

# Phenomenology of reduction of consciousness: comparativist approach

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**Abstract.** The article presents an analysis of the spiritual practices of self-knowledge, based on the method of phenomenological reduction. In the paper, the author describes the features of such practices as methods of "purification" (expansion) of consciousness, liberation from mental, speech and behavioral stereotypes. The phenomenological method, implemented in the spiritual practices of self-knowledge, is aimed at restructuring individual consciousness through the rejection of egocentrism, the elimination of subjective-evaluative activity in relation to the outside world and to oneself. Overcoming egocentrism allows going beyond social and cultural stereotypes, overcoming the disunity of consciousness and being that serves as an obstacle to the reality's objective perception. The author notes that the phenomenological reduction practice requires constant tension of existential potential, and in the methodological plan for cognitive activity aimed at the study of consciousness, it is necessary, along with epistemological criteria, to develop a number of axiological criteria for this activity.

## Introduction

The philosophical problem of consciousness lies in the fact that, on the one hand, each person considers oneself the owner of consciousness, on the other hand, modern scientific knowledge about its functioning is fundamentally inadequate, since it is established by third-person observation and introspection. Third-person observation is reduced to the reduction of the mental activity of consciousness to the neural processes of the brain or to the behavioral reactions of the subject to external stimuli.

This reductionist tendency can be traced in many modern studies of consciousness that attempt to integrate the properties of consciousness into the physicalist's picture of the world, asserting the identity of consciousness and brain functions (Feigl, 1967; Smart, 2004; Place, 2004). However, explaining the nature of consciousness, these theories go the wrong way, trying to establish its material substrate and through this to understand the essence of consciousness. This is the same as trying to understand the meaning of a road sign by studying the properties of the material of which it is made. In this approach, "remnants" of the binary ontology of contrasting the "internal" and "external" and the reduction associated with this to the simplest forms of material interaction manifest themselves.

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The legitimate source of knowledge about the mental life of consciousness remains self-observation or introspection, which is a first-person study of consciousness. However, this method of cognition has its flaws. A significant drawback of this method is that the results of introspection cannot be the subject of empirical verification, since they were obtained in the process of studying mental objects that were not fixed by natural methods; therefore it is impossible to speak of strict scientific objectivity of the results obtained.

Another difficulty is related to the impossibility of studying “consciousness itself”, since only its various objectifications are open to research. That is why E. Cassirer compared consciousness with the mythical Proteus, and the psychiatrist R.J. Lifton, denoting the mobility and polymorphism of the “I”, used the concept of “protean Self” (Lifton, 1993). Introspection is not a method for studying the essence of consciousness itself, as it is aimed at exploring its content. The way a subject knows his consciousness is predetermined by certain knowledge he/she has. As E. Husserl notes, the very understanding of consciousness needs to be purified, since it is loaded with natural science, cultural, historical and philosophical interpretations

Thus, through introspection, the subject is able to identify some content of consciousness. This content is the “raw material” for analysis which is carried out from the perspective of acquired socio-cultural experience, which often contains a set of convenient schematisms that lead away from an objective understanding of the true life of consciousness. The discovery and elimination of such schematisms is relevant. There are different ways to detect and get rid of them. In our study, we will consider several spiritual practices of self-knowledge that are similar in technique to the method of phenomenological reduction. The study analyzes these practices and identifies their common ground with the method of phenomenological reduction. The implementation of these research objectives expands the concept of consciousness.

## **Phenomenological method in the study of consciousness**

The methodological basis of our study is the phenomenological approach. The use of this approach is due to the fact that it takes inseparability of consciousness from immediate reality into account. Consciousness here appears as a specific type of being that cannot be described in the traditional perspective of subject-object relations.

The founder of the phenomenological approach E. Husserl, exploring consciousness, relied on the Cartesian position “I think, therefore, I exist,” which is an example of obvious truth, since the only thing that is open to human knowledge is the content of its consciousness. However, consciousness is not “transparent” for the cognitive process, therefore E. Husserl, proposing his phenomenological method, sought to achieve the principle of non-repetitiveness (evidence) in understanding such concepts of consciousness as “the world” and “I”. According to the philosopher, the subject of knowledge should direct his attention to acts of consciousness, which means a rejection of scientific and ordinary “foreknowledge,” focusing only on what “shows itself” (Husserl, 1999). The phenomena of consciousness should be described as they are in reality (“for-ourselves”), and not as they exist “for-us,” therefore the phenomenological method involves a decisive rejection of hypotheses and concepts that are ingrained in socio-cultural practice (Bogdanova, Borisov, 2016).

Often describing himself, other people and the surrounding reality, a person chooses a convenient classification system, typifies own experiences, creating the appearance of order. In any act of typing, its hidden goal is to achieve internal comfort with minimal cost. This psychological factor ensures the saving of strength and energy in solving certain life problems (Bogdanova, 2018). In order to avoid misconceptions, it is necessary to look at a person from scratch, abandoning the usual attitudes that classify the state of mind. In this regard, the phenomenological method seeks to free itself from any “ideology”. A person is

not a material for interpretation for conformity with one or another ready explanatory model. The spiritual life of each person is unique and unique; its interpretation must be carried out based on its own structures (Borisov, 2016).

E. Husserl proposed the procedures of the phenomenological method, allowing the transition from a naive perception of the world and oneself in a natural setting to focus on the very experiences of consciousness: reduction and epoch. Phenomenological reduction is understood to mean “getting out of brackets” of all information and provisions about the world and oneself which doubtful. Phenomenological reduction is divided into eidetic and transcendental. Eidetic reduction puts the real world and knowledge about it in brackets. As a result of eidetic reduction, a transition is made from the “natural” setting of the knowing subject to the transcendental subject (Trunov, 2008).

The knowing subject can consider consciousness as an object for analysis. However, according to Husserl, the very understanding of consciousness also needs to be purified, since it is loaded with a natural-science, cultural-historical and philosophical interpretation. Purification of consciousness is carried out using transcendental reduction. Transcendental reduction “brackets” thoughts about consciousness, about spiritual processes as phenomena of human culture (Husserl, 1999). It is thanks to the transcendental era (abstinence from judgments) that the movement toward a pure stream of experiences of consciousness takes place, which is the true object of study and constitutes the core of the “I”, which cannot be expressed conceptually, but is clearly experienced intuitively. Elements of the flow are phenomena that need to be able to detect and analyze.

## **Phenomenological method in the context of oriental practices of self-knowledge**

In his study, E. Husserl comes to understand the pure consciousness, the transcendental “I” as an endless and irreversible stream of experiences. Such an understanding can be easily found in the tradition of Eastern philosophy, for example, in the philosophy of Buddhism. In Buddhism, elementary states of consciousness, phenomena are called dharmas. Consciousness is seen as a stream of conscious dharmas. The flow metaphor reflects the process of continuous formation. From the point of view of Buddhism, what a person calls his “I” is an area of subjective fantasies, but in fact, his true nature can be described only as a system of impersonal phenomena of being. The phenomenological method, implemented in the practice of Buddhism, acts radically, it involves the restructuring of individual consciousness, the rejection of egocentrism, the elimination of subjective-evaluative activity in relation to the outside world and to oneself.

In the social aspect, the desire to evaluate oneself and others is born out of insecurity, the desire to meet the requirements of the social environment (culture), which leads to conformism that leads a person away from understanding the essence of things. Often, evaluation makes the way to self-knowledge difficult, and does not allow seeing things in their true light, so Buddhists consider the desire to give an assessment as an affect that binds a person to false ideas and brings suffering.

What practices does philosophy offer for “purifying” consciousness from self-centeredness and evaluation? It should be noted that even the most archaic practices of Eastern philosophy are quite comparable with the method of phenomenological reduction, since they also serve to “expand” consciousness and free from stereotypes of individual and socio-cultural experience. You should start with a “refusal of judgment” (era) about yourself and the world, which are based solely on these stereotypes. This practice of suspension of judgment is one of the main principles of the schools of Vedanta and Buddhism. A man takes

a detached, reflective position in relation to his judgments; this allows getting rid of many speech and value stereotypes.

Patanjali notes that many thoughts related to evaluative activities, motivations and desires make the human psyche restless. The individual because of them is constantly in affective states (flare). In the psyche that generates lasting desires, certain behaviors are fixed, which are reproduced automatically. In yoga, these automatisms are overcome with the help of a volitional act that stops the chain of thought (Satyananda Saraswati, 2006). In the fight against the automatisms of sensory experience, Patanjali offers two types of practices. The first type consists of thinking about the true consciousness involved in being, and the second type is the retention of thoughts (epoch). The ultimate goal of human existence is conceived as a gradual fading of the stream of thoughts and desires, gaining an inner void. A person should carefully monitor his thoughts, feelings and desires, be aware of the reasons for their occurrence, in order to, without clinging to them, come to the realization that everything is a void (i.e., free from self-centeredness) (Lebedev, 2008).

An interesting practice of phenomenological reduction offers the Indian philosopher Sri Ramana Maharshi. His method is aimed at a thorough study of the internal experience of the "I-concept." Usually, when answering the question "Who am I?" a person builds habitual rationalizations, relying on objectification, but such constructions are evidence of egocentrism. The task is to "just be," and not be this or that.

The philosopher describes the following technique of self-knowledge: when a thought arises in a person's mind, it is necessary not to follow it, but to ask: "Whom did this thought arise for?" If the answer is "for me", then you need to ask: "Who am I?" (Lebedev, 2008). This reduction can be continued further, gradually expanding the boundaries of one's usual perception and thinking, taking it deeper into the consciousness. As a result, the phenomena of consciousness will find their "purity," the existential basis; a new experience of perception and thinking will open, depending on the direction and depth of the phenomenological reduction.

## **The phenomenological method in the context of Plotinus spiritual practice**

Trends in the application of spiritual practices of phenomenological reduction that are close in spirit are not the exclusive prerogative of Eastern philosophy. The philosophical practices of antiquity are completely and completely penetrated by them. For example, in Plotinus's philosophy, the path of self-knowledge is figuratively comparable to the work of a sculptor. The sculptor strives to give a block of stone a beautiful shape that reflects true beauty, as well as the human soul seeks to give itself the most spiritual (genuine) form. Self-knowledge is experienced in an axiologically colored experience of involvement in the "divine beauty", overshadowing all imaginary, illusory qualities and properties of our usual perceptions. If a person, turning his gaze inward, sees glimpses of this beauty in himself, he should continue to act like a sculptor who gives beauty to a statue - remove all unnecessary. What does Plotinus mean by "unnecessary" and "superfluous"? "Purification" (expansion) of consciousness involves the liberation of the "soul" from the power of the "body". To do this, one should abandon the habit of thinking of oneself as a being, with various individual characteristics that are largely random and do not characterize genuine consciousness, "since such thoughts interfere with soaring to what is higher than ourselves" (Ado, 1991).

The basis of the experience of self-knowledge by Plotinus is the principle: "every soul is and becomes what it contemplates" (Ado, 1991). A man himself chooses what to pay attention to and what to attach importance to: external, material or hidden, hidden, spiritual. Plotinus prefers the latter and offers a spiritual exercise, with the help of which the soul "sculpts" itself. The essence of the exercise is to become inaccessible to the outside world. It

is necessary to achieve inner concentration; only in this state can a person discover his "divine nature". However, it is impossible to completely free oneself from the external; therefore Plotinus offers to perceive the "I" as a kind of intermediate area between two "shadow zones": "life in God" and "life in the body". A person gains his authenticity when "life in God" completely absorbs the entire field of consciousness, and, thus, our "I" merges with being.

How can this condition be practiced? Plotinus offers to liken consciousness to a mirror. Using this image, you can practice methods of "tuning" the reflection: the mirror can be cleaned, rotated in the right direction. What is behind these metaphors? If consciousness is an internal mirror of a person, then turbidity on it is in the terminology of Plotinus "painful memories of the past, concern for earthly affairs, concern for body". This is what distracts, "blurs the focus" of perception. Trying to adjust the focus, a person at first does not clear the "mirror-consciousness", but simply twists them in different directions, that is, "Is at the mercy of empty vanity and vain worries" (Ado, 1991). Being at this stage, a person can achieve awareness of his true life only for short moments. Although genuine consciousness always comes in contact with a "divine source," the level of tension and concentration of this contact is much higher than the capabilities of an individual consciousness. Even if it rises to this level, it cannot stay on it.

Unity with the "divine world", the acquisition of true being is experienced as ecstasy. Plotinus, describing his experience of spiritual transformation, notes that after staying in genuine being it is necessary to "lower" from the level of intuition to the level of reflection. This reflection is always accompanied by the question: "how could I go down as low as I could, having experienced unity with the Spirit, again come to the split of the conscious self" (Ado, 1991). The transition from one level to another always results in a loss of "I". From the short-term state of integrity with the being of man, the fear of losing his usual egocentric attitude returns. However, the experience of integrity is so strong that, being in the usual state, a person experiences a sense of existential guilt about the loss of authenticity. Thus, the movement of the human spirit resembles the swing of a pendulum. This oscillatory movement is a consequence of constant internal tension created by our existential potential.

It may seem that the ascent to the "divine life" and stay in the "earthly life" are contradictory, but this is not so. It is their combination that makes up the value content of human life. The spiritual world is not only inside man, but also outside. Therefore, the goal of this meditation practice is to search for "the spiritual beyond the outer side of things, the awareness of the beauty, harmony of the Universe" (Ado, 1991).

## Conclusion

The roots of phenomenological reduction can be found in both eastern and western philosophical traditions. The features of this tradition are the work with the intention of consciousness, the contemplation of "pure" ideas or phenomena through the "expansion" of consciousness. A contemplative attitude presupposes a complete detachment from everything that the familiar individual and socio-cultural self possesses, or a rejection of the installation of egocentrism and everything connected with this installation (name, social status, individual attachments, etc.). Liberation from self-centeredness overcomes the subject-object opposition inherent in the cognitive attitude. The unity of subject and object is experienced mystically. A person cognizes an object, completely immersed in it. This process is accompanied by the "fading of the ego." The differences between the external and internal world are erased. In reality, a person becomes a "pure thought" or "pure phenomenon", merges with them, contemplates in a state of complete and deep rest.

However, any attempt to destroy the existing automatism of the "I" is perceived by the "uninitiated" as a threat and introduces it into an affective "defensive" state (hostility,

jealousy, envy, hatred, anger, fear), which is the main reason for his suffering and delusions. Consciousness is “purified” (expands) only when a person embarks on the path of austerities, acquires the ability to control affects.

When practicing introspection, it is necessary to improve the methodology of cognition, to overcome its limitations associated with a reduction to rational activity. Although consciousness thinks, it itself cannot always be thought, because only one or another area of existence is opened for reason, but not being as a whole. A breakthrough to being, to reality is carried out intuitively, and, as you know, intuitive cognitive experience cannot be reduced to formal methodological recommendations. To maintain an intuitive orientation requires a constant voltage of existential potential. Therefore, in the methodological plan for cognitive activity aimed at the study of consciousness, it is necessary, along with epistemological criteria, to develop a number of axiological criteria for this activity.

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