E's critique, his later common and radical critique are these: that it is a flux of random phenomena that, therefore, committed to uncertainty; that it is inherently intuitive; and that it is subjective, and its results all sound "intolerably abstract and unreal". Against each charge, E shall argue that his critique is the best

antidote to explanation of Husserlian phenomenology because this philosophical method demonstrates that no conventional norms or practices are beyond question and challenge. Moreover, against each charge, he contends that phenomenology is compatible with and open to the possibility of conscious as well as concrete deep-structural norms, though it rightly assumes that all such norms require intuition and thinking in order to gain reliable knowledge and substantive truth. And he shall do so, in part, by distinguishing between first-order explanation and second-order critique. He concludes:

It should be obvious even from this brief account of phenomenology that it is a form of methodological idealism, seeking to explore an abstraction called “human consciousness” and a world of pure possibilities.

By “articulating” the final account—that is, by describing, classifying, elaborating, illuminating, and uncovering the more or less unarticulated definitions, sentiments and values, and standards and self-understandings embodied in the critique of Husserlian phenomenology—E argues that pre-view of Kant and back-view of Leavis further instantiate virtues and goods about dogmatism which intuition is increasingly collaborative and right. Immediate sensation works to develop a global theory, which “is bound to be an authoritarian theory, since it depends wholly on intuition”. But because such accusation championed by intuition resonate too well with extreme words like dogmatism, irrationalism and subjectivity, E’s observation thus put itself increasingly at risk by dogmatic conclusion which on the contrary serves simultaneously as a defense of Husserlian phenomenology. To our defense, phenomenology rightly avers, what we call intentional theory of consciousness, and what I am calling a truth like an existing straw easily attacked by wind but never fell down. Husserlian phenomenology can “serve a critical function” while yet being “constructive and conserving”.

As E finally transfers to the contribution phenomenology has offered to literary criticisms, he shows that the approach is not necessarily, or even characteristically, conservative with its influence on the Russian Formalists. With his presentation, Russian Formalism is just “like” Husserlian’s methodology, in which poetry is bracketed off real objects and goes back to the poetry itself. Apart from that, Geneva school is also sided in with a form just following suit:

As with Husserl’s “bracketing” of the real object, the actual historical context of the literary work, its author, conditions of production and readership are ignored; phenomenological critic is aims instead at a wholly “immanent” reading of the text, totally unaffected by anything outside it. The text itself is reduced to a pure embodiment of the author’s consciousness: all of its stylistic and semantic aspects are grasped as organic parts of a complex totality, of which the unifying essence is the author’s mind. To know this mind, we must not refer to anything we actually know of the author-biographical criticism is banned but only to those aspects of his or her consciousness which manifest themselves in the work itself. Moreover, we are concerned with the “deep structures” of this mind, which can be found in recurrent themes and patterns of imagery (p. 51).

Against the final charge, I intend to admit the phenomenological analogy E has described in Geneva school, and that something like subjectivity, are characteristic features of the approach, but I shall refuse to see this methodological concern as a critical problem. Subjectivity seems to me inevitable, a reflection or result of the human condition and not of the approach, and it should lead theorists, on the one side, to recog-

nize and respect human diversity and, on the other, to admit to the role of consciousness, and thus to immediate relationship between truth and phenomena. Transcendental structures can not be gained without reasoning. But the universal essences like love, beauty and compassion are often felt and conducted by all. Human beings are in states of ongoing reciprocity with their environments. Life processes evolve irreversibly and unidirectionally along the space-time continuum. Humans are homeodynamic, as they seek stability and balance in their dynamic forward motion. Humans are characterized by their capacity for abstraction and imagery, language and thought, sensation and emotion. Pattern and organization individuate and identify persons, families, and communities and reflect their innovative wholeness. Subject and object are two sides of one coin. In this regard, subjective/objective distinction is what Husserl so assiduously attempted to abolish. But E contends that the justification and criticism of phenomenology and phenomenological practices and practical norms are filled with flaws. I thus regard his critique as unjustified or self-vindicated norms and practices that apparently cohere with the most plausible account of phenomenology, especially, the ideally step-by-step account of Husserlian phenomenology, and practically regard it as unsatisfactory and unjustified methodological truth that works against itself as well as literary criticism. One metaphorical example, I should argue, is that as long as one commits a crime, evidence unavoidably is left. So does phenomenological method. As long as your conscious is intentionally towards deep structures, you must first meet phenomena. That can make all those so-called essence, truth, principle, discipline and law of our world justified, and particularly appropriate, for we are human beings, given our liberal traditions and ideals. Such an appeal to extant humankind traditions and ideals constitutes, or more accurately presupposes, an interpretation of phenomenology that is supposed to make plausible the claim that the principle of immediate phenomena and the practice of looking through phenomena “fit” particularly well their character and aspirations, and this, in turn, is supposed to warrant the claim that the principle and the practice are justified or rational.

Conclusion

These brief illustrations, of E’s reasoning for the critique of Husserlian phenomenology and of his fundamental historical stance, provide evidence for thinking that E’s critique can be quite radical. “A thoughtful critic can always draw attention to radical ideas and possibilities, even if only by transgressing conventional understandings or taboos; and he or she can always find creative ways to defend those possibilities on more or less conventional grounds, even while challenging, revising, transforming, and/or rejecting elements of the conventional.” (Sabia, 2010: p. 704) Hence it is not true that visions of Husserlian phenomenology is “nothing less than a science of subjectivity itself” will likely be “parochial” if we adopt as more thorough observing approach to his target and possibly he will change his critique and its interpretative methods. Parochial visions, to be sure, will be the fruit of basic stance E has always took, but what I have tried to argue here is that the notion of a historic culture in E’s argument is in the final analysis an invention that ignores the extent to which phenomenology itself is rooted in cultures and languages, and the individuals who inhabit and employ them, are complex, contestable, and mutable constructions. Seemingly strong tilling of these fertile fields

insures against E's critique while providing the most persuasive, and the most authoritative, grounds for our anti-critique of norms and practices that they can have. Put in ways that will need qualification, the interpretation of the phenomenology E presupposed in this kind of argument is the monologue of an interpretation of its overall meaning or central themes, and the claim that phenomenology suits particularly well idealism and is therefore criticized.

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