

*A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled “Issues Confronting the Post-European World” and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). **The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations** was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.*

## Essay 17

# Husserl’s Epochē: Theory, Praxis, or Something in Between?

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### Abstract

Although the centrality of the epochē for Husserl’s phenomenological method has been long recognized, it is by no means a simple task to articulate precisely what it is. I argue that the answer to this question cannot be separated from the answer to the question of how it is acquired. To the end of inquiring if the epochē is a form of knowledge and therefore acquired by learning, I investigate whether Husserl was able to teach it to others. I discover that despite the fact that many of his ‘students’ ended up becoming critical of the centrality of the method of the epochē for both phenomenology and philosophy, it can be taught. Moreover, I conclude that when it is understood as the *way of finding* presuppositions, these critiques cannot but presuppose it. I conclude that so understood, what the epochē is cannot be captured by the traditional “theory”/“praxis” distinction.

Some years ago I heard a man, who at one time walked among some of us as a god, say the following of his work: “all of it is written under the epochē.” I was puzzled by this remark, not so much because of the old wisdom, according to which the gods are reputed to communicate cryptically with mortals, but because in some of his writings this particular man had seemed to suggest that the time of Husserl’s phenomenology—and presumably its key methodical moment, the epochē—was up. Nevertheless, mindful of time being the elusive phenomenon that it is, and wanting to maintain the integrity of the words I had

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heard, I took them to indicate that his writings were written under something like the *gesture* of the epochē.

Some years later, I read a book that was hailed as “translating Husserl into a clear and more attractive idiom.” According to the author of this book “[t]he reduction [it is typical of this book’s ‘clarity’ that the author chooses not to speak of the epochē but only of the reduction] is not a theory or a claim, it is a procedure . . . expressed . . . in instructions [like] . . . the instructions for boiling an egg.” Consequently, for this author the way to evaluate Husserl’s instructions for the reduction is “to try and implement them and see what happens.” He reports that “I have tried to follow Husserl’s instructions for the performance of the phenomenological reduction, and I have to report that nothing of any philosophical interest occurred.” Indeed, I remember thinking at the time that it is a pity the author did not try to follow the instructions for boiling an egg under the epochē; this, no doubt, would have resulted in something far more philosophically interesting occurring than his failed attempt to undergo what, having translated Husserl’s reduction into a “clear and more attractive idiom,” struck him as “some esoteric experience the nature of which he [Husserl] is then in principle unable to communicate.”

On my view Husserl’s epochē is neither a gesture nor a recipe. Nor is it a method. Rather, it is *the* method—the method of phenomenology and therefore *the* method of phenomenological philosophy. As such, as soon as we ask the question, “What is it?” we are lost. We are lost not because it is some indefinable gesture or because it is the result of an idiosyncratic esoteric experience, but because the issue of *how* to achieve access to it is inseparable from the determination of *what* it is. The recognition of the belonging together proper to the “what” and the “how” of something is not new. Socrates, in Plato’s *Meno*, provides the classical articulation of this recognition, when he refuses to permit the separation of the question how human excellence is acquired from the question proper to what it is. And the impasse (*aporia*) in which that dialogue ends is but the rigorous consequence of the refusal to separate the question of what something is from the question of how it is acquired. Unless human excellence is something that can be taught, that is, acquired by learning, *what* it is cannot be knowledge (*epistēmē*).

But as is always the case with Plato, the impasse is embedded in both a paradox and a provocation. The paradox is that despite the fact that human excellence does not appear to be either knowledge or knowable—because teachers of it are apparently lacking—it is nevertheless recognized as a quality of some few humans who possess the know-how (*phronesis*) to bring it about. And in the absence of teachers capable of imparting such know-how, the most

compelling conclusion is that, given how unnatural this know-how is, its acquisition is a gift from the gods. The provocation is that we are told that *should* someone among us be capable of making another human excellent, he alone among the living would be in his senses, while the others are flitting phantoms.

What does this have to do with Husserl's epochē? Everything. For if we respond to Plato's provocation and substitute "philosophy" for human excellence, the issue becomes the inseparability proper to the question of what philosophy is from the question of how it is acquired. Moreover, resolving the question of whether philosophy is knowledge and therefore knowable becomes tied to the question of whether there is someone among us who is capable of making another human a philosopher. Finally, in our investigation of the latter, we must confront the question of whether some few among us are recognized as philosophers and therefore are recognized as possessing philosophical know-how.

Husserl, I submit, is recognizable as a philosopher. He is recognizable as such because he did not manifest the unquestioning understanding of oneself that always exhibits a failure to comprehend one's own presuppositions and thus a failure really to grasp what one believes one knows. The evidence for this is overwhelming. Psychologism, empiricism, rationalism, historicism, naturalism, and formalism, were all refuted by him—and decisively so—because rather than rest content with an unquestioning understanding of them he tirelessly interrogated the presuppositions proper to the *conceptuality* of each by confronting the latter with the *contents* that fill them in. Granting, then, the recognition of Husserl as a philosopher, our question becomes: Is he able to make another human being a philosopher? More generally, is Husserl a teacher of philosophy? What is at stake in the question is of course nothing less than the question of whether philosophy (or *his* philosophy, since at this level of the problematic this makes no difference) is something that can be learned and therefore knowledge.

Before attempting to answer this question, however, a potentially devastating critique of all that has been said so far has to be confronted. Perhaps it will be granted, given the classical criteria we have invoked above for recognizing one among us as a philosopher, that Husserl was indeed a philosopher, though one who, in today's world, is hopelessly *old fashioned*. After all, despite the laudable achievements of his philosophy, everybody now knows that it is Eurocentric, colonialistic, riddled with masculine gender biases, and worse, because Husserl had thought that it had to be science or it could not be at all, its pretensions have become ridiculous. This being the case, why bother with

him or his philosophy, since the problems that exercised *his* philosophy no longer exercise *ours*? Two things at this point need to be said in response to this.

This first is that the scope of such a critique takes in far more than Husserl's philosophy, insofar as it can be advanced against any traditional philosophy that does not measure up to the standards of the day. And while pointing this out does not mitigate against the force of such a critique, it does permit the raising of a second and more crucial response, which must take the form of the question: what is the perspective from which such a critique is advanced? More pointedly: Does such a critique presuppose philosophy and if so, what does this presupposition entail? For if the critique does indeed presuppose philosophy, then the matter of Husserl's alleged traditionalism takes on an added dimension. This is the case because what the one who advanced such a critique really believed oneself to know would be based on a miscomprehension, were the one who believed it to understand it as originating from *outside* of the philosophical tradition. And should such a one understand his or her critique not to presuppose philosophy, an even deeper dimension to the critique would emerge, namely, the question of why such a critique should be taken seriously at all. This added dimension would emerge not because of the assignment by traditional fiat of some special privilege to philosophy *per se*, but because of what philosophy *per se* has traditionally always promised: a basis that makes critique compelling on grounds other than what everybody believes they know.

Thus, even were we to grant the above critique of Husserl a basis other than that which everybody believes they know, we are still confronted by the question of what this basis is and therefore the question of what philosophy is. Moreover, we are still confronted by the question inseparable from this, namely, how is it acquired. And we are confronted by the latter not because of the alleged authority of Plato on this matter, but because of the very matter itself. To ask of anything "what it is" already involves, which is to say, already presupposes, some kind of *access to* that which we are interrogating with respect to its *what*. We can no more avoid this than a Leopard can avoid having spots. Call it the hermeneutical circle. Call it *anamnesis*. Call it whatever you want. But try to deny it and the clever among us will hang you out to dry if you try to maintain what something is without addressing the issue of how access to it is acquired. Thus, in the case in hand, which is our recognition of Husserl as a philosopher, we are confronted by the question of whether he is a teacher of philosophy. I would hope that no one among us would take issue with the claim that to be a teacher one has to have something to teach. In the case of Husserl, this something is the epochē. Husserl tells us that the epochē is *the* method of phenomenology. He also tells us that phenomenology is *the* method of rigorous science, and that

philosophy is the latter or it is nothing at all. But is the epochē something that can be acquired by learning? Is it a learning matter? Can the epochē be taught? Can philosophy be taught?

Let's see. Husserl writes that the epochē involves a "bracketing," a "parenthesizing," a "putting out of action," a "suspension" of our belief. But belief in what and to what end? Husserl's answer is our belief in the world and to the end of justifying what we believe to be our knowledge of both the world and of ourselves, as beings who live in the world. How on earth does Husserl think that such a method can possibly lead to the justification of knowledge? He thinks this because knowledge means *seeing* that the contents that our concepts presuppose are in harmony with our presuppositions that our concepts *really* presuppose such contents. But how do we become aware of our presuppositions? We perform the epochē. The clever among us will say that this is circular reasoning and therefore fallacious, because it "begs the question." But does it? Let us recall the question. The question is, What is the epochē and how is it acquired? Our answer, at this point, is that the epochē is *the* method by which we become aware of our presuppositions and that it is acquired by making us aware of them. If there is a circle here, its terms would be the "method *for* becoming aware of our presuppositions" and the "*making* us aware of them." These terms are clearly not identical. Hence, if this way of answering the question still entails a circle it is certainly not a vicious one, because the answer to the question is in no wise hidden in the question. That we have presuppositions in no way entails how we become aware of them. However, we are moving too quickly, since we have not addressed yet the question of how Husserl thinks the epochē can make us aware of our presuppositions.

Husserl thinks that the method of the epochē can make us aware of our presuppositions because we have them and because we are able to become aware of them when confronted by them. The epochē confronts us with our presuppositions, because by bracketing what it is we believe, it allows us to gauge whether the contents of our beliefs are in harmony with the concepts through which these beliefs are expressed. How does Husserl think we come to be aware of our beliefs? We ask ourselves. More precisely, we interrogate our experience with a view toward what in this experience shows up—at least initially—as unquestionable and with a view of how it so shows up. Among all of what shows up in experience as unquestionable Husserl thinks that there is something that, because of how it shows up, counts as the ground for all else that shows up as unquestionable. This most basic element is the world. Husserl thinks that how it shows up is as something that is always already there, as the unsurpassable horizon for all else that also shows up. As the unsurpassable

horizon for all else that shows up, the world does not show up like anything else that also shows up as unquestionable in experience.

Because of this Husserl calls the world the basic “thesis” of our experience. Being the most basic aspect of what shows up in our experience, he thinks the thesis of the world is unmediated by anything else that shows up as unquestionable in experience. Because it always shows up as already there, as the fringe proper to experience, Husserl considers the showing up proper to the world as something that is native to experience. As such, he designates the unquestionableness with which it shows up as “natural.” Because this unquestionableness itself is taken by Husserl as the definitive mark of belief, he considers it, i.e., the belief in the world, also to be natural. And because the unquestionable belief at issue here, like the thesis it posits, is unsurpassable, he considers the belief that “posits” it to be elemental to our most immediate experience. As such, Husserl designates the positing proper to this unsurpassable belief the “natural attitude.”

Husserl thinks that so long as the thesis of the world is posited by the belief in it, it, that is, the thesis of the world, is accepted by the natural attitude that posits it as something that is “valid.” As such, the existence of the world is accepted by immediate experience as both what it is, that is, as something that is “on hand” for experience, and as how it is, that is, “always already there” as the unsurpassable horizon for whatever else shows up in experience. As an accepted validity, the positing of the world thesis does not show up as a presupposition, but as the way that it, i.e., the world, is. In order for the positing of the thesis of the world to lose its status as a taken for granted and in that way valid belief, i.e., in order for it to assume the status of a presupposition, we must confront it in such a way that its belief quality, that is, its unquestionableness, comes to the fore of our awareness. Initiating just this confrontation, which is to say, initiating the awareness of the natural attitude’s positing of the thesis of the world as something that *is taken for granted*, is precisely what Husserl thinks the method of the phenomenological epochē accomplishes.

Husserl thinks the method of the epochē accomplishes this because once the positing of the thesis of the world by the natural attitude is caught sight of by the interrogation of our beliefs, it becomes possible to “put it out of action,” to “suspend” it, and thereby to “bracket,” “put into parenthesis” the validity of the world thesis posited by the natural attitude. Husserl thinks that the consequence of this is decidedly *not* the annulment of either the natural thesis of the world or its positing; i.e., the counter-positing of the world thesis as something *invalid* and therefore non-existent. Rather, he thinks that the consequence of the epochē is that the positing of the world is confronted qua its positing, such that the latter

loses its status as something that is *accepted* as valid. No longer accepted as valid, the positing of the world thesis now shows up to the methodical awareness brought about by the epochē as what Husserl calls a “phenomenon.” It shows itself both as what it is—a belief—and as how it shows up—as a belief that is always already there, as the horizon for anything else that happens to show up. Husserl thinks that when awareness attends to the positing of the world thesis subsequent to its epochē, nothing is revealed as having changed in its unquestionableness, save that now this unquestionableness is revealed as such, that is, is revealed as a phenomenon. And as such, the phenomenon of the positing of the world thesis confronts the awareness of it as a presupposition.

Before turning our attention to how Husserl thinks the confrontation with this presupposition can lead the one who confronts it to question it in a manner that permits the belief that it contains to be gauged with respect to its content—such that the question can be raised and answered of whether this belief really grasps the content that it believes it knows—two things must be considered. One, Husserl thinks that *any* belief that shows up in experience can be subjected to the method of the epochē. And two, Husserl initially thinks that for the purpose of establishing phenomenology as rigorous science, the scope of the epochē should be limited to the natural attitude’s positing of the world thesis. His reason for so limiting the scope of the epochē is rooted in the peculiar status of the *awareness of* the phenomenon proper to the positing of the world thesis. Subsequent to the epochē, this awareness *itself* shows up as a phenomenon. It shows up as the phenomenon of an awareness that is “pure” in the sense that it no longer accepts the validity of the world thesis posited by the natural attitude. As such, it lends itself to being investigated with a view toward precisely how the latter (i.e., the natural attitude), and anything else that shows up upon its basis, so shows up as a taken for granted validity to this pure awareness itself. Husserl initially characterizes the pure awareness at issue here as a new region of being, never before delimited in terms of its specificity. Because Husserl thinks that this region of being remains unaffected by the epochē’s exclusion of the natural attitude’s positing of the world thesis, he thinks that it has the status of the phenomenological “residuum” proper to this exclusion. And because the residuum has as its *sine qua non* the epochē, he refers to the shift in awareness that occurs with the epochē’s operation as the phenomenological reduction. Finally, because the latter (i.e. the phenomenological reduction) reveals a mode of awareness that confronts the positing of the world thesis as a presupposition, Husserl designates the status of this awareness as transcendental.

Once the fundamental belief in the world that shows up as the positing of the world thesis confronts awareness as a presupposition, Husserl thinks

phenomenology is in a position to investigate whether the content of this presupposition knows what it believes it knows. Husserl thinks that it does not. Specifically, the content of the belief in the world thesis, which maintains the world's status as a being that is completely transcendent to experience, cannot be coherently maintained in the face of the awareness of the inseparability of this thesis from the awareness that posits it. However, rather than rehearse what Husserl thinks the results are of the phenomenological *research* on the correlation between awareness and the world phenomenon that is discovered when awareness confronts the incoherence of the presupposition that is at issue here, a number of points about the *method* of this research need to be made.

First, some points about what this method is *not*. It is not a gesture, if by gesture is meant a movement of thought that is so entwined with language that precision about what it entails must be forever postponed, because of the putative ineluctable ambiguity proper to the latter (i.e. proper to language). As we have seen, precision about the epochē is possible. It is possible for the simple reason that one among us can be recognized as having succeeded not only in delineating certain beliefs but also as having confronted them with the awareness of their status *as* beliefs, that is, *as* presuppositions. It does not follow, however, that because it is possible to achieve precision about the epochē that it is a technique. The epochē therefore is not a series of *rules* for combining and transforming word symbols according to a pre-established calculus. Nor is it a rule-governed procedure for combining and transforming *concepts* in accord with such a calculus. The epochē is neither of these for the simple reason that the source of its methodical legitimacy is not determined by rules but by *awareness*. Specifically, its legitimacy is determined by the awareness that confronts presuppositions *as* presuppositions.

As *the* method for bringing about this awareness, the question still remains regarding how the epochē is to be positively determined. Husserl thinks that it can be so determined in terms of its lack of presuppositions. Many of those who are recognizable as philosophers and who have tried to follow his method, however, take serious issue with this positive determination. They have alleged that Husserl's phenomenology is loaded with presuppositions, presuppositions about the meaning of Being, about the transparency of awareness, about the other, about history, about language; the list goes on and on. Surely this judgment of history cannot simply be dismissed. Surely these philosophers cannot simply be said to have misunderstood Husserl's thoughts about the epochē. Perhaps. But perhaps they have. Maybe they were poor students of Husserl or maybe Husserl was a poor teacher. Or maybe Husserl was not a teacher at all, because maybe the epochē is not a learning matter, not knowledge, but a know-how.

Let us try to resolve this by attending to the sense in which the method of the epochē might possibly be understood as a presuppositionless method. One sense would be to understand the results that it brings about, the phenomenological reduction and the awareness of transcendental awareness, to have the status of truths that do not presuppose anything. It cannot be denied that Husserl's early thinking about the epochē maintained something like this sense. After all, its performance seemed, once and for all, to do away with the presupposition of the validity of the world thesis posited by the natural attitude. However, it also cannot be maintained that Husserl's thinking, as a result of the *research* that he conducted "under" the epochē, did not actually arrive at a different conclusion regarding the latter's presuppositionlessness. Rather than present a *starting point* that once and for all banishes all presuppositions, Husserl came to think of the epochē as the method for the finding of any presuppositions whatever. As such, its *methodical* sense as *the way of finding* presuppositions is stressed over the supposed finality proper to the specific results of what it finds at any given time. On this understanding, the epochē would be presuppositionless in the sense that the finding of any presuppositions whatever would be able to be shown as having come about via its employment. But can this be shown?

I think it can. If by "presupposition" is understood the confrontation with a belief by awareness, a confrontation that allows it to be interrogated with respect to the question of whether its content is in harmony with what it thinks it knows, then were one among us to show *how* to bring about this confrontation, we would be constrained to admit that what we have been shown is *the* method for finding our presuppositions. Now Husserl, I submit, has shown us how to do this. Further, insofar as the confrontation at issue here is recognized as the *sine qua non* for philosophy, and I think that it has to be so recognized, then what we have been shown is *how* to become philosophers. Granting this, the only question remaining would be how Husserl shows this; that is, is this something he is able to teach, and therefore something we are able to learn, or is it something that issues from a mysteriously acquired know-how, and thus is not a learning matter but a divinely inspired "talent"? Of course, I am sure many today would not grant that Husserl's epochē has shown us how to become philosophers. For clearly Husserl's phenomenology can be shown to presuppose many things whose content is not in harmony with what he believes it knows. To take but one example: Husserl presupposes that the awareness that shows up subsequent to the epochē is not only transcendental but that it also exists absolutely. However, when the content of this belief is confronted by what it presupposes is really the case, a clear lack of harmony appears to emerge, insofar as the facticity and historicity of awareness does not seem to be in harmony with its presupposed

absoluteness. Even granting this, however, I would respond: how is it that the awareness of this presupposition comes about? Does not such awareness *presuppose* that the *belief* in awareness's absoluteness is confronted by an awareness of this belief that is able to gauge its harmony with its content, and in the case at hand, able to gauge its lack of harmony? In other words, does not the finding of this presupposition in what Husserl believes his phenomenology to know appeal to a tacit awareness that confronts this belief, an awareness that Husserl's articulation of the method of the epochē has the great merit of rendering explicit?

Whether one is convinced by this line of argument or not, the question remains: is Husserl's epochē a matter of knowledge or know-how? If it is the former (knowledge), we could speak of his or perhaps better *the* theory of the phenomenological epochē. If it is the latter (know-how), we would have to speak of it as mode of praxis, rooted perhaps in what the Greeks called *phronesis*. Or perhaps the epochē is something in between, say a theory that leads to praxis or a praxis that leads to theory. Now I like to think that I *know* what Husserl's epochē is because I *know how* to practice it. I also like to think that I was not born knowing this but that I somehow learned it. Moreover, I like to think that if I had enough time, I could show that this very way of posing the questions *presupposes* an awareness of the historicity of belief *and* a belief in the historicity of awareness, an awareness that it would not be unworthwhile to confront by investigating its origins in what it is I believe I really know. I will defer the question of whether such an investigation would really be worthwhile, however, for another occasion.