ON WHAT TRIGGERS HUSSERL'S *EPOCHÉ*

MIRCEA MARICA

Abstract. Husserl's methodological skepticism is concerned with the possibility of understanding the objective attainments, not with questioning the justification of scientific claims. The motivation behind the *epoché* is twofold: first, there is the perplexity one experiences when faced with reflecting upon the objectivity of our knowledge claims; second, in performing the *epoché*, one is motivated by the need to avoid a methodological mistake. It is not that we doubt knowledge; it is just that it would be a methodological mistake to base ourselves upon it for an investigation into what knowledge itself is. Inasmuch as the *epoché* is directed towards a clarification of our very claims to knowledge, its radical form is a methodological prerequisite.

Key words: phenomenology, Husserl, objectivity, subjectivity, self-evidence, *epoché*, naïveté, science, knowledge, empirical, formal, logic.

Introduction

Husserl's phenomenology is, first and foremost, a method. It begins with the suspension of the so called natural attitude (NA), the everyday naïveté defined by the highest degree of taking things for granted, of postulating objectivity, a sort of quotidian ordinariness, removed from any critical awareness. In performing the phenomenological *epoché*, the philosopher is to bracket NA completely, to neutralize the general thesis as such.

Several scholars, however, have expressed doubts regarding the motivation behind such a radical suspension of judgement. People (e.g., Fink (1970), Sartre (1962)) have argued that the natural attitude is coherent as it stands, and thus there are no rational reasons within it to motivate the critical stance Husserl proposes.

The purpose of this paper is to inquire the motivation behind the Husserlian *epoché*, as it can be depicted from Husserl's early lectures on logic and epistemology (ILTK). I will argue that one can distinguish a twofold motivation in Husserl's text: first, the triggering ground of the *epoché* consists in the sense and the awareness of a lack of fundamental understanding concerning our knowledge claims. Secondly, in what its radical form is concerned, I will argue that, given the purpose, a radical form of suspension of judgement is needed. Since the concern of the Husserlian theory of knowledge is with what knowledge as such is, it follows that it cannot start its investigation from presupposed knowledge claims.

To this aim, I will first offer a brief account of Husserl's proposed method, as depicted from his 1906/07 lectures and *Ideen I*. Further on, I will distinguish between three levels of naïveté Husserl finds in our ordinary and scientific atti-

tudes; even though having a critical stance built within them, sciences, whether empirical or formal, are still naive in the sense of them not questioning the possibility of their own accomplishments. As such, there is still a fundamental piece of knowledge we lack.

In the final section of this paper I will contrast the Husserlian *epoché* with the Cartesian doubt. Distinguishing the fundamental differences in both form and purpose between the two will prove particularly fruitful in obtaining further clarification regarding motivation that lays behind Husserl's method.

The natural attitude and the *epoché*: A 'pedagogical' skepticism

The natural attitude is characterized by a general positing, a directedness towards nothing in particular, towards a general thesis. To perform the phenomenological *epoché* is to bracket NA completely, to neutralize the general thesis as such. The philosophical attitude specifically consists, according to Husserl, in recognizing the NA as naïve and trying to gain a certain distance from it, to bracket it.

All philosophical questions are first and foremost questions of knowledge. If we are not sure that knowledge is possible and what knowledge is, we cannot start any investigation. In that sense, questions of knowledge are the first questions of philosophy.

Husserl (ILTK: §33a) argues that any theory of knowledge implies a unique kind of epistemological skepticism as its starting point. But the *epoché* does not entail a negation of our ordinary claims, but rather a modification, a neutralization. The phenomenological attitude is designed as an escape the naïve dogmatism of the NA by a suspension of judgment, implying neither an affirmation, nor a denial of our ordinary claims: "It is not a transformation of the [general] thesis into its antithesis, of positive into negative; it is also not a transformation into presumption, suggestion, indecision, doubt (in one or another sense of the word)" (Ideen I: 97–98).

Thus, Husserl's methodological skepticism is not a disavowal of knowledge. It is concerned with the possibility of understanding the objective attainments and the validity of sciences, not with questioning the justification of scientific claims. Husserl's method is directed towards understanding what objective scientific validity might be and how does it reveal itself in subjective acts. As Dermot Moran puts it, "[...]Husserl employs the term "epistemology" not to refer to the kinds of epistemic justification usually marshalled to overcome the threat of skepticism, but rather, more in the Kantian sense of an a priori investigation into the nature of those acts which yield cognition" (2000: 92). Then again, because it wants to understand knowledge better, it cannot start from knowledge.

The suspension of the NA modifies the general thesis, displacing it from what appears to how it appears, how those objects are given to one. Thus, Husserl shifts to a genuinely transcendental position: how is it that these phenomena are given to me.

If in the natural attitude we look upon the world as something that is already given as existing, through the *epoché* we give up this stance. We "abstain from participating, as reflecting subjects, in the natural positing of existence by the original act of our natural ego" (Kockelmans 1994: 222).

However, people have wondered what is it that is lacking within the NA, which might trigger such a move. Eugene Fink (1970), Husserl's last assistant, notably discusses this problem, arguing that there are no apparent motives within the natural attitude for executing the phenomenological *epoché*. Sartre (1962: 102) also takes up the problem raised by Fink, arguing that the transcendental subject seems "artificial", because it can only be understood from the point of view of a method which seems un-motivated in the natural attitude. The *epoché* seems like an "acte gratuit"; "[t]he natural standpoint is perfectly coherent as it stands; there are no 'cracks' or difficulties which would lead us to question it, much less to suspend it wholesale in the manner recommended by Husserl"(Carr 2003: 193).

In *Ideen I*, Husserl describes the *epoché* as an act of our "perfect freedom". The transition to the reduction simply follows the presentation of the natural attitude: "Since we are completely free to modify every positing and every judging and to parenthesize every objectivity […], instead of remaining within this attitude, we shall radically alter it" (Ideen I: 57).

However, while one might find Husserl's account in *Ideen I* indeed lacking a detailed depiction of the incentives for performing the *epoché*, in his 1906/07 lectures, when first introducing the method, Husserl develops this point extensively.

Three levels of naïveté

In *ILTK* (§27), Husserl does acknowledge that, as opposed to our everyday naïveté, the sciences themselves have already a critical reflex built into their work. In the scientific attitude, we gain our axioms from empirical observation, we deduce theorems which gain the character of hypothesis, and then retest these hypotheses empirically. As long as they are not falsified, we hold on to them. This is a genuine critical stance: sciences do not just take their hypotheses for granted; they are not naïve about them. The progress of science involves a continuous critical testing and retesting of hypotheses. In this sense, a critical attitude is definitive of science in general (ILTK: 128).

But the fact that science is already critical in comparison with our ordinary naïve attitude is just a higher form of naïveté (unlike the radical critical stance of philosophy). That is because sciences would not pose the general question regarding how knowledge is attained.

So one can, by now, distinguish two forms of naïveté – a lower and a higher form. The difference between the critical function in science and critical philosophical thinking can also be sorted out in terms of purpose: the purpose of the critical function of ordinary science is to increase and improve knowledge: to know more and to know better, to increase the certainty of our knowledge claims. The philosophical critical reflection operates on another level. It is about understanding what the achievement of science actually consists in. Thus, the critical stance of philosophy has a different finality than the ordinary critique which is inbuilt in the scientific methodology.

Even with regard to formal sciences, the point Husserl makes is that they themselves are, in a further, higher form, naïve, because they themselves lack philosophical

criticism (ILTK: §28, §30). Knowledge of the a priori consists of insight: I see that one plus one equals two, I understand it, I follow it. The seeing, the thinking, the understanding are subjective acts. Thus, when we talk of a theory of knowledge, we cannot but also talk about these subjective acts, without which there is nothing in terms of science and understanding: "as long as no clarity is reached about the justification of knowledge in general, formal logic cannot defend the legitimacy of its procedure *with absolute certainty* either. It proceeds, we can say, in a *noetically naive* way" (ILTK: 138).

In the formal sciences subjectivity almost disappears into oblivion. When performing the deductive acts we do not attend to this subjective side, we are completely directed towards our formal objects, oblivious of all the subjectivity involved. However, it cannot be reduced to nothing, it must be active. Thus, in empirical observation, we experience a regular need to check the epistemic reliability of our subjective acts, observations, memories, while that doesn't apply to formal sciences, because self-evidence turns us inattentive of the subjective acts involved in 'seeing' the axioms. The evidence in logic is of such kind that we can become unaware of the role played here by subjectivity; so much so that, for instance, for Kant, the analytic a priori spoke for itself. His theory of knowledge was not concerned with it. So, for Kant only the synthetic a priori and the empirical are considered to be a true epistemic problem. Husserl starts with the Kantian intuition that subjectivity plays a problematic role in the a posteriori. But he argues that a full theory of knowledge has also to account for the self-evidence of the insights of logic (ILTK: §26, §27 and §28).

Whatever science produces, starts at an ultimate level, with experience (§25). Natural science does not reject common, pre-scientific experience of nature, but corrects it. Even if going far beyond what seems to count as the object of direct experience, the scientist is still ultimately justifying his claims on perception. Science cannot totally discard experience. But perceptual experience is categorized, structured, formed by thought. The thought is a categorical structure which transforms perceptual experience into categorical structures: S is P. This is a major step. The world is turned into a categorical object: I lift what I experience into the realm of the intelligible. With regard to science, that is the crucial step. Starting from this most elementary lifting, I can go on and make more complex categorical structuring, I can expand my knowledge. In this way, I lift the world into ever more complex forms of intelligibility.

Empirical observations and insight into the logical axioms are both, however, subjective acts of 'seeing'. Thus, a full theory of knowledge has to account for the self-evidence of the insights of logic too:

> For, if one has realized that, in themselves and by their essence, cognitive acts claim legitimacy and have to be able to prove that claim in themselves alone, then questions about this proof must be raised in theoretical universality for all types of knowledge, and nowhere can it ever be said that one way of knowing or another is not in need of any critique (ILTK: 133).

In sum, science, be it empirical or formal, does not have a complete knowledge of how it comes about its own knowledge. Also, the articulation of the formal

sciences is still directed towards the purpose of the regional sciences, servicing the ordinary knowledge interest of science, in terms of genuinely knowing the world better. So they themselves are inscribed in the scientific project. In that sense too, they partake in the naïveté of the empirical sciences. Of course, their naïveté is of a higher form, as they guide the regional sciences towards the universality pertaining to formal ontology; as such, they are already articulating universal conditions of possibility of knowledge in general. But they are still naïve, given that they are not critical with their own accomplishments. As such, we need a further, philosophical critical reflection on this whole scientific project in terms of what this knowledge actually is.

The *epoché* and the Cartesian doubt: form and motivation

Descartes's methodological doubt was also directed towards achieving apodictic foundations for knowledge, and thus it may be regarded as preliminary to Husserl's *epoché*. However, Descartes's goal is to find the ground from which science can start from, while for Husserl "epistemological investigation does not deal with the specifics of how one is justified in believing particular facts, expressed in a proposition like *Paris is South of London*. Rather, the epistemological question deals with the processes involved in *being* justified in believing *any fact whatever*" (Sanchez 2010: 9).

As such, Husserl's project is completely different from Descartes's in both motivation and form. From the point of view of motivation, Descartes wanted to provide an indubitable foundation to scientific knowledge. Husserl says that even if we were to find such a *mathesis universalis*, the problem of the theory of knowledge would still not be solved. Husserl's theory of knowledge is not about obtaining perfect knowledge, but rather about clarifying what knowledge is, a clarification by a critique of knowledge; an understanding of the meaning of knowledge and its objective claim to cogency (ILTK: 182).

In what form is concerned, Descartes denied, at least temporarily, the existence of the things reduced, while Husserl only places it within brackets. In performing the *epoché*, we just "put out of action" the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude. The *epoché* is envisioned as "a certain refraining from judgment which is compatible with the unshaken conviction of truth, even with the unshakable conviction of evident truth" (Ideen I: 59-60).

What Descartes stands for is the philosopher meddling in the business of the sciences. The philosopher trying to increase the rationality of science, give it a better foundation, a better justification. Thus, the Cartesian picture is still scientific, involved in the enterprise of improving science itself, by giving it more solid foundations, justification (ILTK: 185).

Of course, in any number of times, Husserl also talks about transcendental phenomenology as being the ultimate foundation for science. However, what Husserl means by this differs from the foundations that sciences themselves continuously work at for improving their own knowledge. The 'internal' foundational work of the sciences is to be distinguished from the philosophical foundations: "[p]hilosophy is not in a

position to check or add to that evidence, and has no business certifying, rejecting, or even weighting the truth of those claims. Husserl's investigation […] aims only at the meaning or sense of those claims and of that evidence (Hall 1982: 189-190).

Being concerned with what knowledge as such is, a theory of knowledge cannot start its investigation from presupposed knowledge claims. The *epoché* operates on our judgements in the broad sense, on our stances, on our position takings. It keeps a distance, it doesn't engage with them, it brackets them, it puts them out of action. It doesn't go along with them, it doesn't go against them, it just holds back from them. It is a peculiar operation in which we alienate ourselves from ourselves, from our own stances. We behave as if we are totally neutral spectators. So we do not doubt anything in performing the *epoché*, because that would be an engagement with these claims. We leave them as they are, and just pull out of them.

In what the motivation laying behind the *epoché* is concerned, for Husserl, as opposed to Descartes, the problem is not that sciences lack intelligibility or a strong justification. As such, Descartes's method is motivated by the dissatisfaction he finds in the foundations upon which all scientific knowledge rests. The motivation behind the *epoché*, however, is quite distinct from that; when we start reflecting upon scientific knowledge in terms of what it actually is, and what it gives us, we are puzzled by not understanding the objectivity which is posited behind all of scientific knowledge. How can something which is utterly subjective give us objective knowledge of things which are not in our mind? This puzzlement about how our mind can reach out and tell us what is out there is behind the philosophical attitude proper. Everything science does is utterly rational and convincing, so convincing that we cannot deny it, but when we reflect upon how is it possible, and what this objectivity actually is, we get perplexed:

> We see that what is proven is demonstrated beyond a doubt. But, as soon as we begin to reflect epistemologically, that does not help us. Abysses of problems open up, and we come to admit that *knowledge's claim to legitimacy is in general a puzzle*. As long as the puzzle is not solved, as long as the essence, possibility, and objectivity of knowledge not elucidated, the meaning of knowable and known objectivity not elucidated, then all pre-established, determinate knowledge is subject to a big question mark (ILTK: 83)

Thus, while behind Descartes's doubt, there lays some kind of dissatisfaction with regard to the certainty of scientific knowledge, the motivation behind the *epoché* is twofold: first, there is the perplexity one experiences when faced with reflecting upon the objectivity of our knowledge claims; second, in performing the *epoché*, one is motivated by the need to avoid a methodological mistake. It is not that we doubt knowledge; it is just that it would be a methodological mistake to base ourselves upon it for an investigation into what knowledge itself is. We may have doubts with regard to certain claims or positions, but the motivation of the *epoché* is not founded on these doubts. Even if we have no doubts about all of our claims, even if we are perfectly happy with science and the scientific knowledge

we have, there is still a reason for the *epoché*. That is because the concern Husserl has in his idea of epistemology is not that this knowledge in itself is lacking justification, it is just that we do not understand what we have there, that we do not understand what this objectivity actually means.

There is a piece of knowledge lacking: the piece of knowledge with regard to what a piece of knowledge is. What motivates the *epoché* is the sense and the awareness of a lack. There is a lack of fundamental understanding concerning our knowledge claims in the sense of what we actually have there, what they achieve, what this objectivity is. In order to fill that lack, in order to achieve that understanding we must, of course, not presuppose any of this knowledge in our investigation. That means we have to bracket all of it in the first place, as the initial gesture, as the initial move.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that there are three levels of naïveté built, respectively, within our ordinary attitude towards knowledge, and within both our empirical and our formal scientific endeavours. Neither question the very way we come to acquire knowledge in the first place. As such, there is a fundamental piece of knowledge we lack. The awareness of that lack is what lies behind the critical stance put forth by Husserl, is what motivates the radical suspension of judgement he employs. Inasmuch as the *epoché* is directed towards a clarification of our very claims to knowledge, its radical form is a methodological prerequisite. One cannot start from engaging with knowledge claims in the quest for understanding knowledge.

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