

Epoch é as the Breakthrough of the Natural Attitude

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The following contribution aims to interpret the methodical device of Husserl's *epoch é* in light of the concept of breakthrough. Since the *epoch é* is a theoretical device directed towards the suspension of the natural attitude, I will first attempt to define the concept of natural attitude. Subsequently, I will seek to understand the rich meaning of the concept of *epoch é*. Finally, I will explore how this element is related to the concept of breakthrough. In other words, I will endeavour to clarify how the *epoch é* determines a breakthrough of the natural attitude, which is not to be understood as "annihilation" or "destruction" but as a traversal.

Keywords: Edmund Husserl, *epoch é*, natural attitude, phenomenology

Introduction

This contribution aims to interpret the methodological apparatus of Husserlian *epoch é* in light of the concept of breakthrough. Given that the *epoch é* is the theoretical device directed at suspending the natural attitude, we will first attempt to define the concept of natural attitude (*natürliche Einstellung*), and then seek to thematize the profound meaning of the concept of *epoch é*. Finally, we will try to understand how this element is related to the concept of breakthrough. The argument is organized in the following way. In the first section, I will define the concept of natural attitude. In the second section, I will demonstrate how *epoch é* affects a breakthrough of the natural attitude. In conclusion, I will show how the concept of breakthrough itself allows for a full understanding of what the neutralization of the natural attitude entails.

Natural Attitude

This Edmund Husserl frequently defined phenomenology as a philosophy founded on a mode of thought that deviates from the natural (*Nicht natürlich*) and unnatural (*unnatürlich Gedanken*) (Husserl, 1973a, p. 115, 125, 171, 213; 1973b, p. 20, 79; 1976a, p. 5, 11, 57, 67, 73, 74, 84, 87, 119); 1956, p. 90, 244, 371; 1959, p. 82, 139, 142, 182; 1974, p. 277, 344; 1976b, p. 151, 157, 176, 193, 242, 308, 238, 330). Indeed, the phenomenological approach to thinking diverges from what we consider natural, that is, it does not align with the stance we adopt in our daily lives. At the heart of the phenomenological act lies a shift in subjective attitude aimed at suspending judgment about the world and our existence within it. This suspension, understood as a step backward (*Schritt rückwärts*) or sideways (*seitwärts*) from everyday life, involves a move away from what is natural, normal, or habitual for us. In a sense, our routine life is suspended by phenomenology. Phenomenology questions what Husserl refers to as the *natürliche Einstellung*, or the natural attitude. Before

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elucidating the profound significance of this sidestep facilitated by *epoché*, let's clarify the notion of this natural attitude.

The inquiry into the natural attitude and its experience primarily arises in relation to the so-called transcendental turn in phenomenology. This suspension is explicitly actuated through the theoretical mechanisms of *epoché* and phenomenological *reduction*¹ (Husserl, 1956, pp. 139-145; 1976a, p. 65). *Epoché* refers to the suspension of judgment about the natural world and the natural attitude to focus purely on the analysis of consciousness. It involves “bracketing” or setting aside assumptions and biases about things to view them without the interference of preconceived beliefs or external explanations. This “bracketing” is like a breakthrough of the natural attitude. Following the *epoché*, phenomenological reduction is the process by which a philosopher attempts to reach the essence of things by peeling away layers of personal interpretation and cultural context. This reduction aims to reveal the phenomena as they are experienced directly.

The transcendental deepening of phenomenology, initiated in the years immediately following the *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900-1901) and reaching a provisional culmination with the first book of the *Ideen* (1913), encompasses two significant phases. These phases aid in clarifying the concept of the natural attitude referring to the 1907 lectures *Hauptstücke aus der Phänomenologie und Kritik der Vernunft*² (Husserl, 1973c) and the winter semester lectures of 1910/1911 *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Husserl, 1973d, pp. 111-193).

In the introduction to the 1907 lectures³ (Husserl, 1973b; 1973b, pp. 7-12, 43-48, 55-72), Husserl contemplates the epistemological starting point of phenomenological thought, addressing the distinction between natural science and philosophical science. In this context, the transcendental dimension of phenomenology is linked to the idea of an epistemological critique aimed at demonstrating how phenomenology must elucidate the conditions of possibility for a form of knowledge distinct from the spiritual/mental (*geistige*) and und natural stance/posture (*Haltung*). This foundational idea persists in the subsequent 1910/1911 lectures. However, the starting point shifts. These lectures, serving as a general introduction to phenomenological thought, pivot not on an epistemological issue per se but on the problem of the meaning the world holds for us within a pre-scientific, or doxastic, experience. This experience lays the necessary groundwork for any positive science. Thus, the distinction between the natural and phenomenological attitudes is central to these lectures, but the starting point is not a theory or theoretical act, but a reflection on actual everyday experience (Husserl, 1973d, p. 112). Phenomenology, as Husserl asserts, does not claim to be a doctrine of essence but an experiential inquiry. Here, Husserl moves away from using the term *geistige Haltung* (spiritual stance/posture), which presupposes the concept of mind, in favour of the significant concept of *Einstellung* (attitude)⁴ (Husserl, 1973d, p. 112). This

¹ In the confines of this paper, we cannot comprehensively address the theme of the relationship between *epoché* and phenomenological reduction. Within this context, we restrict ourselves to defining *epoché* as the negative act of phenomenological suspension. In other terms, it is a practical act that furnishes an idea of the relationship with alterity as something external to oneself. Simultaneously, we conceive of reduction as the positive moment of phenomenological suspension. Husserl himself appears to distinguish between these two moments on multiple occasions.

² The lectures from the summer semester of 1907, entitled “*Hauptstücke aus Phänomenologie und Kritik der Vernunft*”, are now published in (Husserl, 1973c).

³ This general introduction consists of five lectures, published under the title: “*Die Idee der Phänomenologie*” by W. Biemel, cf. (E. Husserl, 1973b). In these lectures, Husserl develops for the first time his concept of phenomenological reduction, cf. (Husserl, 1973b, pp. 7-12, 43-48, 55-72), which is therefore a prerequisite for the development of thought in the subsequent lectures.

⁴ Husserl writes in (Husserl, 1973d, p. 112): “Ich beginne mit einer Beschreibung der verschiedenen Ein-Stellungen, in denen Erfahrung und Erkenntnis statthaben kann, zunächst der natürlichen Einstellung, in der wir alle leben und von der wir also ausgehen, wenn wir die philosophische Blick-änderung vollziehen. Wir tun es in der Weise, dass wir die Vorfindlichkeiten dieser Einstellung in allgemeiner Weise be-schreiben.”

shift marks Husserl's gradual departure from psychologism, since the phenomenological analysis of the natural attitude is not part of any psychology since the transcendental leap goes beyond what was termed descriptive psychology in the *Logische Untersuchungen*. Psychologism is stance asserting that psychological processes, structures, or principles underlie and govern all aspects of human knowledge and experience. This view often reduces philosophical, logical, or mathematical problems to psychological terms, suggesting that understanding our mental processes can explain broader intellectual concepts.

Even a renewed psychology would still be a natural science, as it presupposes the natural attitude, structuring itself within a pre-constituted world. An important definition emerges here, crucial for our purposes. Husserl's discourse on *Einstellungen* (attitudes) does not refer to particular processes unique to the psychological dimension (e.g. sadness, happiness, etc.), but to the various attitudes that the human subject can structurally adopt in its intentional relationship with the world. The distinction among different attitudes aims to open an intuitive dimension for phenomenological thought. Indeed, phenomenological inquiry emphasizes the importance of starting from lived experiences rather than abstract epistemological questions. This approach, central to phenomenology, is rooted in the idea that understanding the structure of experience is crucial for examining the foundations of reality and knowledge. Therefore, the analysis of the natural attitude must exhaustively address all aspects found in our daily experience. Therefore, the analysis of the natural attitude involves a thorough examination of everyday experiences, exploring how these experiences are constituted in consciousness. This exhaustive analysis aims to uncover the underlying conditions that make these experiences possible, revealing aspects of our cognitive and perceptual engagement with the world that are typically overlooked or taken for granted in our everyday life.

These aspects are always within reach, ever-present in our daily interaction with the world. By virtue of this, Husserl labels these aspects "pre-evident" (Husserl, 1973d). What characterizes daily experience is something that constantly belongs to us and is continuously with us, so deeply ingrained that we often remain unaware of it.

In summary, Husserl delineates two distinct attitudes: the natural attitude and the phenomenological attitude. The natural attitude focuses on everyday life in the sense of a complex of things, people, events, and objects that we deal with in our normal daily life. It is the attitude of subjectivity that lives directly, immersed in the activities of the world, directly confronting the things it needs. Husserl believes that this perspective is the foundation of a deep kind of thinking that shapes how humans naturally understand things, and therefore influences all types of knowledge developed from it, particularly, objectivism, i.e. the idea that the world consists of finite things, of facts endowed with meaning independently of personal experience. The natural attitude and objectivism determine the positive sciences, as each of them focuses on a specific aspect or region of the world, understood as a series of facts. In this sense, both the natural sciences in the strict sense and the human sciences can be considered natural sciences, since all operate within the parameters of the natural experience of the world. In some sciences, people only look at objects and not how these objects show up or appear. But in phenomenology, which is a type of philosophy, they also think about how we see and experience these objects. This approach considers our personal experience with objects, not just the objects themselves. Phenomenology emerges as an unnatural attitude of knowledge because it steps backwards or sideways from the objective level of common-sense experience. In other words, the phenomenological attitude focuses on the "point of contact" of the two dimensions of the phenomenon—of appearing and what appears—which remains invisible to the natural attitude. This represents the transcendental perspective of Husserlian phenomenology, which does not imply an escape from the world or a detachment from the natural attitude, but merely attempts to make visible the original meaning

of our experience in all its forms. Therefore, a significant part of the phenomenological project involves probing the features of the natural attitude. Now, before clarifying how this probing can be understood as a “breakthrough”, let’s understand what enables the transition to the phenomenological attitude.

Epoch é

This shift in perspective facilitated by phenomenology derives its possibility from the inherent structure of what manifests, the *Phainómenon*. This term not only denotes the content of manifestation but also encompasses the act of manifestation itself. Husserl elucidates this as the subjective phenomenon, wherein “subjective” transcends mere psychological experience to signify the structural interrelation binding the subject-world correlation. Central to the phenomenological method is the thematic exploration of the juncture between these dimensions, marking its distinctiveness.

Yet, this intentional interconnection eludes thematic exploration within the confines of the natural attitude. The phenomenologist must thus engage in a process of understanding, thematization, and transcendence of the natural attitude. This transition, as posited by Husserl, is enacted through the *epoch é*, a suspension of presuppositions that underpins the shift from the natural to the philosophical/phenomenological attitude. In the *epoch é* there’s a total shift in how we see the world. Our usual focus on everyday life disappears, and we don’t notice the usual things that concern us. This helps us grasp what it means to “suspend” our usual way of thinking. Husserl writes:

To the Cartesian attempt at universal doubt, we might now substitute the universal “*epoch é*”. But with good reason, we limit the universality of this *epoch é*. For if we grant it all the breadth it can have, no field would remain for unmodified judgments, much less for a science [...]. We aim at the discovery of a new scientific territory, and we want to conquer it precisely with the method of bracketing, limited, however, in a certain way. (Husserl, 1976a, p. 56)

In the *epoch é* we put aside the general idea of how we usually see things and focus on the facts themselves. This means we temporarily ignore everything about the natural attitude and the way we usually think about it. Even the sciences that rely on this usual way of thinking are temporarily bracketed (cf. Husserl, 1976a, p. 56). Husserl claims:

I therefore sideline all the sciences that refer to the natural world and, however solid they seem to me, however much I admire them, however little I think of objecting to anything, I make absolutely no use of what they consider valid. I do not even appropriate one of their propositions, even if they are perfectly evident, I do not assume any and from none of them do I derive any foundation – it is understood, as long as they are conceived, as indeed happens in these sciences, as truths concerning the reality of this world. (Husserl 1976a, pp. 56-57)

Following and modifying the teaching of Descartes, the phenomenologist must carry out the great reversal, which “if performed correctly, leads to transcendental subjectivity” (Husserl, 1973, p. 58. Eng. trans., p. 90). Therefore, after the *epoch é* we no longer possess either a valid science or a world existing for us. The natural world, so close to us, instead of naturally valuing for us on the basis of a belief of being, manifests as a mere claim to existence.

In short, the *epoch é* is the starting point of phenomenological inquiry, marking the shift from the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude. It involves suspending our usual perspective to lay the groundwork for phenomenological reduction (cf. Husserl, 1976a, p. 44). Essentially, it sets aside our assumptions about reality. According to Husserl, the *epoch é* involves disregarding everything that is beyond direct experience (cf. Husserl, 1976b, p. 153). This act nullifies the validity of our everyday understanding of the world, allowing us to perceive

its deeper, universal meaning (cf. Husserl, 1956, p. 129). Through the *epoché* transcendental subjectivity emerges, revealing the true essence of reality (cf. Husserl, 1973a, p. 189). It's the necessary step for transcendental reduction, freeing us from our naive understanding of the world and opening us up to deeper truths (cf. Husserl, 1973b, p. 154).

Here (cf. Husserl, 1976b, p. 154), we find the important idea of Husserl's *epoché*. But instead of just focusing on the "stopping aspect", let's also think about the idea of setting a limit, of putting boundaries on this suspensive attitude. Husserl himself writes:

For us, the entire world, as posited in the natural attitude, as actually found in experience, "entirely free from theories, as it is actually experienced" and clearly announced in the connection of experiences, is now for us devoid of validity: unproven, but also uncontested, it must be bracketed. Equally all theories and sciences, however good they may be, founded positivistically or otherwise, that refer to this world, undergo the same fate. (Husserl, 1976a, p. 57)

Through the *epoché* the experience of the natural attitude "is not proven, but neither is it contested". This means it is not interrupted or stopped but continues its course, even though we no longer live naively within it. Our attention is no longer solely focused on the natural world in which we move, with its events and its objects. However, this suspensive act is limited. Indeed, the exclusion of the natural attitude does not mean that phenomenological thinking withdraws from this world and takes refuge in an abstract dimension. Despite their distinction, the natural attitude and the phenomenological attitude are structurally connected, since the latter always has its starting point in the former. Indeed, the point of departure of phenomenological research highlights the true meaning of this naturalness. In other words, the naive gaze on objects, characteristic of the natural attitude, is brought to consciousness through phenomenological *epoché* (and eidetic reduction). The *epoché* marks the boundary between the natural attitude and the phenomenological attitude, through which it is possible to return to the world by bracketing the world itself. The world is not eliminated but is taken from the phenomenological point of view.

So, when something is eliminated, it's like a signal to change direction, causing what's been changed to realign in the realm of experience. Put simply, what's been set aside isn't erased, rather, it's just temporarily stopped and marked with a reference, a sequence (cf. Husserl, 1976a, p. 142).

Husserl's assertion regarding the distinction between suspension and negation becomes apparent when contextualized within the discussion of the *epoché* and its relationship to the modification of neutrality. The modification of neutrality, according to Husserl, involves a transformation in the stance or attitude of consciousness towards objects. It entails a suspension or bracketing of one's usual judgments, beliefs, or prejudices about the objects under consideration. In this state of neutrality, consciousness refrains from affirming or denying the validity of its perceptions or beliefs, thus allowing for a more direct and unprejudiced apprehension of phenomena as they present themselves in experience. This modification is integral to Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction, wherein the philosopher seeks to uncover the essential structures of consciousness and experience by setting aside preconceptions and biases.

This examination unfolds within the investigation of the various modes through which consciousness apprehends given objectualities. These modes, contrary to being parallel and of equal stature, are hierarchically structured upon each other according to different intentional stratifications. They constitute what Husserl terms *Urdoxa*, encompassing the diverse forms of belief. Among the alterations within the realm of beliefs lies the modification of neutrality, which, in a certain sense, completely nullifies and weakens every doxic modality it

pertains to. However, crucially, this nullification operates in a manner distinct from negation, as delineated by Husserl (cf. Husserl, 1976a, p. 222). Husserl writes:

If, therefore, we sideline every volitional element of the suspension, but do not understand the latter in the sense of something doubtful or hypothetical, a certain holding-in-suspense remains, or rather a “having-in-presence” something that is not really given to consciousness as present. The positional character has become powerless. Belief is no longer seriously a belief, supposing is no longer a serious supposing, denying is no longer a serious denying, etc. They are a believing, a supposing, a denying, etc., neutralized [...]. Everything is found in the modifying brackets very similar to those we have talked so much about at one time and that are so important for paving the way to phenomenology. (Husserl, 1976a, pp. 222-223)

Thus, this mode completely cancels out every belief it's connected to, in a different way than just negation. The modification of neutrality is thus the attitude of consciousness that allows the implementation of the suspension, the enactment of the *epoché*. It turns out to be the suspension and not the negation of every type of belief. The *epoché* enacts this suspension and, in this way, represents the opening towards phenomenological research.

Breakthrough

Now, we have seen how the relationship between the natural attitude and the phenomenological attitude is anything but exclusive. Indeed, we characterized the thematization of the phenomenological attitude as bringing to consciousness elements present in the natural attitude. Suspension allows for understanding its profound transcendental meaning and defining the intentional characters of the I-world relationship. *Epoché* turned out to be a negation that does not nullify, a suspension that does not annihilate. Now, precisely this sense refers back to the term of breakthrough. In fact, although *epoché* is not to be understood as a negation, it is that act which creates a split, a forcing of the natural attitude. However, this foundation-breaking is directed towards a foundation. Indeed, it is to be understood as a progression, a crossing through the natural attitude, a foundation-breaking of the natural attitude that allows for the activation of the phenomenological gaze.

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