1. What is ‘phenomenology’? Discuss the contribution of Martin Heidegger to phenomenological studies.

Ans: Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions.

Phenomenology as a discipline is distinct from but related to other key disciplines in philosophy, such as ontology, epistemology, logic, and ethics. Phenomenology has been practiced in various guises for centuries, but it came into its own in the early 20th century in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and others. Phenomenological issues of intentionality, consciousness, qualia, and first-person perspective have been prominent in recent philosophy of mind.

The discipline of phenomenology may be defined initially as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. Literally, phenomenology is the study of “phenomena”: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view. This field of philosophy is then to be distinguished from, and related to, the other main fields of philosophy: ontology (the study of being or what is), epistemology (the study of knowledge), logic (the study of valid reasoning), ethics (the study of right and wrong action), etc.

The historical movement of phenomenology is the philosophical tradition launched in the first half of the 20th century by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, et al. In that movement, the discipline of phenomenology was prized as the proper foundation of all philosophy—as opposed, say, to ethics or metaphysics or epistemology. The methods and characterization of the discipline were widely debated by Husserl and his successors, and these debates continue to the present day. (The definition of phenomenology offered above will thus be debatable, for example, by Heideggerians, but it remains the starting point in characterizing the discipline.)

In recent philosophy of mind, the term “phenomenology” is often restricted to the characterization of sensory qualities of seeing, hearing, etc.: what it is like to have sensations of various kinds. However, our experience is normally much richer in content than mere sensation. Accordingly, in the phenomenological tradition, phenomenology is given a much wider range, addressing the meaning things have in our experience, notably, the significance of objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self, and others, as these things arise and are experienced in our “life-world”.

Phenomenology as a discipline has been central to the tradition of continental European philosophy throughout the 20th century, while philosophy of mind has evolved in the Austro-Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy that developed throughout the 20th century. Yet the fundamental character of our mental activity is pursued in overlapping ways within these two traditions. Accordingly, the perspective on phenomenology drawn in this article will accommodate both traditions. The main concern here will be to characterize the discipline of phenomenology, in a contemporary purview, while also highlighting the historical tradition that brought the discipline into its own.

Basically, phenomenology studies the structure of various types of experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity. The structure of these forms of experience typically involves what Husserl called “intentionality”, that is, the directedness of experience toward things in the world, the property of consciousness that it is a consciousness of or about something. According to classical Husserlian phenomenology, our experience is directed toward—represents or “intends” things only through particular concepts, thoughts, ideas, images, etc. These make up the meaning or content of a given experience, and are distinct from the things they present or mean.

2. Critically examine the feminist approach to the understanding of social reality.

Ans: Many people incorrectly believe that feminist theory focuses exclusively on girls and women and that it has an inherent goal of promoting the superiority of women over men. In reality, feminist theory has always been about viewing the social world in a way that illuminates the forces that create and support inequality, oppression, and injustice and in doing so, promotes the pursuit of equality and justice.

That said, since the experiences and perspectives of women and girls were historically excluded from social theory and social science, much feminist theory has focused on their interactions and experiences within society in order to ensure that half the world’s population is not left out of how we see and understand social forces, relations, and problems. While most feminist theorists throughout history have been women, today people of all genders can be found working in the discipline.

By shifting the focus of social theory away from the perspectives and experiences of men, feminist theorists have created social theories that are more inclusive and creative than those which assume the social actor to always be a man. Part of what makes feminist theory creative and inclusive is that it often considers how systems of power and oppression interact, which is to say it does not just focus on gendered power and oppression, but on how it might intersect with systemic racism, a hierarchical class system, sexuality, nationality, and (dis)ability, among other things.

Some feminist theory provides an analytic framework for understanding how women’s location in, and experience of, social situations differ from men’s. For example, cultural feminists look at the different values associated with womanhood and femininity as a reason why men and women experience the social world differently. Other feminist theorists believe that the different roles assigned to women and men within institutions better explain gender difference, including the sexual division of labor in the household.

Existential and phenomenological feminists focus on how women have been marginalized and defined as “other” in patriarchal