

Relativity of Justification: Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men* within the Phenomenological Context¹

Nilay Erdem Ayyıldız¹

¹ Dr. Instructor of English, School of Foreign Languages, Firat University, Elazığ/Turkey

Abstract

Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men* (1954) is a courtroom narrative, written for television and then revised for screen and stage several times. In the play, twelve unnamed jurors from different socioeconomic backgrounds are confined to a courtroom to reach a unanimous verdict on a murder trial. It portrays how relativity obstructs the jury to reach a consensus. Juror 8 stands alone against the other eleven members of the jury, who resolve about the criminality of the defendant on the basis of assumptions and presupposition, not a fair judgment. He adopts a Socratic manner and proceeds to provoke doubt amongst the others slowly and patiently questioning a series of arguments, statements and pieces of evidence from the trial. Thus, he promotes them to strip their consciousness of subjectivity and approach to the phenomenon objectively as much as possible by focusing on merely the essential elements, pertaining to the case. In this regard, the present study suggests that the character in question assumes the Husserlian phenomenological approach throughout the play. Therefore, the study intends to first introduce the phenomenology philosopher David Husserl's key concepts in the phenomenological method including "directed intentionality", "bracketing/epoché" and "reduction". It then aims to examine the phenomenological steps, which Juror 8 follows, and discuss to what extent the jury can achieve making a fair judgement about the case through a phenomenological approach.

Keywords: "bracketing/epoché"; "directed intentionality"; phenomenology; "reduction"; subjectivity

Every consciousness is a part of relativity as each person refers to a distinct perspective, constructed by experience and social norms. In this regard, relativity results from the diversity of views on everything including what is right or wrong, normal or abnormal, and it inevitably leads to controversy in some cases in human relations. Sometimes, although people dispute about the same subject matter, relativity obstructs them to resolve the disagreement in multiple-participant situations. It becomes more complicated when human's life is the matter. It is exemplified by the case in the courtroom drama, *Twelve Angry Men*, which was written by Reginald Rose (1920–2002) for television in 1954, and since then it has had a number of stage and screen adaptations. It has established a reputation as an all-time American classic film.

¹ This is the full text of the paper which was presented in 10th International Conference on Humanities, Psychology and Social Sciences, held in Berlin/Germany on 20-22 March, 2020.

Twelve Angry Men portrays how differently a murder case is perceived by a trial-jury, consisting of twelve jurors from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Although each juror's individuality has a significant role in the deliberation, it provides a diversity of perspective (Quash, 1999, p. 165), thus disagreement. The teleplay revolves around a juror, persuading the other eleven members by promoting them to justify their decision about the guilt of a defendant, who is on trial for murdering his father. Therefore, the paper intends to discuss the juror's phenomenological effort and the extent, to which the jury can achieve making an impartial judgement about the case through a phenomenological approach.

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) established phenomenology as a philosophical method, which is defined as the science of phenomena, in the twentieth century. He was followed by many other philosophers including Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), who elaborated upon Husserl's philosophy and improved different conceptions and methods pertaining to phenomenology. The present study applies the father of phenomenology, Husserl's approach to illuminate the phenomenological stance in the aforementioned teleplay.

Husserl holds an epistemological stance and regards experience as the main source of human knowledge. He states: "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" (1952, p. 103). Accordingly, in epistemological terms, phenomenological approaches underline the significance of relativity and retains, as Lester states, "cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom" (1999, p. 1). Husserl attempts to assert the objectivity of human consciousness rather than claiming that facts may be objectively and absolutely determined. He argues that it is possible to focus on "the things themselves" (1952, p. 147), that is, the essences forming the essential constitutes of a phenomenon rendering it as what and how actually it is (1952, p. 147).

Husserl calls the directedness of consciousness toward essences (objects, things or phenomena) as "intentionality". In this regard, consciousness is constructed through "intentional acts" pertaining to "intentional objects" (1952, p. 121). Accordingly, perceiving objects refers to synthesizing them with the perceiver's partial expectations, interests and presuppositions. Thus, each perception contains the observer's assumptions deriving from his/her experiences or beliefs. Instead of arguing that knowledge is certainly attainable, Husserl paves the way for knowledge free of presupposition through a pure description of phenomena stripped of all unprovable assumptions and culturally imposed expectations.

The Husserlian approach follows three main steps; firstly, assuming a transcendental phenomenological attitude, that is, adopting an attitude of consciousness free from empirical assumptions, secondly examining the essence of an actual or fictional phenomenon with the help of imaginative variation. In this step, one needs to consider the essential characteristics of the phenomenon. The third step is coming to a conclusion about the investigated essence. From the Husserlian transcendental approach, the subject clarifies his/her mind from any assumptions to focus the mind on the essence. Thus, consciousness becomes the "consciousness of something", which he calls "directedness intentionality" (Koch 1995). Husserl devises phenomenological reduction and bracketing as a technique to invalidate subjective and private perspectives and presumptions and allow the essence of the

20-22 March, 2020
Berlin, Germany

10th International Conference on Humanities, Psychology & Social Sciences

phenomenon to appear in its pure form by focusing on what is immanent in consciousness itself. He calls this process “epoche” or “reduction”. Performing bracketing and reduction entails putting aside all knowledge of the phenomenon which is to be discovered or examined. It is a way of reducing it to presence. Juror 8 in *Twelve Angry Men* tracks a cautious phenomenological approach to the case by leading the other members to concentrate on the essential findings of the case, discussing it objectively as much as possible and reaching a verdict.

The nameless twelve men in the selected courtroom drama are strangers to each other but unique in personality and diverse in profession and socioeconomic background. Out of the unnamed jurors, Juror 8 is an architect, Juror 2 an officer, Juror 4 a broker, Juror 7 a salesman, Juror 10 a mechanic, Juror 11 a watchmaker and Juror 12 an ad man. Some are young, while some are old. This diversity is reflected by their subjectivity, which seems to be inevitable. Furthermore, the jury seems to be confined to a small jury room on a hot day. The intensive sense of claustrophobic atmosphere with a “grave responsibility” (Rose, 1983, p. 9) also hinders them to reach a unanimous verdict. The eleven members except for Juror 8 approach the case biasedly.

Juror 8 stands alone against the other eleven, changing an eleven to one vote for conviction into a unanimous verdict of not guilty. He promotes them to strip their consciousness of subjectivity and approach to the phenomenon objectively as much as possible. He adopts a Socratic manner and proceeds to provoke doubt amongst the others slowly and patiently questioning a series of arguments, statements and pieces of evidence from the trial.

First of all, in a phenomenological manner, Juror 8 gives a summary of findings including the witnesses’ reports and the boy’s unsatisfying explanation in the court. In the phenomenological approach, what he does is bracketing. He strips all the presuppositions and assumptions of the consciousness to attain “directed intentionality”. The defendant is a member of the lower-class living in slums. Considering the crime rate in the slums consisting of poor Americans and immigrants from different countries, Inter-American commission reports about the considerably high rate of violence and crimes in which particularly children and young adults were involved because of poverty in the 1950s and 1960s’ America (2015, pp. 71–76). In this aspect, the eleven jurors find the boy guilty on the basis of his socioeconomic background, thus prejudices, not a fair judgment about the individual guilt. They argue that people, raised in the slums, are “potential menaces to society” (Rose, 1983, p. 21). The boy’s criminal record also reinforces their prejudice. Therefore, for instance, Juror 4 declares the defendant to be guilty as he is a “product of a filthy neighbourhood and a broken home” (Rose, 1983, p. 21). Juror 10’s prejudice against anyone from the slums is apparent in his expressions as follows: “You can’t believe a word they say. I mean they’re born liars” (Rose, 1983, p. 13) “He’s a common, ignorant slob. He don’t even speak good English” (Rose, 1983, p. 36). Juror 4 also stereotypes those who live in poor socioeconomic areas: “Slums are a breeding ground for criminals” (Rose, 1983, p. 21). It is much more difficult for Juror 3 to evaluate the case objectively as he associates it with his problematic relationship with his fifteen-year-old son, about whom he says: “When he was fifteen he hit me in the face. He’s big, you know. I haven’t seen him in three years. Rotten kid!” (Rose, 1983, p. 21). Thus, he projects the anger he feels toward her son onto the boy on the trial.

The witnesses’ relativity also problematises the reliability of their report and blurs objectivity in the case. The woman with glasses living opposite reports that she has looked out

of the window and seen the boy stabbing his father through the window of a passing train. The old man in the flat below says that he has heard the boy screaming “I’ll kill you!” (Rose, 1983, p. 18) while lying in his bed and that after fifteen minutes, he has seen the boy going downstairs. In sum, it is considerably difficult to hold objectivity to attain a fair judgment. Juror 8 draws attention to all their prejudice and says: “[N]o matter where you run into it, prejudice obscures the truth” (Rose, 1983, p. 53). He approaches to the case as free of his emotions. He also attempts to take of preoccupied veil over the jury’s perception.

Secondly, Juror 8 urges the other members to focus on merely essential items of the phenomena, freeing their minds of any kinds of prejudgments so that the democratic judgement of the jury can emerge: the father’s regularly beating the son, the boy’s being arrested for knife fighting, being sent to a reform school for stabbing someone, the widely-sold knife which the boy may have used to murder his father, the angle of the stabbing, the heights of the boy and the father, the weak visibility of the female witness and her probability of wearing her glasses before going to bed, the elderliness of the man downstairs and his potential walking speed. In this step, he initiates the process of “epoche” or “reduction” reducing the phenomena to its immanent features, thus turning it from presence to essence facilitating concentrating on, in Husserl’s words, “the thing” itself. Juror 8 starts the discussion part as the second step and questions about the case letting them discuss, even performs the phenomena and gives the members time to evaluate in the process of deliberation.

The jury undergoes an intensive process of brainstorming in the second step where they, as Lesser points out, “‘intrude’ more into the study by making interpretations and linkages, relating the findings to previous research or commentary, to personal experience or even to common-sense opinions, and developing tentative theories” (1999, p. 3). To illustrate, benefitting from his childhood experience to show how to use a switchblade appropriately, Juror 5 helps proving that anyone who has had experience with switchblades would not stab down as in the angle of the stabbing on the murdered father’s body. In addition, Juror 8 develops a tentative theory in relation to the knife which has been supposedly used in the murder and shows the jury the same knife he has purchased from an ordinary shop on the street. Thus, he indicates that the boy might have been honest about his account that he has bought it a gift for his friend and dropped it on the way and that the trader might have told a lie that the knife was a special type, so the juror develops a tentative theory that the murderer, other than the boy, could have used that knife, which may be easily found in many shops. He also performs walking like an old man while the others are timing and demonstrates that it is impossible for an old man to reach from his bedroom to the door in fifteen minutes. He indicates by performing that although the knife has been found to be clean, the boy cannot have cleaned the knife as soon as he murders his father if he goes downstairs a few seconds later he screams and stabs the knife. He also proves that it is almost improbable to hear somebody scream while a train is passing by. Furthermore, when Juror 3 shouts at him “I’ll kill you!” (Rose, 1983, p. 43), Juror 8 indicates that like Juror 3, the boy cannot have meant it in real terms even if he really utters that sentence out of his anger towards his father. Thus, Juror 8 unscrambles the phenomenon gradually through his phenomenological attitude.

As the last step, Juror 8 leads the jury to a conclusion, which is indeed not firm, but points to “implications or ways forward which make sense if the interpretation referred to is an accurate or useful one” (Lesser, 1999, p. 3). In the play, the juror does not intend to prove the boy’s innocence but the invalidity of the accusations by providing the other jurors with an

20-22 March, 2020
Berlin, Germany

10th International Conference on Humanities, Psychology & Social Sciences

intense web of probabilities indicating them that their decision about the defendant's life is baseless. For instance, Juror 2 says ultimately: "You can't send someone off to die on evidence like that" (Rose, 1983, p. 71). The eleven members are swayed by Juror 8's questions and arguments. They attain a more objective approach to the case and change their minds in favour of the defendant.

In conclusion, *Twelve Angry Men* portrays clashes of individual personality and belief interfering with even a murder trial. The phenomenological analysis of the work reveals that stereotypes, prejudices and generalisations contradict with reason, logic, objectivity and common sense, all of which must triumph to restore democracy. The study indicates that jurors who are representatives of justice are indeed representatives of the culture, in which they live, thus inevitably inclusive of prejudice and presumption. In this aspect, that considering just verdict is supposed to be free of them, the analysis asserts that trial requires phenomenological review of cases to approach the case as fairly and objectively as possible following three Husserlian steps; transcendental attitude, bracketing and reduction.

References

- [1] Husserl, E., (1952). *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, 1913, New York: Macmillan.
- [2] Koch, T., (1995). "Interpretive approaches in nursing research: The influence of Husserl and Heidegger," *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 21, pp. 827-836. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2648.1995.21050827.x
- [3] Lester, S., (1999). An introduction to phenomenological research. Taunton UK, Stan Lester Developments. Available: <http://www.sld.demon.co.uk/resmethy.pdf>
- [4] Rose, R., (1983). *Twelve Angry Men*, 1947, Canada: The Dramatic Publishing Company.
- [5] Quash, B. (1999). "Drama and the Ends of Modernity," *Balthasar at the end of Modernity*, Lucy Gardner, et al. eds. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, pp. 139-172.
- [6] *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights*. 2015. Violence, children and organized crime. [Online]. 40 (15). Available: <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/ViolenceChildren2016.pdf>