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## The Place of Phenomenology and Existentialism in African Society, in Particular, Nigeria: A Philosophical Analysis

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### Abstract

Phenomenology and Existentialism represent an attitude or qualities that emphasize human existence, that is, the distinctive qualities of individual persons rather than man in the abstract or nature and the world in general. Phenomenology and Existentialism are closely related movements; this is because they revolt against the methods of traditional African society. However, we have a problem and the problem is that Phenomenology and Existentialism are personal and individualistic philosophy. How can it be relevant to the African society that is communal? In this work, we tried to make Phenomenology and Existentialism relevant to the African society, especially Nigeria judging from the fact that individual persons make up the community. Our method is a critical look at the works written on phenomenology and existentialism and also on Africa in order to discover the relevance in Nigeria.

**Key Words:** Phenomenology, Existentialism, Africa, Nigeria

### Introduction

Phenomenology is all about getting into the “entities”; it means, today, to describe realities as they are without presuppositions or biased mind. While, Existentialism is the philosophy of human existence, it is not about the human race but the individual; not stone, God, rocks, angels and horses. In this work, we reflected on the meaning and types of Phenomenology and Existentialism, the Place of Phenomenology and Existentialism in the African Society, Nigeria as a case study.

### What is Phenomenology?

The discipline of phenomenology may be defined initially as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. Literarily, phenomenology is the study of “phenomena”, appearances of things, as they are in our experiences. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view. In whatever context the term “phenomenology” is used, it refers to the distinction introduced by Kant between phenomenon and noumenon. The problem of reconciling reality and thought is as old

as philosophy itself. The problem is complicated by the fact that we cannot know reality independently of consciousness, and we cannot know consciousness independently of reality. The philosopher is committed to penetrating the mystery; the phenomenologist attempts to solve this apparent dualism. One may assert that, if there is a solution at all, it is that only phenomena are presented and that, therefore, is where we must first look. Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote: “phenomenology is an inventory of consciousness as Milieu of the Universe” (Merleau-Ponty, 1965, p.199). If we are to know what anything is, and this is the commitment of the phenomenologist, we must examine the consciousness we have of it; if this does not give us an answer, nothing will.

Phenomenology is commonly understood in either two ways: as a disciplinary field in philosophy, or as a movement in the history of philosophy. The Oxford English Dictionary presents the following definition of “phenomenology”, a. the science of phenomena as distinct from being (ontology) and b, that division of any science which describes and clarifies its phenomena from the Greek phenomenon, “appearance”. In philosophy, phenomenology is used in the first sense, and debates of theory and methodology. In physics and philosophy of science, the term is used in the second sense, albeit only occasionally. The ancient discipline launched philosophy as we emerged from Plato’s cave. Yet the discipline of phenomenology did not blossom until the 20th century and remains poorly understood in many circles of contemporary philosophy.

How did philosophy move from a root concept of phenomena to the discipline of phenomenology? Originally, in the 18th century, “phenomenology” meant the theory of appearances fundamental to empirical knowledge, especially sensory appearances. The Latin term “*phenomenologia*” was introduced by Christopher Friedrich Oettinger in 1736. Subsequently, the German term “phenomenological” was used by John Heinrich Lambert; a follower of Christian Wolff. Immanuel Kant used the term occasionally in various writings. In 1807, G. W. F. Hegel wrote a book titled *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (phenomenology of spirit). By 1889 Franz Brentano used the term to characterize what he called “descriptive psychology”. From there, Edmund Husserl took up the term for his new science of consciousness and the rest is history. Today, the father of Phenomenology is Edmund Husserl. However, phenomenology can be approached in three ways. As a method and this is associated with Edmund Husserl, as ontology – (Martin Heidegger), and as existentialism – (Jean Paul Sartre).

Edmund Husserl was looking for a method in philosophy that will not be faulted that will also apply to other sciences. For him, this method will not be found in the laboratory but will be found in human being. However, before he arrived at this phenomenology as a method, other philosophers influenced him. The philosophers are René Descartes, Franz Brentano and Immanuel Kant. Husserl’s phenomenology follows the footsteps of Descartes methodic doubt. Indeed, Husserl tells us that Descartes is the great patron of phenomenology. Husserl stated:

No philosopher of the past has affected the sense of phenomenology as decisively as René Descartes... phenomenology must honor him as its genuine patriarch. It must be said explicitly that the study of Descartes meditations has influenced directly the formation of the development of phenomenology (Husserl, 1970, p.3).

Both Descartes and Husserl were mathematicians turned philosophers, and wanted clear and indisputably certain knowledge. For Descartes, the demolition exercise was the methodic doubt, for Husserl, it is the phenomenological *epoché*.

Franz Brentano was the teacher of Husserl who was a descriptive psychologist. Under the influence of Brentano's descriptive psychology, Edmund Husserl developed phenomenology as a descriptive analysis of experience. Phenomenology is concerned with the essence of things and not with their concrete existence as individual things.

Another important influence on Husserl was Kant. Immanuel Kant influenced him because of transcendental idealism. Let us now discuss Husserl's phenomenology as a method.

**Phenomenology is a method** of philosophizing; it aims at an unprejudiced, description of the objects of experience. It means that one perceives the object of inquiry with a completely open mind without presuppositions, without being biased, without prior assumptions. All these must be done away with, put between brackets, or better still, suspended so that the mind becomes free and open to receive the object of experience exactly it appears to one's consciousness in experience. This is called phenomenological *Epoché* by Husserl. Reflecting on Husserl's phenomenological epoché, Omoregbe (2001) remarked:

This means that the phenomenologist must perform on himself what Husserl calls phenomenological *epoché* putting between brackets or suspending all his prior knowledge, biases, prejudices, presuppositions or assumptions concerning the object of his inquiry (p. 21).

The next stage in Husserl's phenomenology is *eidetic reduction*. This means the object of inquiry one removes from the object rare existential traits, all its peculiar characteristics and all its accidental qualities so that only the essence is left. What the phenomenologist is looking for is the essence of things. That is why Husserl described phenomenology as an "eidetic science", that is the science of essences. All that matters is the essence of the object, not its actual existence.

### **Intentionality**

Intentionality means the intrinsic union between the subject and the object. Although Husserl took over from his master the doctrine of intentionality, he did so with some reservations. He agreed with Brentano that the object of mental act may not exist in reality; for example, golden horse or god of Jupiter. He agreed with Brentano that the object is mental; but it is not a sufficient and a necessary condition. He disagreed with Brentano by calling all mental happenings "mental phenomenon". Mental acts are not phenomena – they are mental activities, not metal objects.

Husserl described two types of consciousness. There is consciousness as a permanent state of awareness which covers the whole stream of experience that makes up the individual mind's unity, together with all aspects that enter into the constitution of this stream. Then there is the consciousness of one thing or the other, which is an inner perception of intentional relation to something. Omoregbe (2001), reflecting on Husserl's consciousness opined:

Consciousness is an inner experience made up of intentional acts and some experiences that are not intentional such as sensation e.g. of pain, pleasure, happiness, sadness. There are three aspects of consciousness: the subject of experience, the act of experience, the object of experience; i.e. the ego, the experience itself, and the intentional object (p. 25).

Husserl's phenomenology developed the "ego" to become a transcendental ego. His phenomenology is in two phases: the empirical – descriptive analysis of experience, and the transcendental phase. The transcendental phase starts with transcendental reduction, that is, putting aside all one's attitudes, one's natural self, natural way of looking at things in order

to make way for the emergency of the transcendental ego. The transcendental ego, a kind of super ego, transcends the world of empirical experience and the sole source of all valid knowledge. It is the transcendental ego that gives meaning and value to all one's experiences. The transcendental ego becomes an impartial spectator, an unbiased judge and interpreter of all experiences and of even the world itself. Husserl (1970) said this:

The objective world which exists for me... the transcendental ego, which existed or will exist for me, this objective world with all its objects is drawn from me... all the existential meaning and value that has for me is drawn from my transcendental self (p. 207).

The transcendental ego is no other thing than the mind or human spirits freed from carnality, from natural desires or tendencies, from emotions, prejudices and bias. It was, of course, criticized and rejected by existentialists who saw it as idealism. Therefore, the existentialists only accepted Husserl's first phase of phenomenology and rejected the second phase.

**Phenomenology as Ontology:** This is associated with Martin Heidegger. According to Heidegger, phenomenology means 'we' and our activities which are always in the world. That is our being-in-the-world; so we do our activities by bracketing the world, we interpret our activities and the meaning things have for us. This is done by looking at the contextual relations to things in the world. Indeed, for him, phenomenology resolves into what he calls fundamental ontology. We must distinguish beings from their being. We begin our investigation of the meaning of Being in our case by starting with "*Dasein*" – that is "being-there". Heidegger resisted Husserl's neo-Cartesian emphasis on consciousness and subjectivity; including how perception presents things around us. By contrast, Heidegger held that our more basic ways of relating to things are practical activities like hammering, where the phenomenology reveals our situation in a context of equipment and in being with others. Heidegger said: "Phenomenology is letting things show themselves... to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself". Here Heidegger explicitly parodied Husserl's call – to the "things themselves" or "to the phenomena themselves". Heidegger developed an existential interpretation of our modes of being including, famous our being unto death. In his very different style, in a clear annalistic prose; in his book called *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1927), Heidegger traced the question of the meaning of being from Aristotle through many thinkers into the issues of phenomenology. For him, our understanding of beings and their being comes ultimately through phenomenology. Here is the connection with classical issues of ontology is more apart, consonant with Husserl's vision in the logical investigations (an early source of inspiration for Heidegger). Heidegger believed that our deep understanding of being comes from phenomenology.

**Phenomenology as Existentialism:** Jean-Paul Sartre developed his conception of phenomenology as existentialism when he popularized existentialism. In his novel *Nausea* (1936), he described a bizarre causes of experience in which the protagonist, writing in the first person, described how ordinary objects lose their meaning until he encounters pure being at the foot of a chestnut tree; and in that moment recovers his sense of his own freedom. In his book *Being and Nothingness* (1943) Sartre said consciousness is conscious of objects, as Husserl had stressed. In Sartre's model of intentionality; the central player in consciousness is a phenomenon, and the occurrence of a phenomenon just as a consciousness of an object. The chestnut tree that I see is, for Sartre, such a phenomenon, is my consciousness. Indeed, all things in the world, as we normally experience them, are phenomena, beneath or behind which lies their being-in-itself. Sartre (1956) echoed out:

Since each consciousness is not consciousness of –its-objects but also a pre-reflective consciousness of itself (conscious de soi) yet Sartre, the “I” or “self” is nothing but a sequence of acts of consciousness, notably including radical free choices (unlike human being of perceptions) (p.117).

For Sartre, the practice of phenomenology proceeds by deliberate reflection on the structure of consciousness. Sartre’s method is in effect a literacy style of interpretative description of different types of experience in relevant situations, a practice that does not really fit the methodological proposals of either Heidegger or Husserl, but makes use of Sartre’s great literary skills. Sartre’s phenomenology in *Being and Nothingness* became the philosophical foundation for his popular philosophy of existentialism; sketched in his famous lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism” (1945).

However, in another perspective, Maurice Merleau – Ponty joined Sartre and Beauvoir in developing phenomenology. In 1940, Ponty developed a rich variety of phenomenology emphasizing the role of the body in human experience. Unlike Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre, Ponty looked to experience psychology; analyzing the reported experience of amputees who felt sensations in a phantom limb. He rejected associationist psychology which focused on correlations between sensation and stimuli, and intellectualist psychology which focused on rational construction of the world in the mind. Ponty focused on the “body image” our experience of our own body and its significance in our activities, thus extending Husserl’s account of the lived body (as opposed to the physical body). Ponty resisted the traditional Cartesians separating of the mind and body. For the body image is neither in the mental realm nor in the mechanical – physical realm. Rather, my body is, as it were, me in my engaged action with things I perceive including other people.

The scope of phenomenology of perception is characteristic of the breadth of classical phenomenology. It is not because Ponty drew (with generosity) on Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre, while fashioning his own innovative vision of phenomenology, his phenomenology addressed the role of attention in the phenomenal field, the experience is the body, the spatiality of the body; the mortality of the body; the body in sexual being and in speech, other shoes, temporarily, the character of freedom. Ponty (1965) wrote:

In so far as when I reflect on the essence of subjects– find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity (consciousness) is merely one with my existence as a body and with existence of the world and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world (p. 200).

Finally analytic philosophers of the mind have rediscovered phenomenological issues of mental representation, intentionality, consciousness, sensory experience, intentional content and the context of thought. Let us now discuss the basic traditional types of phenomenology.

### **Types of Phenomenology**

Here we discuss seven types of phenomenology.

1. **Traditional Constitutive Phenomenology** studies objects that are constituted in pure consciousness, setting aside questions of any relation to natural objects around us.
2. **Naturalistic Constitutive Phenomenology** studies how consciousness constitutes things in the world of nature, assuming with the natural attitude that consciousness is part of nature.

3. **Existential Phenomenology** studies concrete human existence, including our experience of free choice or action in concrete situations.
4. **Generative Historicist Phenomenology** studies how meaning, as found in our experience, is generated in historical process of collective experience over time.
5. **Genetic Phenomenology** studies the genesis of meanings of things within one's own stream of experience.
6. **Hermeneutical Phenomenology:** This is the study of interpretive structures of experience, how we understand and engage things around us in our own world including ourselves and others.
7. **Realistic Phenomenology:** This studies the structure of consciousness and intentionality, assuming it occurs in a real world that is largely external to consciousness and not somehow brought into being by consciousness. Let us reflect on existentialism.

### What is Existentialism?

The first thing to note is that existentialism is about human "existence". Existentialism has no interest in the existence of tables, chairs, stars, atoms or other things. The human existence means the existence of the particular individual, not the human race. Man's problem in the view of existentialists is to become fully conscious of his authentic self in the particular situation in which he finds himself. This basic problem cannot be solved by rational thought and abstract ideas about human nature. Universal laws and general concepts cannot come to grips with the problem of utterly unique, concrete, particular person. There can be no precedents or guidebooks to direct him on his painful and anxious mission of becoming himself. According to Heidegger (1956), "Man alone exists. Rocks are, but they do not exist. Trees are, but they do exist. Horses are, but they do exist. Angels are, but they do not exist. God is, but he does not exist" (p. 215).

In what then does human existence consist? Omoregbe (1991) explained that:

...to exist means to be personally committed to a freely chosen way of life; it means being conscious of the problems of human life with all the choices open to man and freely opting for a certain way of life while assuming full personal responsibility for it. To exist is to be at the helm of one's affairs, personally directing its main course. It means really living one's own life the way one has freely chosen and assuming responsibility for it (p. 38).

The above citation goes further to explain why Heidegger said that only human being exists, and that other kinds of being do not exist. For the existentialists, truth is attained only by the existing thinker in his particular personal situation, not by objective thought detached from the thinker's existence.

In the ancient period, Socrates and the stoics looked up on philosophy as primarily a way of life rather than a purely speculative pursuit. Also in the medieval period, Christian thinkers such as St. Augustine and Blaise Paschal had anguished awareness of human condition and stressed the role of personal transformation and commitment.

Soren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth-century Danish religious philosopher is the originator of modern existentialism. His major concern is twofold: how to become one's real self and how to become a Christian. Reflecting on Kierkegaard, Adler (1973) remarked:

He (Kierkegaard) holds that God is known only through personal faith and commitment. Rational demonstration of God's existence is absurd and irrelevant. The criterion for truth is the intense passion of inwardness of the person who attains it. There is no objective truth, abstract truth apart from personal "appropriation" (p.165).

According to Adler, the two things that make us followers of God is faith and commitment and not rational demonstration of God's existence as advocated by Kierkegaard. Friedrich Nietzsche, a nineteenth – century German philosopher, is an important existentialist. He saw modern man as a degenerate, spiritless, and devitalized creature who tries to escape from the horrible reality of his condition by a shallow philosophy and soothing religion. He was of the view that it is man's mission to create his own transformation through a resolute will, personal suffering, and an experience of the depths and heights of human existence. He rejected traditional philosophy as an illusory satisfaction of psychological needs, and Christianity as a denial of the value of earthly existence.

### **Types of Existentialism**

There are two types of existentialism: Religious and Atheistic existentialism. Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel and Karl Jaspers are proponents of a God-centered existentialism. Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are atheistic or agnostic existentialists. The two schools are held together by their common concern with personal existence as the realm of basic truth. Let us now examine the relevance of phenomenology and existentialism in African society with Nigeria as a case study.

### **The Place of Phenomenology and Existentialism in the African Society, Nigeria in Particular**

Phenomenology contributes to the society in conflict resolution. With phenomenological epoché, the person spiritualizes himself, removes all the anger, pains, bitterness, sorrows, by bracketing it and remains open, in order to listen to the other person. This is because if "I am hurt" and "you are hurt" who will listen to the reason why you did what you have done at the time the incidence happened? All of us must be open-minded.

In another perspective, phenomenology helps in religious co-existence. This is because in Nigeria we have religious problem. Balogun (1980) confirmed it thus: "Crises in Nigeria are deeply rooted in the conflicting values and predictions that are of ethno-religious origin" (p.10).

In continuation of the crisis and instability in Nigeria, Ehusani (1978) added: "Therefore, excessive and destructive ethics and religious sentiments are contrived by manipulators among the elite, who seek to make economic and political gains from such sentiments" (p. 73). What Ehusani is saying is that the poor Nigerians have always lived together happily. In the slums of Ajegunle in Lagos, the ghettos of Sabon Gari in Kano, and the waterside of Bundu and Marine base in Port Harcourt, poor Nigerians from different ethnic groups of different religions lived together with no problems. There were no devotees of the cult of ethnicity unlike in the present time. Indeed, Nigeria needs phenomenology, especially looking at the essentials so that one can speak against the evil in Nigerian society which will not constitute the obstacles on the way to peace and prosperity.

**Using phenomenological epoché:** "*Epoché*" means suspending one's belief. Today in Nigeria we have various religions, but we can stay together by inter-faith relationship. It means that I will suspend all my doctrines and be open to other religious truth and see what is

essential in all the religions and promote it and not the doctrines; since what I think and feel that God is, may not be what He is. These essentials in all religions that human beings promote will help us to stay together. What brings out this “essentials” is the “eidetic reduction” of Edmund Husserl’s in his phenomenology as a method.

Most importantly, phenomenology helps one to write statements in the police station. This is because all African countries have police for peace. Indeed, many intellectuals do not know how to write statements when they are asked to do so but one who has studied phenomenology can do so easily. This is because phenomenology makes one to describe what happens vividly without prejudice and allows the authorities to look into the matter as it is.

In summary, phenomenology, according to Husserl, is the science of the “essentials”. It helps one to do one’s research properly without accepting sedimentary theories. The person goes back to the roots of all that he does because any work without a foundation collapses.

Existentialism can also be relevant in Nigeria. Existentialism makes human beings to be authentic. Authenticity here means to be oneself. Oneself means not to copy others. Today in Nigeria, many people do not have minds of their own; they copy what others do either right or wrong. Knowledge of existentialism enables one to develop an independent mind.

Again, existentialism helps one to be objective. This objectivity means that one should not expect help from God and neighbours; one should work hard and take one’s destiny in his/her hands. This is important for the youths of today who should not wait for government, parents and relations but start something, no matter how little. This is because in little, there is infinity. This will correct the impression that Africans depend on others for their needs.

Moreover, existentialism reminds one that in this world, one is alone to face his own problems. Do not forget that whenever one has problems one is left alone to face it; people will run away from you. Omoregbe (1991) remarked:

For the existentialists, human existence does not simply mean “being there”; human existence is a drama in which every individual is an actor. To exist is to be personally involved in the drama of life as an actor rather than as a passive spectator (p. 38).

What we understand from the above citation is that one should face his own problems and not carry one’s problems to others. Everyone should be responsible to himself without blaming others for ill lucks. That is why one must be an actor in charge of the affairs of one’s life and not running away from one’s duties and responsibilities.

### **Summary**

It has been established that phenomenology and existentialism emphasize human existence and individual persons. They protest against traditional philosophers. Both movements are concerned with man as an individual and his estrangement from himself, his fellow man, and contemporary society. Particularly, phenomenology examines the consciousness of reality. Edmund Husserl, considered as the founder of phenomenology, started with the experience of human consciousness in an attempt to arrive at “pure consciousness”. Heidegger as a student of Husserl in his phenomenology asked what is being in a concrete situation while Ponty contributed his phenomenology to the field of philosophical psychology. He used the phenomenological method as a philosophical tool.

In summation, existentialists refuse to belong to any school of thought. They resent the impersonal nature of technology and of totalitarianism. It is concerned with man’s predicament. Man’s estrangement has been a focal point during the 20th and 21st centuries.



Existentialists believe there is no knowledge apart from a knowing subject. The truth is experienced within us. That truth cannot be grasped abstractly; therefore, the existentialists use literary or artistic forms to express feelings and moods. They emphasize the individual and his freedom and responsibility.

Critically looking at phenomenology, Edmund Husserl's phenomenology as a method did not end well because he ended up in a self-contained consciousness; it means consciousness is no longer consciousness of something. Also this method of Husserl can only be found in human beings and cannot be seen in the laboratory, there is something lacking in Husserl's phenomenology. Indeed, existentialists revolt against the depersonalization of man as a result of a mass technological society. They created an awareness of the threat imposed upon humanity and morality. Titus (1979) said: "Critics contend that by stressing subjectivity, existentialists have rejected objectivity. They have minimized the importance of science, nature, reason, and the external world" (p.347). It means that existentialism is a retreat from reason and is unrelated to the historical mainstream of recent technical philosophy. Some critics concluded that an exaggerated emphasis upon meaninglessness will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### Conclusion

We give credit to Phenomenology and Existentialism especially in conflict resolution, independent mind, authenticity, religious co-existence, going back to root of our researches. Nevertheless, the existentialists are to be commended for promoting our awareness of some of the problems present in African society. Phenomenology and Existentialism both emphasizes human existence and individual persons in the discipline of philosophy but it is important in African society because it is the individuals that make up the African communal society and Nigeria in particular.

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