Being in Brackets: A First-Person Exploration of the Phenomenological Method Epoché \*

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ABSTRACT

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This article is an excerpt from the ongoing research exploring the experience of the phenomenological method of epoché from the first-person perspective. First, I outline the state of the field and then dive into the first-person exploration, describing the method used in gathering our experiential data. After that, I focus on presenting a data-derived model that describes the experience of epoché as a diachronic process, comprised of five stages: 1) A pre-epoché state and the experience of the natural attitude shifting; 2) Entering the experiential state of the epoché; 3) The experiential state of the epoché – what it is like; 4) Exiting the experiential state of the epoché; and 5) A Post-epoché state and how the natural attitude is experienced after the epoché. Throughout the presentation of observations, I focus on a) how an individual moves away from and back towards being immersed in the natural attitude; b) how an individual relates to her own experiences and c) what changes occur in the process.

KEYWORDS

Phenomenology, epoché, natural attitude, first-person research

1. INTRODUCTION

To better understand our enterprise, we must first familiarize ourselves with the concept of the “natural attitude”. In *Ideas I*, Husserl [1] introduces the natural attitude as our everyday assumption that the world exists independent of our conscious awareness. In this attitude we take the world as always already present, prior to any reflection. Expanding on this conceptualization, in Fink’s “Sixth Cartesian Meditation” [2, p. 166], Husserl goes on to say: “In the natural attitude, in which for ourselves and for others we are called and are humans, to everything worldly there belongs the being-acceptedness: existent in the world, in the world that is always existent beforehand as constant acceptedness of a basis. So also man’s being is being in the world that is existent beforehand. In phenomenology, this being-beforehand is itself a problem.”

This everyday forgetfulness thus permeates our everyday life. We operate on the basis of natural naivety, that reality exists ‘out there’ and is waiting to be discovered and explored. This reality is supposed to be independent of our experience and exists even if there is no one to direct attention to it or perceive it [3]. This assumption is so deeply ingrained in us that it is accepted not only by all of us in everyday life, but also by the natural sciences.

The basic method of the phenomenological approach is to direct one's attention from the content of the experience to the observation of the experience itself, as it is given in consciousness. In order to avoid succumbing to our everyday embeddedness in the natural attitude, we must bracket our presuppositions, values, judgments and opinions about the world.

To do this, we employ a particular gesture of awareness – the epoché. Husserl [1] asserts that the epoché enables a return to “the things themselves”, to the world as we directly experience it. In performing the epoché, we put in brackets, or “turn off” the whole world as we normally experience it, including our own assumptions, judgments, theories etc.

The task is to re-awaken us to recognize the meaning we bestow upon our experiences. As Merleau-Ponty [4, p. xv] puts it, performing epoché does not mean to withdraw from the world or the phenomena, but to “slacken the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus bring them to our notice”.

* 1. State of the art in contemporary first-person research

The definition of the method of epoché as well as the question of its importance in phenomenology and the possibilities of implementation outside philosophical fields have been the source of many debates (e.g. [5,6]). Moreover, contemporary discussions [5,7] point to a lacking definition of the concept. In addition to problems of interpretation, there is also the question of how the realization of such a state takes place from the first-person perspective (i.e. what is it like for me, the experiencing subject, to perform the epoché). Similarities between the concept of the epoché and various Eastern practices have also been illuminated in recent decades, such as the yoga practice of prāṇāyāma (breath control) [8] and Samatha-Vipassanā meditation [9].

Due to the uncertainty that permeates the field and the various interpretations about what epoché is and how to carry it out, I have decided to investigate the experiential process from a first-person perspective in the hopes of providing more clarity and being able to better distinguish what it is we are talking about, when we talk about the practice of epoché.

In this article I will broadly focus on the following questions: what is it like to come into contact with the state of epoché and what are the characteristics of such a state from a first-person perspective. I will present the diachronic process involved in carrying out the method of epoché, focusing on a) how an individual moves away from and back towards being immersed in the natural attitude; b) how an individual relates to her own experience and c) what changes in the process.

1. METHOD

The excerpt presented in this article is part of a broader study in which we have explored epoché with the micro-phenomenological interview method [10]. The aim of the micro-phenomenological interview [10] is to help co-researchers become aware of a past experience and access detailed descriptions of that same concrete experience, enabling the coming into contact with previously unattainable dimensions of lived experience and cultivate an individual's reflection and retrospective reporting of experiential data.

In total we have conducted eight micro-phenomenological interviews with one co-researcher. The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded on a personal phone or a Zoom H4n audio recorder. All experiences focused on and were taken from meditative practice – either a Vipassanā meditation (with eyes closed), or a walking mindfulness meditation (with eyes open).

1. RESULTS – DIACHRONIC PROCESS
	1. Pre-epoché state and the experience of the natural attitude shifting

A characteristic of the pre-state is being gently aware of one's surroundings, sensing them, but not engaging with them, letting them pass by. The experience is accompanied by a relaxed and stable state of body and mind. In an interview it was described as follows:

“And as I stand there, I also hear people, this soft shuffling of the people around me, silent, soft movements of feet shifting on the ground and shuffling on the ground. And there is this feeling in my body of stable ground. […] And I feel my body as a whole, just this being in the standing position. And a general calmness that comes with this feeling.”

* 1. Entering the experiential state of the epoché

One way of getting into the state of epoché is by spontaneously “slipping into” the state, whereby the state of epoché seems to arise by itself. There is an element of a transition, which can be faster or slower. One can just slip into the state – in this case the transition is very fast. On the other hand, one can also slowly allow the state to take place, either by remembering what it was like before and trying to follow the felt atmosphere of that state, or by softly settling in the body (or a body part) and allowing the sensation to come, gently holding it in awareness.

At first there is often a feeling of tension in the body one recognizes and intentionally relaxes. For example:

“I relax the shoulders, I let them [the arms] slump next to my body. Then there is this very soft, slow movement, with no pressure in it.” As this relaxation of the upper part of the body and a move towards the lower part takes place, there is an experience of “relaxing into this feeling. It is bodily, as I shift a bit with my shoulders, but also it is attentional – not focusing directly, just letting things go and flow down here [in the belly area].”

This settling into the (part of the) body is then followed by a feeling of space being more open, as though:

“My body can relax into this openness. Like, my body as a shape can flow into this [space], a boundary where my skin is can flow into this open, flowing, shimmering, static feeling [felt as the boundary, a space a few centimeters around my body and slowly entering the space further “away” from the body]. There is this feeling of being just open and relaxed, there is an openness at the sides.”

The feeling described here as a shimmer, or a static-like feeling in quality, is something that lends itself towards lessening the sense of bodily boundaries. It is accompanied by a feeling of spreading.

* 1. The experiential state of the epoché – what it is like

The experiential state of the epoché has a variety of dimensions often appearing together. Here I will describe a few that have occurred often and throughout different experiences.

The state of the epoché was always characterized by a certain serenity and letting-be. There was no active searching for information or any type of stimulus in the world, rather it was a calmness in being, an allowing of appearances.

An aspect of epoché, already partly indicated above, is a felt sense of stability. It was described as a feeling of “sitting in myself” in the interview situation, yet it is important to note that this experience has very little to do with the experience of bodily sensations. It relates more to the feeling of the body as a whole, to the *gestalt* of the body.

Another aspect is that there is no directedness of one's attention towards the world or “towards the front of oneself”. In an interview it was described as:

“Being directed towards the back and also being aware of the spinal cord, of the position of the spine”. The activity is felt only in the sustaining of the awareness on the whole bodily gestalt. It is effortless and feels like “just being there with the awareness.”

This type of awareness often brings about a change in perspective or a change in one's visual field, if the eyes are open. The world is perceived without its usual depth, being described as follows:

“I feel as if I am looking at a ‘picture’ in front of me, there is this lack of spatial depth in what I am seeing. And at the same time there is a feeling of seeing through this ‘picture’, this sensation. It feels as though my visual field is a veil and has its own dimension of depth and of spatiality being present in the natural, everyday world. But what I am sensing is that which is ‘beyond it’, ‘through it’ […] It is like another feeling of space around me that is at the same time dense, filled, thick, light, flowing, all-encompassing. I feel this spatiality as an atmosphere, it is primarily felt as air around me. And it goes on, it is felt as though the visual field (the veil) has a certain stopping point – it stops the perception on a certain point. But this denser spatiality is felt as limitless, it goes on, it feels as limitless potentiality all around me.”

The state of the epoché is also characterised by a feeling of a primordial space. This space has the quality of dense, thick and sometimes warm air that is:

“Not visible, it is a felt air, felt as oneness around me [my location], to the sides, everywhere around me.”

In a similar experiential episode during meditation, in addition to what was described above, a feeling of space as a “background of holding” was identified. This background was felt as being held by space, which had a profound quality of darkness and thickness.

The state of epoché is also accompanied by the loosening of the sense of bodily boundaries and dissolving the separation between what is inner and what is outer, described in the interview situation as follows:

“There was no more separation, there was nothing out [there], there was just this blackness and this familiarity that was felt as and felt in this warm quality of blackness. And just the location that is this [where I feel my awareness to be] and that is all.”

* 1. Exiting the experiential state of the epoché

Exiting the state has often occurred spontaneously and unintentionally. There was a feeling of the world slowly drifting back in as attention started to become more focused on the external world and to get more directed towards it.

In a few examples, there was a profound feeling of no separation between oneself and the world in the state of the epoché, which was later contrasted by a feeling of separation on returning to a more “natural”, habitual mode of being in the world. There were also a few instances of intentionally exiting the state or rather of a feeling of “having to return”, which was experienced as a desire, an anxiety or a nudge urging the observer to return to the natural mode of being.

A very big part of exiting the epoché state was the felt sense of coming back to one's own body from the (above mentioned) primordial space. It was described as coming closer to a point where one feels oneself to be situated and the space around that area becoming thicker and more condensed. This condensed and thicker feeling can start in a part of the body, for example the area of the torso, or it can be felt as the whole *gestalt* of the body becoming denser and heavier.

Heaviness and denseness also allows a sharper focus on the body, which begins to separate the body from the rest of the space. As one starts to get more actively directed towards the world, stronger feelings of differentiation between form and background in the visual field becomes more noticeable. For example:

“I am able to “pick out” a particular tree from a myriad of different trees, able to direct myself towards it and focus on it – making it stand out from the background as an entity.”

This perception of one's environment as holding more graspable and holdable possibilities comes to the fore as the feeling of the body also shifts towards the background.

* 1. Post-epoché state and how the natural attitude is experienced after the epoché

Coming back from a profound state of epoché leaves a mark on one's way of interacting with the world and one's way of being in the world. There is an immediate feeling of an increase in calmness, gentleness, contentment and a slowness of being. But also, a much more lingering feeling resounding through one’s being, the feelings of presence and the openness of space. There is a profound awareness of how one's awareness shapes the surrounding world and how one is in the end inseparable from one's surroundings.

1. CONCLUSION

In the article I have set out to enrich the traditional conceptualisations of epoché with in-depth descriptions of the first-person experiences of epoché elicited by micro-phenomenological interviews. In analyzing the experiential reports of performing epoché, I have made three notable observations. The first observation is a profound shift in the quality of experience, how one turns towards, notices and attunes herself to the world. The second and third observation are closely linked to the first one: the second one being a felt profound shift in how one experiences one's own existence, one's being in the world; and the third one being a profound shift in how the appearance of the world and its enclosedness appears to “the observer”. In the future it would be fruitful to consider such endeavors more thoroughly in the frame of contemplative and mystical traditions. It would also be interesting to design studies which bracket all such traditional presuppositions.

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