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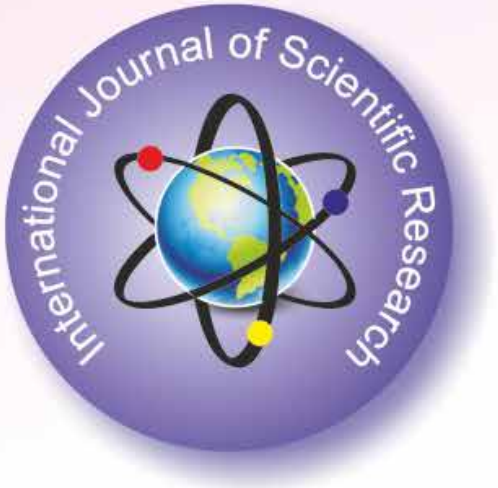

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Research Paper

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Phenomenological Insights For A Critique Of Positivist Approach In Social Sciences.

Philosophy

KEYWORDS : Phenomenology, Positivism, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

Positivesm aims at reducing all the spheres to a domain to be studied by the scientific method. Phenomenology seeks to undo the negative effects of positivist approach on disciplines that study human and social spheres. Insights generated by this approach help restore the primacy of human experience and meaning giving acts of human consciousness.

The critique of positivism from phenomenological perspective assumes significance as positivism seeks to reduce all significant issues, including the discourse about culture and society to the domain to be studied by methods of natural sciences whereas phenomenology endeavoures to restore the primacy of human experience. Husserl's concept of Lebenswelt1 represents a turning point in unveiling the relation between natural sciences, and cultural and social domains informed by sense and significance constituted by meaning giving acts of human consciousness. The movement of thought that he is credited to have initiated endeavours to undo the negative effects of positivistic prejudices on social and human realms. He launched a radical critique of post-renaissance philosophy as over-influenced by the findings of natural sciences. In his philosophy, the relation between natural sciences and human experience underwent a very important and significant inversion. Whereas naturalism sought to reify and reduce experience to a subject-matter to be studied by methods of natural sciences, Husserl calls for grounding natural sciences in human life-world of experience. It would be pertinent to note that the insights generated by this penetrated almost all the disciplines related to human realm. Such insights are of immense significance to the study of social and human phenomena as they seek to restore the primacy of human experience which is central to such studies. Husserl insists that all truths, including the truths of social as well as natural sciences, are required to be grounded anew in the living acts of human consciousness. This grounding of truth in experience requires a method capable of describing the manners in which human consciousness originally constitutes meanings through acts of perception, imagination and signification. This method has been termed as phenomenological as it seeks to come back to the origins of knowledge by examining how the world first appears to human consciousness. The meaning of the world, he insists, can only be re-understood as phenomena of consciousness.

Phenomenology purports to be descriptive and presuppositionless. The goal of being descriptive involves describing phenomena in an unbiased manner as they originally appear to the consciousness2. The aim of presuppositionlessness involves scrutinizing theories for their presuppositions in order to undo the bewitchment of thought being done by them. It was proposed as a radical beginning in the sense that it offered post-renaissance 'modern' consciousness a means of returning to the roots of philosophical questioning. It stressed the need to begin philosophy all over again so as to relearn to see world as it really is in our original lived-experience. In this way it endeavours to make explicit the manner in which world appears to us in our primordial pre-theoretical experience. Rather than pre-judging the ways of knowing the world in a biased manner, phenomenology purports to eliminate all prejudices by suspending all judgment-loaded answerers to the fundamental issues and to question our taken-for-granted standpoints. The most dominant of such standpoints is the natural standpoint that tends to view everything as nature. It even seeks to naturalise human consciousness by treating it as just another thing among natural things. Just like other things it is analysed into entities –only difference being that these entities are taken to be mental ones. These entities are treated as peculiar natural objects causaly related to one another, and as bound to certain things called bodies. Cartesianism and introspectionism are instances of such approaches. Realism and materialism also seek to reduce consciousness and person to an object referred to as subject. The natural world is characterized by its externality - being out there as a given fact in space and time. And experience is taken to be an external relation between two entities that exist separately. The subject records the facts about objects in a passive manner -resembling the process of photographs being taken by the camera.

Under the influence of naturalism, social disciplines are treated at par with natural sciences because the natural standpoint assumes the givenness of world as totality of objects of possible experience lying out there complete with the meaning. In other words meaning, sense and significance are also reified to the status of natural entities –to be found out there- that are passively received by the object called subject.

Husserl considers the conception of experience as something that passively transpires between two ontologically independent entities –leaving both of them unchanged and unaffected– to be a result of theoretical bias that needs to be cured. Once we reject naturalism and suspend our belief in natural standpoint, we recapture the lived-experience that goes beyond sciences and all types of theorizing -to the world as it appears to an unbiased consciousness. Phenomenology's main purpose is to remind us that primordial meaning of objective world is infact its mode of engaging human consciousness. By the same stroke it also reminds us that the meaning of our subjective consciousness is the mode in which it opens up towards the world. The natural standpoint reduces the world to an isolated object and consciousness to a disembodied object called subject. Thus, human subjectivity is alienated from its creative interactions in life-world. In this way it ceases to participate in its own creation through the creation of meanings and significances. Instead, it becomes mere thing among other things –a material thing according to materialism and an ideal thing according to idealism. Husserl endeavoured to show how two poles of objectivity and subjectivity -which were sought to be demarcated as opposite poles under the influence of positivism and naturalism– are infact ontologically and internally associated through a primordial relation. The experiencing subject and the experienced object are not only united in lived-experience, rather they both get transformed through the experiencing act of consciousness. It is realised that consciousness is not object or a thing, and the fundamental difference between consciousness and natural objects is recaptured as consciousness is considered to be always intentional. Husserl took the concept of intentionality of consciousness as directedness of consciousness from his teacher Brenteno and developed it further. He stresses that by intentionality he understands the peculiarity of experience to be consciousness of something.3 It would be pertinent to note here that this something, as noted earlier is not a natural object lying out there that is reflected unchanged in the mirror of

consciousness. Rather it is an intentional object that gets constituted through the act of consciousness in the sense that it is the act of consciousness that imparts meaning to it. This constituted object of consciousness is referred to as noema and the meaning giving act of consciousness is termed noesis. The act of experience is not mere mirroring, rather it is lived-experience that not only constitutes the object as noema but transforms the subject also as ego or 'I' is also created through such acts. The world so constituted is not mere natural or physical world rather it is Life-world or Lebenswelt. Lebenswelt is unveiled as a world for consciousness, since its meaning is constituted not only in and through consciousness but also for it. Similarly the consciousness is also disclosed as consciousness of something i.e., the consciousness of the world. Thus, human mind is unveiled as an intentional activity that moves towards reality beyond itself. In this way shortcomings of traditional extremes of idealism and materialism are overcome. It resists the contentions of idealism to move beyond subject-object dualism by confining meaning to consciousness alone, and also rejects the efforts of materialism to resolve subject-object dualism by subordinating consciousness to pre-established realities of the external world. Both these extremes fail to capture the intentional relation between consciousness and the world, which establishes that meaning is neither in the mind only, nor in the world alone, but in the intentional relation between the two.

It can be seen that Husserl overcame subject-object dichotomy by pointing out that noema is the objective pole and noesis the subjective pole that are internally and ontologically related to one another in the lived-experience. Meaning, sense and significance are constituted through the intentional acts, and the world does not remain natural world any more and is unveiled as the Life-world or the Lebenswelt which includes signification and sense also. So, the cultural objects, symbols and constructs are not mere natural objects existing out there, rather they are constituted by human consciousness. Human subject is also created through the same stroke of meaning giving act and the cultural realm gets constituted as Lebenswelt or Life-world.

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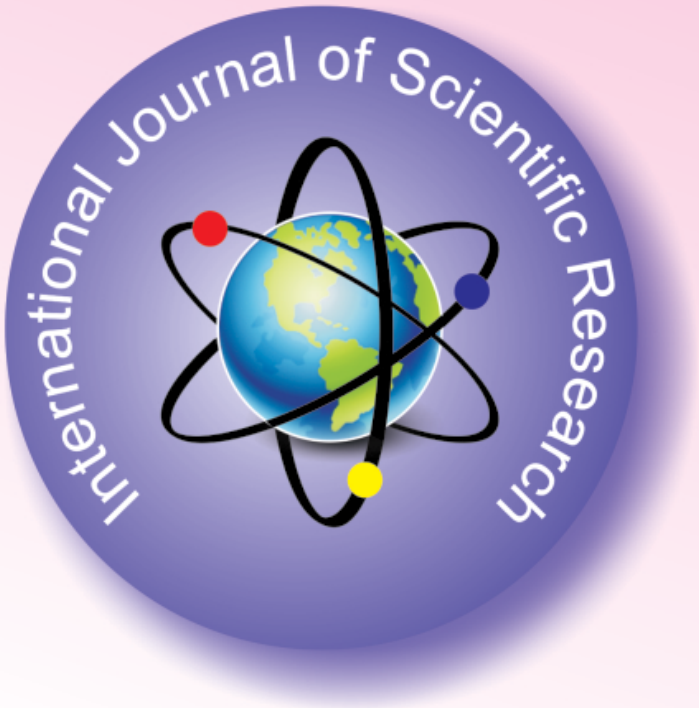

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