‘Essential Insight’ as a method of understanding our internal life

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Abstract

Phenomenology is a methodology of human science which was originated by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the 20th century. Phenomenology tries to understand our conscious experience internally, instead of explicating it externally e.g. by physiology or brain science. It is well known that the phenomenological method was adopted by psychiatrists such as L. Binswanger and W. Blankenburg. In recent years’ much ‘phenomenological’ research has been done also in nursing science, psychology and pedagogy etc., but even now there is no consensus about the core of the phenomenological method. So elucidating the meaning and possibilities of this method is very important in order to develop phenomenological research.

Husserl shows that the phenomenological method has two stages: ‘phenomenological reduction’ and ‘essential insight’. In this paper I would like to focus the latter ‘essential insight’ and try to explicate its meaning and possibility. First I am going to elucidate it by returning to Husserl’s motive. Secondly I will examine the objections against it. Thirdly I will cite the essential insight of ‘nostalgia’ as an application of this method. Lastly I will return to Plato’s era and his philosophy in order to grasp the meaning of this method deeply.

Introduction

I have been studying German Philosophy, especially about Hegel and Husserl with Prof. Seiji Takeda who is now working for Waseda University. He and I believe that the method of phenomenology is highly important in order to understand our meaningful life, and we have been trying to apply the method of ‘essential insight’ to various themes in the style of philosophical workshops for about 15 years.

Phenomenology tries to understand our conscious experience internally, instead of explicating it externally e.g. by physiology or brain science. So the phenomenological method is useful not only for philosophy, but also for all sciences that are searching for what being human is. It is well known that this method was adopted by psychiatrists such as L. Binswanger and W. Blankenburg. In recent years much phenomenological research has been done also in nursing science (Patricia Benner)1, psychology (Amedeo Girogi)2 and pedagogy etc.

Last year (2009) Takeda and I first attended the International Human Science Research Conference (IHSRC) in Norway. I was very much impressed that many researchers assembled and tried to apply the phenomenological method to develop psychology, health care and pedagogy etc. However, at the same time I found that there was no consensus about the core of the phenomenological method. In order to develop phenomenological research, it is very important to elucidate the meaning and possibility of this method.

The works of Husserl, the originator of Phenomenology, show that there are two stages in the phenomenological method: ‘phenomenological reduction’ and ‘eidetic reduction (essential insight)’. Eidetic reduction and essential insight have almost the same meaning in Husserl’s works, but I prefer to use ‘essential insight’, for

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this term shows more clearly what we should do. In this paper, I will elucidate the meaning and possibility of ‘essential insight’ especially. First I am going to explicate it by returning to Husserl’s motive and examining possible objections. After that I will cite the essential insight of ‘nostalgia’ as an application of this method. Lastly I will return to Plato’s era and his philosophy in order to grasp the meaning of this method deeply.

I Science of Essence and The Two Methods

Science of Essence

In the European modern age, only positive or empirical sciences (physics, physiology, economics etc) which derive their validity from observation and experimentation, were accepted as truly objective knowledge. People believed that meaning and life values could be talked about only as subjective opinions because of the lack of observation and experimentation. This notion of science had been the mainstream view in Europe, and Husserl called this ‘positivism’ in The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology (1936)\(^1\).

Against this view Husserl tried to produce a new science which could deal with our internal meaningful life through a new kind of scientific method. This new science is called the ‘science of essence’, and its method is called ‘essential insight’ (Wesenserschauung)\(^5\) by Husserl.

Phenomenological Reduction

Before carrying out essential insight, we have to execute ‘phenomenological reduction’. I will also outline this method briefly.

We usually believe that the objective physical world always exists as such whether we are conscious of it or not, and that each subject’s inner meaningful world is included in the objective world. But Husserl’s way of thinking is utterly the opposite; the objective world, including many kinds of objects, appears in our consciousness, and there acquires the meaning that it exists as such whether we are aware of it or not, i.e., the meaning of transcendence from our consciousness. The transcendence of the objective world from our consciousness is a kind of belief that is formed in our consciousness.

Considering consciousness as the field where all kinds of objects appear and thematizing the consciousness in this sense is called ‘phenomenological reduction’. Then Husserl questioned how this belief of transcendence of the objective world (world-belief, Weltglaube)\(^6\) was formed and reproduced continuously in our consciousness. For this world-belief is the most fundamental premise of all the positive sciences and their validities can be understood only by elucidating this world-belief. Such kind of question is called the ‘transcendental problem’ by Husserl. While this is a very interesting theme, it takes us beyond the scope of our topic.

Essential Insight

Phenomenological reduction reveals consciousness as a field where all kinds of objects and experiences appear. In order to understand the consciousness (our inner meaningful world) we have to stop seeing it from outside. Immanent reflections of our conscious experience are needed.

But Husserl says that reflecting and describing some actual experiences — e.g. perceptions of a desk, a vase, a book, etc. — is insufficient. In Britannica Article 4th Manuscript (1929) he says as follows:

“The phenomenology of things-perception is not the report of actual or expected perceptions, but it is just grasping the invariable structure-system, without which neither a perception of things nor a synthesized accordance of various perceptions of one and the same thing would be thinkable.”\(^7\)

So grasping ‘the invariable structure-system’ or grasping some common characteristic of every individual case is important. This common characteristic is called essence, and grasping and describing the essence is called essential insight. As an actual process of this method, Husserl talks of ‘free imaginative variation’ in Experience and Judgment\(^8\). That means giving various instances by free imagination and grasping the essence from them.

He believed that essential insight could generate not only the grounding of sciences, but also the basis of ethics, aesthetics etc. I also believe that this method can elucidate the meanings and values of our personal lives. For example, it can explicate the essence of ‘love’ or ‘a broken heart’, the essence of sentiments such as ‘nostalgia’, the essence of ‘morality’, etc.

But its potentiality has not yet been fully actualized. One reason is that contemporary thought is generally skeptical about the notion of essence and essential insight. Also Husserl himself failed to sufficiently explain their meaning. The second reason is that Husserl did not explain the actual ways or ‘arts’ of this method precisely. Some people believe that it is a secret technique that cannot be explained by words. The third reason is that the meaning of this method or why essential insight is necessary is not clear. I am going to clarify these problems in the following.

II Examining The Objections

Objections to Essential Insight

Now let us examine the objections to the ‘essence’ or essential-insight method. They are as follows:

1. **Anti-Essence**: There is no essence. What is called essence is, in fact, constituted by the powers exercised in the society (Social
Constructionism). /There are only various individual objects or experiences. There is only ‘familiar resemblance’ between them (Wittgenstein).

2. **Impossibility of Description**: It is impossible directly to copy essence that would be a priori immanent in some experience, for we have to use words and words leave the original experience (Derrida). Derrida also maintains that there is no ‘original experience’, more correctly, no ‘pure present intuition’, which is always contaminated by retention and pretention.

3. **Impossibility of arriving at ‘general subjectivity’** (Subjekt überhaupt): Husserl’s essential insight is a lonely, inner reflection. How can a lonely reflection produce the essential description that would be valid for every subject?

I also feel that in all these objections there is a common fear that essence might suppress each one’s original experiences.

**The Essential Descriptions of Things-Perception**

In order to examine these objections, I would like to cite the essence of ‘things-perception’ for example. In *Ideas I and Crisis* Husserl describes as follows:

1. Perception as seeing is attended by the feeling of ‘liveliness’ (Leibhaftigkeit). One feels that one sees the object itself, not the image of it.

2. But if one reflects on one’s experience of perception, it is clear that only a part of the object is seen. One can see the front, but cannot see the back.

3. So the things-perception has always some anticipation or some undefined horizon, though it is the most direct and original experience of outer objects.

4. At the same time the background is also grasped vaguely.

5. Each things-perception is attended by the belief that the perceived object is a part of the objective world and everyone perceives the same.

**How We Should Understand the Essential Insight**

If we read these essential descriptions, we are led to reflect on our own experiences and examine if the descriptions could apply to these experiences, and then we know that these descriptions are correct. In such a way we can confirm the validity of essential descriptions. So it is clear that all of those objections are incorrect, for essential descriptions are actually possible and we can understand that they are valid for almost every subject.

Now we will examine those objections precisely. Against the objections of ‘anti-essence’ and ‘impossibility of description’, I would like to maintain that: Essential insight does not mean directly copying the a priori immanent essence in our experience. Some vital ‘viewpoint’ is necessary.

These two objections commonly have a presupposition that essence would be an a priori eternal being and would exist as such without some viewpoint or interest. However, this presupposition is wrong. Copying an essence directly is of course impossible. If one wants to grasp the ‘essence’, there must be a ‘viewpoint’ or a ‘direction of question’ or some ‘concern’. But Husserl did not say this point clearly, and his terminology is sometimes misleading, e.g. ‘ unconcerned observer’ (uninteressierter Zuschauer).

Also Husserl’s essential descriptions of things-perception are led by the question of ‘how a belief of the existence of the perceived object is formed’. So the meanings and values of things in our daily life are disregarded. But if one asks the question of how things-perception is connected with our life interest, another essential view becomes possible. As Heidegger notes that things appearing in our daily life have their ‘uses’ (They have ‘readiness-to-hand’ or Zuhendheit). Therefore, essential insight or essential description is ‘viewpoint-correlative’. If there is no viewpoint, there can be no essence.

This does not mean, however, that all knowledge is only relative. If one sets an adequate viewpoint and tries to extract the essence, knowledge can arise the correctness of which everyone can examine and confirm. Against the third objection of impossibility of arriving at ‘general subjectivity’ I would like to point out this characteristic of essential descriptions.

In order to confirm those propositions as the essence of things-perception, each individual can question his or her own conscious experience. And the individual can examine their correctness, consent to them, give some supplemental meaning, or correct them. The description of essential insight is characterized by the fact that everyone can confirm its essential correctness.

But Husserl did not say that mutual confirmation was necessary for essential insight, for he might think that lonely, inner reflection would be enough. But I would like to maintain that:

The image of ‘lonely reflection’ should be replaced by the image of ‘mutual exchange of experiences’.

Maybe lonely reflection can produce the essential description of things-perception or mathematical calculation. For in these cases, uniformity of almost everyone’s experience can be expected. But if we want to grasp the essential meaning of our life values, e.g. the meaning of ‘a broken heart’, we need mutual confirmation.

The ‘Art’ of Essential Insight
Now I am going to point out the ‘art’ of this method generally.

1. **Make clear your viewpoint or question previously.** — If doing so, what to do becomes also clearer. But you often find a new important question or viewpoint just in carrying out some essential insight. So always be ready for a new question.

2. **Give various kinds of examples as much as you can.** — Prof. Yoshida, who is psychologist and a professor emeritus of Tokyo University, suggested to me that imagining ‘extreme’ instances was useful for setting us free from adherence to some instances. ‘Free imaginative variation’ is necessary for thinking fairly and grasping the true generality.

3. **Mutual exchange of essential descriptions is necessary.** — You will find new aspects, and many various instances or aspects make us grasp essence more widely and more deeply.

Next I would like to cite the workshop about the essential insight of ‘nostalgia’ as an example. Through it we can understand the meaning of this method more clearly.

### III The Essential Insight of ‘Nostalgia’ (Natsukashisa)

The themes of the philosophical workshops that I have had are the essence of ‘nostalgia’, the essence of ‘fear’, the difference between ‘dreaming experience and actual experience’, the essence of justice, the essence of freedom, etc. The aim of these workshops is to familiarize each participant with the essential-insight method, so that each one can apply it to various themes for oneself. University students and people of various ages have participated in these workshops.

I found that the essence of ‘nostalgia’ was a very good theme for beginners. It is easier than other themes because almost everyone can recall this sentiment vividly. By the way, the theme that I am going to cite is correctly a sentiment called ‘Natsukashisa’ in Japanese. I believe that the English word ‘nostalgia’ has the nearest meaning to it, but of course there may be a slight difference of meaning between them. Now I would like to introduce how I manage this workshop and what has been discussed there.

**How to manage an ‘essential-insight’ workshop**

The usual process of this workshop is first ‘instructions’, next ‘individual work’, third ‘group work’, and ‘summary’. I would like to explain this process more precisely:

1. **Initial Instructions — Setting the Goal**

   Setting the goal is very important. As has been mentioned, some viewpoint or question is necessary for essential insight. I state the following:

   “Everybody has experienced the sentiment of ‘nostalgia’, but it is rather difficult to describe the characteristics that make nostalgia what it is. Let us try to grasp these characteristics by appropriate words. The goal is to understand this sentiment deeply, so it can be called successful if you will finally have a sense of deep understanding. Please be careful about two points. First you should recall nostalgia vividly and try to feel it, and you can describe its characteristics by using the suitable words. Second, please keep away from scientific knowledge and concentrate on the feeling that you have recalled.”

2. **Individual Work** (for 15 minutes) — Setting the Steps

   Instead of trying to grasp essence directly, it is useful to set some steps. Especially, giving various examples is important. Here I set two steps.

   2-1 finding the ‘objects’ that cause nostalgia and grasping their common characteristics

   I say the following: “What kind of objects or situations can bring you nostalgia? Imagine freely and note down 4 or 5 various cases. (For example: looking at pictures of my old friends) Then try to grasp the common characteristics from these objects. (For example: past things)”

   2-2 giving the characteristics of the ‘feeling of nostalgia as such’

   For example: relaxed feeling with pleasure.

   Each participant notes down his or her ideas of these steps.

3. **Group Work** (for 45 to 60 minutes) — Discussion on the essence of nostalgia in small groups

   Each group has 5 or 6 members. First each participant presents his or her notes to the others. If their notes have some differences, they think and discuss why there are differences. If some question emerges, they may discuss it. They discuss on the essence of nostalgia and finally write down short sentences about it.

4. **Report and Summary**

   Each group presents its discussion orally and the chair summarizes all the discussions.

**What has been discussed on the essence of nostalgia?**

Now I would like to introduce the contents of this workshop. The following is only a summary.

- **the ‘objects’ or ‘situations’** that cause nostalgia (2-1)

  “My sketchbook that I used in my high school days —— I feel very nostalgic when it catches my eye. I was absorbed in graphic design, and this sketchbook reminds me of the ‘intensity and effort’ in those days. At the same time I feel that I can’t do the same now and that I can’t return to those days.”

  “When I walked near the elementary school —— I saw the playground and the building that I haven’t seen for a long time.”
“My friends and I went to play in an amusement park one day when we were undergraduates. We were boys and girls, and had great fun like children.”

- common characteristics of the objects
  1. Almost all the objects are connected with ‘the past’.
  2. The objects must have ‘positive feelings’; they can be classified into three kinds.
     - Things, places and persons that one associated with closely in the past → ‘intimacy’.
     - Very happy experiences → ‘happiness’
     - Experiences that one was enthusiastic about some work → ‘passion’

- discussion
  “Usually one cannot be nostalgic when one remembers an unpleasant experience. But sometimes one can be nostalgic when one recalls one’s troublesome experiences in younger days. Why?” —— “Maybe the individual affirms the experience now. In the troublesome days, he or she might have been concentrating with all strength. Concentration often gives people a vivid, fresh feeling.”

- characteristics of the ‘feeling of nostalgia as such’ and discussion about them (2-2)
  “Nostalgia usually has a relaxed feeling. But sometimes the feeling becomes excited and causes our hearts to beat faster.” Why?” “It usually has a pleasant feeling. But sometimes it is mixed with sadness.” Why?” —— “Sadness comes from the thought that ‘I can’t go back to that time though I am longing for it.’” “Maybe there are two extreme cases. The one is ‘loving dearly’ the past experience without sadness. He or she can affirm his or her present life. The other is ‘longing for’ the past experience that is absent now. He or she cannot affirm his or her present life. Most nostalgic feeling lies between the two cases.”

- Summary and Supplement (by Nishi)
  Nostalgia (Natsukashîsha) is the sentiment of ‘longing for’ or ‘loving dearly’ one’s past matters which are attended by intimacy or vivid passion in recalling them. It is basically a relaxed feeling with pleasure, but mostly mixed with sadness. For nostalgia involves the consciousness of separation from the past and impossibility of returning. This mixture of pleasure and sadness is the essential characteristic of nostalgia.

  I believe that nostalgia is a sentiment that only humans can have. Only humans have the past and the future and also a pure imaginary world because language makes it possible for humans to leave ‘here and now’. So humans can also have a sentiment of ‘longing for’ the future or a purely imaginary place.

Reflecting on the meaning of this workshop
In the discussion most participants soon socialize with each other, and show relaxed feelings. After the workshop they often say “It was very interesting to find that there was certainly a common feeling between people of different ages who have different life histories.” I think this comment tells us the meaning of an important aspect of essential-insight method, i.e. the meaning of mutual exchange of experiences.

Essential insight starts from each member’s inner reflection and through the mutual exchange of experiences members will find the commonness of other people’s experiences and their own. This process involves grasping ‘my’ experience from the view of the commonness and this leads to understanding both the deep connection and the originality of each person’s experience.

So we can say that essence is not an a priori fixed being, but it is established for understanding our mutual lives, i.e. commonness and originality. If we set up some essence broadly so that it can include various experiences, it does not suppress each person’s original experience. On the contrary, grasping essence helps to understand someone’s original experience by understanding what ‘shape’ the essence takes under his or her conditions of life.

But I feel that in the researches of nursing with phenomenological approach in Japan, only understanding the originality of patients’ experiences is emphasized and grasping the common essence of their experiences is neglected.

I would like to add one more thing. Essence is not the absolute and final being, but we can inquire into the conditions that make the essence possible. As I have mentioned, nostalgia is conditioned by the ability of understanding ‘time’.

I think the exchange of mutual essential descriptions is very much like the dialogues of Plato, so lastly let us go back to his thoughts and his era and try to grasp the meaning of this method more essentially.

IV Why Is Essential Insight Necessary?

Essential insight began with Plato. In one of his Dialogues “Meno” Socrates asks Meno what virtue is. Meno answers as follows: “If you want the virtue of a man, it is easy to say that a man’s virtue consists of being able to manage public affairs and in so doing to benefit his friends, […] if you want the virtue of a woman, it is not difficult to describe; she must manage the home well, preserve its possessions, and be submissive to her husband.”

Socrates replies that Meno only talks of various virtues and continues as follows: “Even if they are many and various, all of them have one and the same form which makes them virtues, and it is right to look to this when one is asked to make clear what virtue is.” The answer is, however, not presented in “Meno”, as is often
the case with Plato's works.

But why does Socrates ask the 'essence' of virtues? Why was the essential insight needed? Before answering this question, let us consider the common essence of the virtues that Meno mentioned.

I think it can be said as 'playing some social role sincerely', or more generally speaking, 'contributing to people’s need and welfare'. So we understand that such a person is always spoken of highly and called 'a man of virtue' regardless of time and place. Then we can consider what 'shape' the essence can take under the conditions of our contemporary society. If we grasp the essence, we can orient ourselves to the future.

I believe that Plato's motive also lay there, for in his days Athens became the richest city-state in Greek, and 'simple and sturdy' virtues were threatened. Richness and freedom of actions and thoughts tend to break old virtues. It causes a kind of 'nihilism'. People become uncertain of what they should do and what they should esteem. In such an era, there often appear some people who want to go back to ancient times. But we are unable to reconstruct morals or values by restoration, for the conditions of society have changed. Values can be reconstructed only by grasping the essence and finding its new 'shape' under the new conditions.

Also in our contemporary 'free' society, we have many problems and often become uncertain. By asking what 'medical care' is, for example, we are searching for a new orientation. Essential insight is necessary because it can produce a new orientation and consensus of both individual and communal life.

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18) Plato : ibid., p. 873
われわれの内部世界を理解する方法としての「本質観取」

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現象学は人間科学の方法論であり、20世紀初頭にドイツの哲学者エトムント・フッサールによって創始されたものである。その特徴は、われわれの意識的な経験を、生理学的あるいは脳科学的な仕方で外在的に説明するではなく、その経験を内在的に理解しようと努めることにある。現象学的方法が、ビンズワンガーやプランケンブルクのような精神医学者によって採用されたことはよく知られている。近年ではさらに、看護学、心理学、教育学などにおいても多くの現象学的な研究がなされている。しかし現在においても、現象学的方法の核心についてはまったく合意が得られていない。現象学的な研究の発展のためには、現象学的方法の意義と可能性を解明することが必要とされている。

フッサールは、現象学の方法を二つの段階として示している。すなわち「現象学的還元」と「本質観取」とである。この論文では、とくに後者の「本質観取」についてその意義と可能性とを解明することを試みる。まず、フッサール自身のテキストを検討することを通じて本質観取の方法の意義を解明し（I）、次に、本質観取の方法に対するいくつかの批判を検討する（II）。さらに、本質観取の応用例として「なつかしさの本質」について私が行ってきたワークショップの次第を報告する（III）。最後に、プラトンの時代と彼の思考に立ち戻ることによって、本質観取の方法の意義をさらに深い次元で捉えたい（IV）。

〈キーワード〉 人間科学、方法論、フッサール、本質観取