Philosophy of Consciousness

Husserl

Lecture Reading Material for Topic Five
of the Free University of Brighton Philosophy Degree

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November, 2016
Chapter 1

Husserl

The question of developing a means of undistorted philosophical access to a state of pure consciousness leads us directly to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. It is here that we first encounter a philosopher who explicitly understands that the possibility of true philosophy is entirely dependent on the discovery and maintenance of such undistorted access. Husserl’s route was by means of what he came to call the phenomenological reduction.

Viewed from a sufficient distance, the phenomenological reduction, like our own experiment in stopping thinking, is intended to bring the meditating philosopher into a state of pure consciousness. For Husserl, this state is not an end in itself, but is rather a domain to be secured in order to be explicated by means of phenomenologically purified reflection.

1.1 The Life-World and the Epochē of the Objective Sciences

Husserl developed various “ways” into phenomenology from his first “breakthrough” in the Logical Investigations to his culminating enquiry into the “pregiven life-world” in the Crisis text. This Crisis enquiry begins with a consideration of the origins of modern objective science which Husserl traces back to the development of Galilean mathematical physics. His aim is to demonstrate that our modern scientific understanding of the “true” (i.e. objective) being of the universe is founded on a mathematical idealisation of the world that is already given in our normal everyday experience:

The contrast between the subjectivity of the life-world and the “objective,” the “true” world, lies in the fact that the latter is a theoretical-logical substraction, the substraction of something that is in principle not perceivable, in principle not experienceable
in its own proper being, whereas the subjective, in the life-world, is distinguished in all respects precisely by its being actually experienceable (Husserl, 1970/1992, p.).

It is this subjective-relative experienceable world that Husserl terms the “pregiven life-world” and it is the universal form of this life-world that he takes to be the proper subject matter of phenomenology. In explicating the a priori forms of this world, Husserl also seeks to provide a rational ground for the objective sciences by showing how the “truths” of science presuppose and depend on verifications that can only be obtained on the basis of life-world experience:

The life-world is a realm of original self-evidences. That which is self-evidently given is, in perception, experienced as “the thing itself,” in immediate presence, or, in memory, remembered as the thing itself; and every other manner of intuition is a presentification of the thing itself. [...] All conceivable verification leads back to these modes of self-evidence because the “thing itself” (in the particular mode) lies in these intuitions themselves as that which is actually, intersubjectively experienceable and verifiable and is not a substruction of thought; whereas such a substruction, insofar as it makes a claim to truth, can have actual truth only by being related back to such self-evidences (Husserl, 1970/1992, pp. 127-128).

Husserl’s goal in investigating the Galilean origins of objective science is to show how our unreflective acceptance of modern science’s mathematically idealised conception of the “true being” of nature causes us to overlook, or rather to look through the life-world in such a way that we no longer recognise it or distinguish it from our scientific model of the world. In order to remove this distorting layer of interpretation, and thereby to bring the life-world into clear view, Husserl requires that we each, as meditating philosophers, perform an epoché or bracketing of all objective sciences:

This means not merely an abstraction from them, such as an imaginary transformation, in thought, of present human existence, such that no science appeared in the picture. What is meant is rather an epoché of all participation in the cognitions of the objective sciences, an epoché of any critical position-taking which is interested in either their truth or falsity, even any position on their guiding idea of an objective knowledge of the world (Husserl, 1970/1992, p. 135).
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However, for anyone who reads the *Crisis* text it becomes clear that this epoché can only be effective if one has already understood what Husserl means by the objective sciences and the life-world that is to be distinguished from them. The enacting of the epoché is the bringing into play of this pre-existing understanding. The understanding itself relies on our careful reading of the *Crisis* text or on our having already and independently realised the distinction that Husserl is pointing out. From the perspective of the course, it turns out we *have* already discovered the life-world that Husserl is indicating: *it is the world as revealed in a state of pure pre-reflective (thought-free) consciousness.*

For us, therefore, there is no need to specifically effect an epoché of the objective sciences, as we can only (knowingly) bring scientific understandings into play by leaving (dividing) the state of pure consciousness and attempting to reflect on that state. If it were to be countered that we *unknowingly* bring scientific understandings into play that structure our *pre-reflective* experience, the answer is that such understandings would anyway belong to the structure of the life-world. Here we must distinguish between the particular life-world of a given individual or of a given historical period and the a priori structure of any life-world whatsoever. For Husserl, the idea of the first epoché is not to immediately uncover such a universal a priori structure, but only to bring into view my particular subjective-relative life-world.

1.2 The Phenomenological Reduction

The epoché of the objective sciences is therefore only a *first step* in effecting a phenomenological reduction. Husserl now wants to bring into question the world as it is understood quite apart from our scientific notions of objective existence. He wishes to question the very “pregivenness” of the life-world, our natural acceptance of its validity, of its actuality, our acceptance that we live *within* the world and that the world *precedes* us.

As with the epoché of the objective sciences, the intent is not to *deny* the validity of the actuality of the world and of our existence within it, but to suspend or bracket our normally unquestioned acceptance of these validities, in order that they may come into view *as* something we accept. Achieving this *transcendental* epoché requires more than a series of abstentions from individual validities:

Instead [. . .] a completely different sort of epoché is possible, namely, one which puts out of action, with one blow, the total performance running through the whole
of natural world-life and through the whole network (whether concealed or open) of validities – precisely that total performance which, as the coherent “natural attitude,” makes up “simple” “straightforward” ongoing life. Through the abstention which inhibits this whole hitherto unbroken way of life a complete transformation of all of life is attained, a thoroughly new way of life. An attitude is arrived at which is above the pregiveness of the validity of the world, above the infinite complex whereby, in concealment, the world’s validities are always founded on other validities, above the whole manifold but synthetically unified flow in which the world has and forever attains anew its content of meaning and ontic validity. In other words, we thus have an attitude above the universal conscious life (both individual-subjective and inter-subjective) through which the world is “there” for those naïvely absorbed in ongoing life, as unquestionably present, as the universe of what is there, as the field of all acquired and newly established life interests. They are all put out of action in advance by the epochē, and with them the whole natural ongoing life which is directed toward the actualities of “the” world (Husserl, 1970/1992, p. 150).

To attain this complete transformation, the individual:

... simply forbids himself – as a philosopher, in the uniqueness of the direction of his interest – to continue the whole natural performance of his world-life; that is, he forbids himself to ask questions which rest upon the ground of the world at hand, questions of being, questions of value, practical questions, questions about being or not-being, about being valuable, being useful, being beautiful, being good, etc. All natural interests are put out of play. [...] This is not a “view,” an “interpretation” bestowed upon the world. Every view about ..., every opinion about “the” world, has its ground in the pregiven world. It is from this very ground that I have freed myself through the epochē; I stand above the world, which has now become for me, in a quite peculiar sense, a phenomenon (Husserl, 1970/1992, p. 152).

According to the path taken in the Crisis text, the transcendental epochē also requires that we develop a “new universal direction of interest”:

... let us establish a consistent universal interest into the “how” of the manners of givenness and in the onta themselves, not straightforwardly but rather as objects in
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respect of their “how” — that is, with our interest exclusively and constantly directed toward how; throughout the alteration of relative validities, subjective appearances, and opinions, the coherent, universal validity world — the world — comes into being for us; how, that is, there arises in us the constant consciousness of universal existence, of the universal horizon, of real, actually existing objects, each of which we are conscious of only through the alterations of our relative conceptions of it, of its manners of appearing, its modes of validity, even when we are conscious of it in particularity as something simply being there (Husserl, 1970/1992, pp. 144–145).

Husserl’s intention is that we bracket our natural acceptance of the actuality of the world and of ourselves as individuals existing within the world. This enables us to look into the manners of givenness of the “onta” that we ordinarily do not register because our focus of interest is on the actuality of things as the things they are in the world. In suspending acceptance of the actuality of the world, we come to recognise that our experience of the world is not a straightforward reception of something pregiven, but that actuality is something bestowed on experiential entities according to the how of their manners givenness in consciousness.

For example, I see a snake in front of me on the path, and in that moment it is a snake as far as I am concerned; it has attained acceptance by me, it is actual. I move a little closer and I now see it is a stick. The previous attribution of the actuality of the snake is cancelled and I now (involuntarily) find actuality attributed to my stick experience. The reason I no longer see a snake is because, when I approached closer, the harmonious, flowing, moment to moment transformation of my sensory experience (the how of the subjective manners of givenness) no longer matched my perceptual snake expectations.

The idea of the phenomenological reduction is that I now recognise my entire experience of the world stands upon a complex, many-layered and unified attribution of world-actuality. Ordinarily, in an experience of perceptual illusion, I remain within the “natural attitude” that takes the on-going background actuality of the world for granted. I do not see the attribution of actuality operating; I interpret my perceiving a snake as a mis-perception, an aberration, something out-of-the-ordinary, which occurred because I did not pay sufficient attention. However, such an experience, when reflected upon, provides a clue, a glimpse behind the curtain that reveals the subjective origin of actuality-attribution. The phenomenological reduction extends such an insight to encompass my total experience of the actuality of the world, including the actuality of my human self as an individual existing within the world. It is not that actuality-attribution ceases to
function, it is rather that I no longer go along with it in the same unrecognised way. I now realise that such actuality-attribution is occurring – my seeing of it means it can no longer operate invisibly, as if it were a property of the world itself. Instead I see how actuality (validity) is bestowed upon experience according to the manner of its harmonious unfoldment. In this way my normal experience of being in the world is reduced and I encounter the “transcendental subjectivity” that constitutes the meaning and actuality of my being in the world:

. . . in the actualizing of the reduction a self-reflection occurs that has a wholly new kind of structure: it is not that man reflectively thinks about himself, but rather that transcendental subjectivity concealed in self-objectification as man, reflectively thinks about itself, beginning seemingly as man, annulling itself as man, and taking itself down as man all the way to the ground, namely, down to the innermost ground of its life (Fink, 1995, p. 32).

For Husserl, this seeing is not some kind of intellectual manipulation whereby I reframe my experience on the basis of a different set of assumptions; it is a profound discovery that creates a fundamental and lasting shift in the basic stance of my experiential consciousness:

Perhaps it will even become manifest that the total phenomenological attitude and the epoché belonging to it are destined in essence to effect, at first, a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion (Husserl, 1970/1992, p. 137).

In introducing the phenomenological reduction, Husserl is expressing something that cannot be grasped within a normal state of acceptance of the actuality of the world. The transcendental epoché is intended to put this acceptance out of play (“with one blow”). And yet, if we consider Husserl’s explicit statements, the enactment of the epoché is a relatively straightforward matter of not taking an interest “in the being, actuality, or nonbeing of the world” (Husserl, 1970/1992, p. 175). It would appear that such an abstention can be easily achieved by means of a thought experiment that only grants actuality to the immanent stream of my own conscious experience. All else, the question of the reality of any transcendent world existing beyond the domain of my immanent experience, is put aside, and neither accepted nor rejected. I remain focussed on just that immanent stream and on what can be discovered within it.

If this is all Husserl means, then the transcendental epoché should lie within the reach of any philosophically educated individual who cares to seriously read the Crisis text. And yet, I predict
that the enactment of the epoché as a thought experiment will not, in itself, lead to “a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion.” Husserl intends more than a *hypothetical* suspension of belief in the actuality of the world – he means for that acceptance to *actually* be suspended. It is the meaning of this *actual* suspension that cannot be expressed within the domain of normal philosophical discourse because that discourse already assumes the actuality of the world. This actuality-acceptance *precedes* any hypothetical state of affairs I may construct, and remains in place during my intellectual entertainment of the possible actuality of that state of affairs. It is like playing a child’s game, I ‘make-believe’ that my immanent stream of experience is the only reality, while (in reality) I know full well that it is not.

For these reasons, Husserl has to *indirectly* invite his reader into the reduction. To achieve this he leads us along paths he has already taken and speaks of the reduction from *within* the reduction in the hope that we may enact the epoché *empathetically*, perhaps as a recognition of something we already knew *implicitly*. From this place he describes what has been achieved in terms that can only be understood by someone who has *already* enacted the reduction. And yet, the actual *act*, the complete suspension of the “natural attitude,” is not something that can be achieved from *within* the natural attitude. For if I understand what it is to be in the natural attitude, I have already transcended it. I am caught in a circularity: it is only by transcending the natural attitude that I can come to see that I have been caught within it, and it is only on the basis of such seeing that I can first transcend it. The act of seeing and transcending are one and the same. It is an immediate insight and not something that can be achieved in a series of rational steps. Husserl’s collaborator and assistant, Eugen Fink, describes the situation as follows:

Man’s self-reflection first becomes a way into the transcendental attitude when it is “radicalised” in a sense such as is not possible in the natural attitude, radicalized, namely, to the *annulment* of the natural attitude. […]

In view of this situation, is there still any sense in speaking of *ways* into the transcendental attitude? If we take ways into phenomenology to mean a *continuity in motivation* that begins in the natural attitude and by inferential force leads into the transcendental attitude, then *there are no such ways*. That does not imply, however, that talk of “ways” into phenomenology is altogether senseless. Thus, for example, to start out from the Idea of radical self-reflection is one actual way, for in the performance of self-reflection of this kind there can spring up that transcendental il-
lumination that first opens up the course of a self-reflection that has to be radicalized in a new sense; because on the occasion of a decisive and unwavering turn inward into oneself the dispositional possibility is created for catching sight, in a productive, anticipatory way, of the dimension of transcendental radicality. The way [into phenomenology] only becomes compelling if we already bring a transcendental knowing with us – even if one that is quite obscure (Fink, 1995, pp. 32–34).

Here, the entire success of the phenomenological reduction depends upon “a decisive and unwavering turn inward into oneself” on the basis of which I may (possibly) catch sight “of the dimension of transcendental radicality.” In terms of our ongoing investigation into consciousness, this means I must already have discovered, according to my own efforts and power of insight, what it is to have transcended my ordinary, everyday state of consciousness. Only then may it become clear what Husserl is attempting to indicate by means of the reduction.

1.3 The Reduction and Direct Knowledge of Consciousness

The task now, in the broader context of the course, is to discover in what way the phenomenological reduction is related to our ongoing enquiry into the state of pure, pre-reflective, thought-free consciousness. We start by asking who is it that performs the phenomenological reduction? How does it occur that “I” can ask questions of my immediate experience? Surely this “I” is an “I” of reflection, and, as such, must disappear in order that a state of pure consciousness can emerge. So what remains? Is there another “I” who looks and sees within a state of pure consciousness?

Husserl approaches this question in his consideration of internal time consciousness:

Every “experience” in the strict sense is internally perceived. But the perceiving of the internal is not an “experience” in the same sense. It is not in itself again internally perceived. Every experience our regard can reach presents itself as an experience that endures, that flows away, and that changes in such and such a way. And it is not the regard that has the experience as the object of its meaning that makes the experience be what it presents itself as being; the regard only looks at the experience (Husserl, 1991, p. 130).

Here Husserl attempts to express a direct knowledge of consciousness, and, in parallel with our earlier investigations, he encounters two distinct moments: firstly the “experience” itself,
i.e. the consciousness-of, such as my consciousness-of being here in this room (now). Then, there is the moment of the experience itself being conscious. Husserl expresses this by saying that the experience is internally perceived, that there is a “regard” that “looks” at the experience. Furthermore, this regard does not make “the experience be what it presents itself as being,” it simply “sees” the experience, i.e. renders it as something that is conscious. At the same time, this “internal” perception is not itself internally perceived – it “sees” the experience, but itself is not “seen.”

The problem here is how can Husserl come to know of this regard that “sees,” that itself is not seen? Our answer is to point to a direct knowledge of consciousness, where it is immediately known what it means to be in a state of pure pre-reflective consciousness on the basis of being in that state. Here we must again confirm that we have such knowledge – because, as immediate or direct knowledge, it cannot be remembered. As far as thought and reflection are concerned, direct knowledge is entirely incomprehensible. Hence it must be demonstrated every time it is referenced, otherwise it is just an empty, unfounded belief in a memory of something that cannot be remembered.

At the same time, what it means to be conscious is the most obvious. “I” am a being who is conscious now. I cannot meaningfully think about this, not because it is obscure or difficult, but because it is the most obvious, the most immediate. It is not separate from me. And yet, to “see” what it is to be conscious “I,” who claim to be conscious now, must in some sense disappear into a state of pure consciousness, where all that I usually identify with as being “me” (my thoughts, feelings and intentions) has become the impersonal content of a stream of consciousness that is simply conscious of itself.

If I question this pure, pre-reflective consciousness, I find it has no “I” centre in it – no “I” standing over and against the experience, no division. It is rather that the entire experience, the field within which that which appears, appears, is itself conscious, such that each part partakes of that unity of being conscious. Or again, that which “I” am, is now suffused throughout the open field of experience such that I am no longer divided from what occurs in that field. For example, the sound of the traffic passing in the street is just as much “me” as the sensation occurring in “my” hand. All is indifferently happening.

While Husserl’s language indicates that he is touch with this place of pure consciousness, he does not speak in terms of stopping thinking or immersing his reflective consciousness into the immediacy of direct experience. However, if we turn to the account that Fink gives of the
phenomenological reduction in the Sixth Cartesian Meditation, we find a clear reference to a pre-reflective moment in the initial stage of the reduction:

In a way, the reduction places the just established “onlooker” before nothingness: the world is bracketed and thereby as well the whole pregivenness of the world, all world-possibilities; there remains as the single first theme for the onlooker nought but actual-moment flowing transcendental life with its undisclosed horizons. But it is permitted neither to apprehend the “flow” by way of clues from mundanely given time-structures, nor to apperceive the undisclosed horizons as implications of being. Strictly speaking, it cannot designate the flow at all as a flow. [...] When phenomenologizing begins its action immediately after the reduction, at this stage of inception it is not only without concepts but also in principle lacks language (Fink, 1995, pp. 94–95).

Here we see that for Fink, “phenomenologising” is an action that is separable from the reduction, even if it occurs “immediately” after the reduction. In this gap of immediacy lies a “nothingness” in which there is only the “actual-moment flowing transcendental life[,]” something we cannot even name as a “flow” because we are “without concepts” and hence without language. It is here, in this immediate nothingness, that both Husserl and Fink are able to encounter a direct knowledge of consciousness. And it is here that the “natural attitude” is put out of play “with one blow.” The immediate realisation is: I am not this human entity, these thoughts and intentions, this past history of events, I am the pure consciousness that illuminates whatever is happening now. What is happening now is no longer happening to me, the happening-to-me, is itself happening. “I” am no longer the “me” to which things happen, “I,” if you like, am this happening. It is this shift of consciousness, the suspending of identification with the human self, that effects Husserl’s “complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion” (Husserl, 1970/1992, p. 137).

However, neither Husserl or Fink properly recognise the significance of this place of “nothingness” that precedes the action of phenomenologising. Such nothingness is not a complete nothingness, it is the absence of reflection, i.e. the absence of a conceptual, linguistic representation of what is occurring. There is still the “actual-moment flowing transcendental life” and this life is directly known without the need of reflection, as is self-evident to anyone who ceases to reflect at any moment. It is the inhabiting and realisation that this cessation is occurring, that is
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essential and that effects the personal transformation that Husserl speaks of. And yet it appears that both Husserl and Fink wish to skip-over this moment of knowing nothing (reflectively) and get straight to work on the task of conceptualising the new realm of pure consciousness that the reduction has opened up.

Of course, it is true that there is nothing you can say about a state of pure consciousness without employing concepts and language, and, as Fink points out, pure consciousness itself “lacks language.” But it remains possible to indicate this state negatively, as we have been doing up to now (not thinking, not reflecting, pure, as in not mixed, direct, as in not mediated, and so on). Such negative characterisations leave the state open and forestall the automatic tendency to appropriate an experience within an overarching conceptual understanding of the nature of experience itself. The idea (for us) is that the state of pure consciousness remains outside the domain of positive conceptualisation. It is rather the space-absence in which everything that can be positively conceptualised, appears.

In contrast, Husserl’s project is concerned with a positive conceptualisation of the structure of experience. He believes it is possible to maintain (by means of the reduction) a reflective presence (within the reduction) that keeps the state of pure consciousness in view. This is the origin of Fink’s “onlooker.” The idea is that within the reduction I have attained to a new kind of reflection (transcendental reflection) that stands outside the everyday natural attitude and “sees” (for the first time) the essential activity of transcendental consciousness in constituting the world of the natural attitude.

1.4 The Problem of Transcendental Reflection

Put simply, Husserl wishes to maintain a reflective presence in the midst of the immediacy of pure experience. In contrast, for us to enter into a state of reflective consciousness is to leave the immediacy of pure consciousness and thereby to lose touch with the only source of direct knowledge. Our aim is to gain access to this state without objectifying it in a reflection. Hence the emphasis on looking and seeing as forms of direct perception, of holding a question in the midst of a state of pure consciousness, and seeing how it stands with the question as a direct knowledge, that is subsequently expressed in language that refers back to that immediate experience.

Instead, Husserl understands the phenomenological reduction as a means of purifying reflection. His aim is to maintain a reflective presence that does not distort pure experience. He intends
to bring before reflection the pure consciousness of experience as a pure consciousness within which the consciousness-of being in the world appears. The phenomenological reduction therefore has the two-fold purpose of gaining access to a state of pure consciousness and opening up a space of pure reflection on that state. It is on behalf of this pure reflection that we must assiduously bracket our scientific understandings and our acceptance of the actuality of the world.

The crucial issue here is whether or not the phenomenological reduction pre-supposes the structure of experience that it expects to find. On first inspection it appears that the reduction is a withholding or negation of scientific and worldly understandings reminiscent of a negation of thinking. However, the bracketing of acceptance of the actuality of the world is not simply a negation. It contains within itself a positive understanding of the structure of experience. That understanding is informed by Husserl’s guiding concept of intentionality. On this basis, consciousness is articulated in terms of immanence and transcendence, whereby intentional processes operating on an immanent stream of consciousness ‘intend’ objects whose actuality transcends the immanence of the stream.

The idea of the epoché is to suspend the otherwise continual acceptance of the actuality of the world so as to reveal this structure of intentionality as the means of constituting our experience of world actuality. The problem is that this model of intentionality is already implicit in the reduction. It is not that we perform the reduction, dispassionately observe experience, and then discover its intentional structure. It is that the bracketing of our acceptance of the actuality of the world creates a division in our pre-reflectively unified experience. It is our reflecting self that posits a distinction between the actuality of the world and the stream of consciousness that remains (appears) once that actuality is questioned. Having effected this split, intentionality emerges as the agency needed to re-unify the experience that we temporarily split asunder.

It is not that the idea that experience has an intentional structure is false, it is that this is only one way that experience can be divided up and conceptualised. It brings out an aspect of experience and places experience within a framework. This is the inevitable consequence of reflecting on experience - all reflection brings with it a context of understanding within which things are allowed to reveal themselves. Physical science has its context of physicality and Husserl’s notion of immanent consciousness is the dual of physical science’s notion of objective reality.
References

