

Ethical Crisis Under the Husserlian Epoché: Restoring the Normative Force of Doubt

Edmund Husserl begins the second meditation in his *Cartesian Meditations* with two aggressive questions on Descartes' radical doubt: "Is it really worthwhile to hunt for an eternal significance belonging to some clarifiable core that may be contained in them? Are they still such thoughts as might infuse our times with living forces?"¹ These questions, which are the first two ones asked in this treatise of an ostensibly descriptive revolutionary philosophy, are decidedly normative: they cast Descartes under the judging eyes of a scornful critic. As such, the birth of the epoché – the first act of phenomenology's dramatic narrative, as it were – immediately acquires a normative character. Husserl answers "no" to both of these questions, and – right on cue – the show begins. Yet we can throw these very questions at the genesis of Husserl's phenomenological project right back upon this first act: for a philosophy born from the negative answer to a normative question, is it really worthwhile to hunt for normative meaning under the epoché? Are they still such thoughts as might infuse our times with ethically (self-)conscious and responsible forces? Upon further investigation, I – in a motion which parallels Husserl's criticism of Descartes – answer both questions in the negative. Doubt is the first moment of a normative claim: indeed, Husserl places the spirit of Cartesian doubt as the premise of phenomenology. However, he immediately moves to eliminate it under the epoché in a hunt for apodicticity. Like the donkey who runs forward to eat the carrot dangled by its rider until total exhaustion, Husserl searches for a stable ground of meaning and truth which eliminates doubt, unaware that this very search is premised upon a normative claim which holds doubt within itself. This leads the epoché to become ethically irresponsible at best, in that it proclaims itself capable of grasping everything in experience when it cannot reach its absolutely posited condition of existence, and ethically monstrous at worst, in that it necessarily brackets out our authentic ethical experience of the world. But the epoché – at least the idea of it – is not lost: I argue that what we need is a normatively self-conscious epoché, one in which original Cartesian doubt is not suppressed but rather embraced.

When one makes a normative claim, they must encounter doubt. When one normatively claims that "something *should* ...," one immediately is confronted by the question: "is it *really so* that something should ...?" If one does not have this experience, then one has made not made a normative but rather a descriptive claim. The overzealous interior designer who, in a flurry of unthinking passion, declares (seemingly normatively) that "the painting should be there, the table should be here, ...", really means "the painting *is* there, the table *is* here" in a descriptive sense -- the painting and the table are.² The moment when I doubt and ask the interior designer, "*should*

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1960), 4.

² The purpose of 'should' here has been reduced to a temporal distance from a descriptive reality. It has lost its normative character.

the table really be here?”, to which they respond, “the table *should* be here,” the statement has become normative: it has congealed doubt within itself. In Sartrean terms, a normative claim always holds within itself the possibility of its non-being, and thus necessarily acquires the character of being doubttable. This is clearly visible in Husserl’s exposition of the Cartesian purging of doubt, which itself reproduces this doubt at a higher level of abstraction: “Aiming with radical consistency at absolute knowledge, he [the ego] refuses to let himself accept anything as existent unless it is secured against every conceivable possibility of becoming doubtful.”³ The meditating ego judges whether or not to accept the object of experience in question as existent on the basis of its apodicticity. To experience oneself as apodictically positing something as existent, then, the meditating ego must *doubt that the object in question can be doubted*. – for this object in question really is irretrievably *in question*: under the philosopher’s examining eyes, there always persists the possibility that the object’s conditions for existence can be doubted. This possibility can never be eliminated from philosophy – or at least the kind that Descartes and Husserl are involved in – for if an object is *not* in question but rather directly given as evident, there would be no reason to even consider the question of its existence so extensively. There would not be a question to be asked at all.⁴ The subject’s descriptive judgement is therefore always firstly normative. We will call this first doubting the ‘original normative doubt’. Although Descartes attempts to instrumentalize this original normative doubt to eliminate doubt, this original doubt quietly persists and wreaks havoc downstream.

Like the sequel to an action movie in which the villain has quietly slipped away instead of suffering a visibly irreversible death, Husserl’s epoché is an attempt to finally kill off this original normative doubt which, for Husserl, fatally resurfaced in Descartes in the form of “presuppos[ing] an ideal of science.”⁵ That original normative doubt which constituted the elimination of doubt suggests the possibility of the non-being of this very elimination (that being the method of Cartesian skepticism); this possibility begs the question to the meditating ego, “[why] *should* I employ Cartesian skepticism?” A first philosophy must stand on (or be) some solid ground; Descartes answers by fetishizing science as this solid ground – ‘because it is scientific, and science is the presupposed ideal.’ This is, for Husserl, a misstep. “None of that shall determine our thinking,” Husserl declares. “As beginning philosophers we do not as yet accept any normative ideal of science; and only so far as we produce one newly for ourselves can we ever

³ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 3.

⁴ Even the most dogmatic ideologues who seem to preclude any possibility of doubt against their position are in the business of formulating doubttable ethical experience. They are opposed to their Other, which firstly affirms (the possibility of) its existence and secondly gives rise to the doubt of the ideologue. It is precisely this doubt which gives rise to the ‘need’ for dogmatism: “they don’t believe us, so we shall make them see”.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

have such an ideal.”⁶ The epoché demands a “universal depriving of acceptance, this ‘inhibiting’ or ‘putting out of play’ of all positions taken toward the already-given Objective world.”⁷ This, in turn, allows me as the meditating ego to “acquire... my pure living, with all of the pure subjective processes making this up, and everything meant in them, *purely as* meant in them.”⁸ What is acquired by the ego, however, is not pure in the sense of precluding normative doubt of phenomena really being “they themselves.”⁹ Instead, it is structured by the very original normative doubt which haunted Descartes. The doubt persists under the epoché, as at every moment the meditating ego must repeat to itself: I must doubt that what comes to me in bracketed experience can be doubted. This is made abundantly clear in the mental laboriousness of the epoché;¹⁰ one does not simply accept and practice the epoché at the level of the epoché, but rather one must continuously remain dubious of the dubiousness of the epoché in order to *continue* practicing it, which is a cognitive process one level above the epoché itself.¹¹ The meditating ego must continuously ask itself the normative question: “[why] *should* I [continue to] engage in the epoché, in this meditation?” The precondition to every ‘descriptively accepted’ experience under the epoché, then, is that the meditating ego has answered this normative question in the affirmative.

Husserl’s epoché, then, is at every moment of its existence thoroughly drenched in normative questions and (normatively) affirmative answers. Husserl, however, moves quickly to deny this normative character, as it would suggest an a priori normative judgement like Descartes’ acceptance of science: phenomenology under the epoché is a project of the ego apprehending themselves uninterrupted and without doubt, explicating for itself the “*descriptive* transcendental-philosophical theory of consciousness” (my italics).¹² Therefore, the Husserlian epoché is unwilling to account for the normative basis of its own continuous genesis. In Sartrean terms, the epoché denies that it is what it is in an act of bad faith. Bernard Lonergan provides a sharp general account of this epistemic falsity:

“The phenomenologist provides himself and the reader with the evidence in which they can grasp the virtually unconditioned... and so reach the absolute on which the judgement is based. But the phenomenologist has not penetrated to the judgement itself, to the rational process within which grasp of the virtually unconditioned and the judgement occur.”¹³

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁹ Ibid., 13

¹⁰ This laboriousness is evident in the basic observation that it is difficult to operate under the epoché, which Husserl observes himself in the *Meditations*, and that we must constantly remind ourselves of the requirements of the epoché. There is experience is not found under the natural attitude.

¹¹ To use strictly Husserlian terms, one does not merely constitute their entering of the epoché for it to persist on its own through time (such a view of object-permanence would be in the natural attitude), but rather continually intends themselves as within the epoché.

¹² Ibid., 41.

¹³ Bernard Lonergan, “Phenomenology: Nature, Significance, Limitations” in *Phenomenology and Logic: The Boston College Lectures on Mathematical Logic and Existentialism*, eds. Philip T. McShane (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001), 275.

From the basic denial of original normative doubt, Husserl builds the concepts of evidence and eidetic intuition, from which the meditating ego is argued to grasp the true nature of things as they really are. However, because phenomenology is concerned with the evident, it is not equipped with the tools to understand absolutely posited judgement. For us, the absolutely posited judgement is the affirmative answer to that normative question “[why] *should* I [continue to] engage in the epoché, in this meditation?” The affirmative answer the phenomenologist provides has already written the very coordinates of the world in which the phenomenologist does phenomenology. Lonergan recalls a thought by H. J. Pos, who suggests that the ego cannot return from the epoché once it has entered it: “If by an intentional act I suspend the really real, what kind of an intentional act is going to restore the really real?”¹⁴ There is no way by which the phenomenologist can somehow reach out from within the confines of the world they have set for themselves under the epoché to investigate that very absolutely posited judgement which constituted those confines. The transcendental character of Husserl’s phenomenology does not transcend the confines of the phenomenological world but rather reflect back at the ego the *idoi* of this confined world. Therefore, when Husserl triumphantly declares in the concluding words of the *Meditations* that “I must lose the world by epoché, in order to regain it by a universal self-examination,”¹⁵ this regained world is not the one which was lost, because in the latter I retained the legitimacy of doubt. The ambiguity of Husserl’s epoché, Lonergan writes, can be understood in its lack of differentiation between a departure from Santayana’s “animal faith” and the grasping of absolutely posited judgement. While the epoché accomplishes the former as a “mere... psychological feat,” in which the ego does not so naively accept things in the world as really them themselves, it deludes itself in its capacity to execute the latter. Lonergan scolds the epoché for what amounts to essentially lying: “One cannot play fast and loose with what one knows to be true. One cannot turn rationality off and on as one pleases.”¹⁶

The epoché’s chastisement is well-deserved. Its blindness towards its own precondition of original normative doubt may be employed to support ethically monstrous judgements and campaigns. Here, we consider a simple ‘phenomenology of the Nazi’ to illustrate the general point. The Nazi sees in the swastika great rousing pride and a call (duty?) to carry out brutal revenge upon the robbers of their welfare; they see in the Jew all the dirty perversions and thievery of licentious greed. Which philosopher will explain to the Nazi the ethical mistake of their experience? – not Husserl, who writes that “any spatiotemporal being exists for me; that is to say, is accepted by me

¹⁴ Lonergan, 277

¹⁵ Husserl 157

¹⁶ Lonergan, 277

in that I experience it, perceive it, remember it, think somehow, judge about it, value it, desire it..."¹⁷ The Nazi weaponizes the epoché: through meditative reflection, all doubt that they may not truly grasp the thing itself has been excised from the phenomenological investigation of their experience. One need not be in the natural attitude to be ethically troubled – the Nazi no longer needs to consider the question of whether the Jew metaphysically *really is* such-and-such,¹⁸ a question which encounters all sorts of Kantian complications. The epoché is a gift to the Nazi's political agenda: irrespective of these troubled 'natural' metaphysical questions, under the epoché, the world of the Nazi ego is the world *for* and *as constituted by* the Nazi ego. What remains in the world to doubt the Nazi experience of the Jew, to doubt the Nazi making the world for themselves, to doubt the Nazi experience of satisfaction from the extermination of Jews? Nothing – Husserl has swept the floor under the epoché clean of doubt. Yet, of course, the original normative doubt remains, even if it has been swept under the rug of the epoché. To have entered the epoché, the Nazi would have had to continuously affirm their doubt of the doubt of the epoché's givenness, a normative affirmation which leaks down into the plane of the epoché itself: the Nazi must too affirm "*should* the Jew be how she or he appears to me?" Perhaps, then, this epoché which suppresses the normativity of experience and marks it as apodictic-descriptive ('this is how things are, without doubt') is more machinic and banal than the banality of Adolf Eichmann's Kantian categorical imperative, which at least retains its normative character of duty and obligation, however reified it may be.¹⁹

What, however, is the core ethical problem of the epoché? – for we cannot simply exploit the generally accepted ethical bankruptcy of the Nazis to answer this question. It is not only that the epoché can be weaponized by the morally repugnant to deny philosophical challenge to their agenda, but that the epoché itself excludes our authentic ethical experience of objects in the world, and therefore is itself always ethically incomplete. As we established from the outset of this paper, normative statements require doubt: to have an ethical experience is to perceive both the judgement and the possibility that the judgement may not be. We constantly confront ethical experience consciously under the natural attitude: if the world 'really is out there', the ego must consider what *really is* the ethical truth, or as previously considered, the Nazi must consider whether the Jew *really is* what is made of him

¹⁷ Husserl 21

¹⁸ Indeed, this is the general question form of essentializing prejudices (which are answered in the affirmative). The racist asks, "Are Blacks really, in their essential selves, dangerous thugs?" The sexist asks, "Are women really, in their essential selves, docile and domestic carers?" and so on.

¹⁹ Of course, this is in reference to Hannah Arendt's work on the 'banality of evil'. The duty in ethical normativity has been made administrative and bureaucratic; the war machine strikingly resembles the corporate office. But even so, at the very least, it retains a formally normative character. Is Husserl's move, which is to deny the normative altogether in favor of the descriptive, not the most banal move of all?

or her. This experience of ethical anguish under the natural attitude is familiar and unavoidable²⁰ – it is in this sense ‘natural’. But, Sara Ahmed writes in *Queer Phenomenology*, “the social and familiar character of objects is ‘bracketed’ by Husserl, as what is posited by the natural attitude.”²¹ Therefore, Ahmed argues, the epoché demands the ego to take on an external and unfamiliar gaze, one which cannot partake in ethical doubting because it does not have the personal relation to do so. This gaze sees objects “not... as my field of action but rather... *as if* I did not already know it or even know what I do with it.”²² Ahmed returns to Husserl’s example of the table: when the ego enters the epoché, they suspend the personal questions of the table “as occupying a familial order, [serving] as the writing table,”²³ and so on which open up the table as an authentically ethically experienced object. Rather, to remain faithful to the campaign of apodicticity, Husserl fixates in *Cartesian Meditations* on our de-familiarized experience of the natural world²⁴ – in a way, reinscribing the ‘natural predilection’ of the natural attitude back into the epoché without the potential for our ethical relation to it. Ahmed writes: “The act of bracketing may sustain the fantasy that ‘what we put aside’ can be transcended in the first place... [and] confirm the fantasy of a subject who is transcendent, who places himself above the contingent world of social matter.”²⁵ This fantasy is, for Ahmed, one of a “paperless philosophy” which “is not dependent on the materials upon which it is written.”²⁶ Echoing Lonergan and Pos, Ahmed observes that the epoché brackets out the original normative doubt which constitutes its possibility, and therefore this doubt is an absolutely posited judgement for the ego under the epoché. With the epoché, the ego is thrown ‘out of their [ethical] self’, impelled to confront their ‘purely given experience’ – here, the ideal of ‘purity’ acquires an ethically quietest character.²⁷

Perhaps, however, a phenomenology of affectivity can save the epoché from our accusation that it denies its original constitutive doubt and becomes ethically neutered. Max Scheler is aware of the basic criticism that the ego cannot transcend the values it holds within itself: “Whatever man sees, wills, does, and knows, has gone through this immutable structure of values, which he carries with him like a house, and all he sees through its windows is only that which these windows permit him to see.”²⁸ However, Scheler holds that the human heart as the *ordo amoris* is

²⁰ As such, many of the popular ethical ‘dilemmas’ emerge from the ethical anguish of the natural attitude.

²¹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 33.

²² *Ibid.*, 35.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁴ In the sense that natural objects in the world appear as permanent and therefore give rise to the appearance of potential unfamiliarity. The ego can be unfamiliar with the table in a way in which it cannot be with, say, a political belief or a symbol.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁷ We might consider how the “purity” of the ego under the epoché might bear philosophical semblance to the eugenicist conception of “purity”.

²⁸ Manfred S. Frings, *Max Scheler: A Concise Introduction into the World of a Great Thinker* (Pittsburgh: Marquette University Press, 1965), 44.

“not a chaos of emotional states but an ordered counterpart of all possible values, a microcosm of the world of values.”²⁹ It is not so much that the epoché codifies as descriptive whatever actually normative ethical experience the ego intends, as we have treated it previously (as this ‘chaos of emotional states’), but rather that in experience the ego can only set forth a particular gradation of values, and it is this gradation which delimits the possible experiences under the epoché. For Scheler, one cannot use rational means to criticize the emotional experience by which our values are revealed *as such*. The moment in which the ego, feeling the melancholic beauty of the sunset or deep annoyance at the incompetent coworker, turns inwards upon their feelings, they begin to search for the emotive acts which causally explain their state. But this search will fail to grasp any authentic causality, because this thinking becomes another act whose term replaces the current state, and that feeling has eluded our cognitive grasp. It seems, then, that Scheler has convincingly fended off our attack and revitalized the ethical promise of the epoché (although in a very different way): values are revealed to the ego *only* in phenomenological experience; the epoché does not close off but rather opens wide the world of values by bracketing the limitations of rationality. As doubt is an exercise in the rational faculties, it has been banished too. Importantly, Scheler shows that ethics can be, rather than normative through doubt, descriptive through a kind of ethical historical determinism: “The *ordo amoris* is man’s destiny, since it forms, as the subjective and emotive counterpart of the kinds of values.”³⁰

My objection to Scheler here is a basic one: in totally excising doubt and rationality from the ethical domain, Scheler’s instrumentalization of the ‘epoché’ renders it too distant from Husserl’s epoché to ‘save’ it. Bracketing the question of Scheler himself, Scheler fetishizes the ego’s losing themselves in the “immediate content” of emotive acts – a feeling-in-itself which resists formulation in rational terms – in a way which is essentially anti-Husserlian. With Scheler’s conception of feeling, it is not that the ego loses not the natural Objective world and gains themselves purely (Husserl’s proposition),³¹ but rather that the ego loses *themselves* and gains, or rather subsumes into, the transcendental world of values. In this way, Scheler and Husserl’s reductions are inverses of one another. Because the ego is ostensibly left with their pure selves in the Husserlian bracketing, the ego is rational – not in the Cartesian sense, but rather in the earlier established sense that the ego is always presented to itself as the subject of a normative question. The affirmative answer denatures the experience under the epoché. Husserl says something like this himself: “Natural reflection alters the previously naïve subjective process quite essentially; this process loses its original mode, ‘straightforward,’ by the very fact that reflection makes an object out of what was previously a

²⁹ Frings, *Max Scheler*, 44.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

³¹ ...and ‘the world’ constituted by the pure ego.

subjective process but not objective.”³² Scheler is dissatisfied: the ego “can make it [emotive acts] an object of thinking only after the emotive experience has extinguished.”³³ For Scheler, emotional acts can be – in crude terms – only subjectively occupied because the ego has dissolved themselves into the world and therefore does not have the rational terms to make themselves the object of experience. Scheler’s phenomenology of affectivity shows us, then, that when one really does account for doubt by manually outlining its impossibility, it loses that essential reflective character of the Husserlian epoché.

What we need, then, is an epoché in which one does not suppress but rather centers the legitimacy of doubting experience. Rather than continually being confronted with the origin-erasing demand to doubt that one can doubt the object in question, one should doubt that one *cannot* doubt – a reflexively consistent position.³⁴ Immediately, this new conception of the epoché accounts for the original normative doubt which constituted it in its very practice. The epoché no longer holds us hostage in Pos’ sense of no return: inscribed within the epoché would be the conditions of its emergence, and therefore also the conditions of its exit – I may, from within the epoché, doubt that I can doubt that I cannot doubt the object in question. For the phenomenology of the Nazi, this means that normative positing of the Jew as dirty, vermin, etc. is subject to doubt because the ego must recognize the original doubt which constituted that normative claim to begin with. More generally, our ethical experience of the world is no longer kept incomplete, as the world of the familiar and the personal enter the epoché as the conditions for authentic normative doubt. Unlike Scheler, we have retained, and even affirmed, the reflective nature of Husserl’s project. Of course, these implications are merely almost logical derivations of the reasoning that we have explicated. The question of what such a novel epoché might look like is left unaddressed in this paper. However, we might consider two candidates. Lonergan’s insistence on the ego’s self-knowledge provides a way for the ego to account for the conditions of their entering the epoché. Sartre’s focus on nothingness within being inscribes doubt and possibility within every descriptive experience. There is an interesting relationship between the two: whereas Sartre opens up a vast chasm of nothingness at the heart of being, Lonergan fills this void with the self’s self-knowledge.

We began by declaring that the epoche was in a crisis of ethical self-denial: at the very heart of its genesis are normative questions which are erased under the epoché. Employing Lonergan’s analysis of the limitations of

³² Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 34.

³³ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁴ By ‘reflexively consistent’, I mean that a statement which references an object is not contradictory if that statement is its own object. To doubt that I can doubt is reflexively inconsistent, because if I am doubting that I can doubt, then I believe that I cannot doubt, but I am doing just that (doubting). On the other hand, to doubt that I cannot doubt is reflexively inconsistent: if I am doubting that I cannot doubt, then indeed I am always in a mode of doubting.

phenomenology, we observed that phenomenology is short of its self-reported capabilities in reaching the absolutely posited judgement which actualizes its the conditions of its emergence. The epoché forces the ego to occupy a defamiliarized position in which its ethical relation to the objects of the world have been severed due to their threat towards apodicticity. A Schelerian total denial of doubt and complete migration of values within phenomenological experience destroys the essential reflective character of the Husserlian epoché. A novel conception of the epoché in which the ego *doubts that they cannot doubt* – whatever concrete form it may take – appears to reconcile the ethical crisis. Just as we began with turning Husserl's opening questions of the *Cartesian Meditations* upon himself, so we shall do with the closing fanfare: the Delphic motto, "Know thyself!" has lost the validity of its Husserlian signification. The Husserlian epoché is a method irrecoverably lost in itself. I must lose the epoché by doubt, in order to regain it by a universal self-doubting.

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