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HUSSERL'S LANGUAGE OF NEUTRALITY

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Husserl intended the phenomenological method as a new beginning for philosophy. The *epoché*, the key notion of this method, entails a modification of attitude such that it can completely cancel and disempower all that might be given to us and that might be used for philosophical inquiry. In *Ideas I*, in particular, this is addressed as the “neutrality modification,” and defined as a universal modification of consciousness that permeates the phenomenological attitude. Neutralization, along with the method, is described by relying on what Husserl calls the “language of neutrality,” which is actually spoken while investigating in the phenomenological attitude, enacted in the descriptions, and also discloses a series of rather peculiar acts that must be performed in order to obtain the phenomenological attitude. This paper discusses the phenomenological language of neutrality, first presenting what “neutrality” means, as well as illustrating the essential expressions of this peculiar language (such as “to put out of action,” “to bracket,” “to suspend,” and so on), then situating it in the context of phenomenological analyses, particularly as regards those devoted to phantasy experiences. Finally, going back to early interpretations of Husserl's transcendental philosophy, notably the critical readings provided by Levinas and Fink, some key features of the method of *epoché* are pointed out, suggesting that the study of the specific neutrality involved in the latter can contribute to answering the question of what kind of act *epoché* is, and if it can even be considered an act at all.

Keywords: Edmund Husserl, phenomenology, methodology, *epoché*, neutrality, phantasy, language.

ЯЗЫК НЕЙТРАЛЬНОСТИ У ГУССЕРЛЯ

ГУЭЛЬФО КАРБОНЕ

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Гуссерль тяготел к тому, чтобы рассматривать феноменологический метод как новое начало философии. Ключевая идея его методологии, *epoché*, влечет за собой изменение установки,

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способное полностью отменить или лишить силы все то, что может быть нам дано и использовано в философском исследовании. Так, в *Идеях I* она рассматривается как «модификация нейтральности» и определяется как универсальная модификация сознания, пронизывающая естественную установку. Нейтрализацию, как и сам метод, Гуссерль описывает с опорой на «язык нейтральности», на котором фактически говорят во время исследования, занимая принятую в описаниях феноменологическую позицию, а также приводит ряд довольно своеобразных фактов, которые необходимо выполнить, чтобы занять феноменологическую установку. В статье автор рассматривает феноменологический язык нейтральности, сначала показывая, что значит «нейтральность» и поясняя основные выражения этого своеобразного языка (такие как «вывести из игры», «заклучить в скобки», «подвесить» и др.), затем помещая их в контекст феноменологического анализа, а именно в тот, что связан с переживаниями в фантазии. Наконец, возвращаясь к ранним интерпретациям трансцендентальной философии Гуссерля и особенно его критических прочтений Левинасом и Финком, автор демонстрирует некоторые ключевые свойства метода *epoché*, предполагая, что изучение специфической нейтральности, вовлеченной в последнее, способно помочь решить вопрос о том, каким типом акта является *epoché*, и может ли оно рассматриваться как акт в принципе.

Ключевые слова: Эдмунд Гуссерль, феноменология, методология, *epoché*, нейтральность, фантазия, язык.

The eye, O priests, is on fire; forms are on fire;
eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire;
and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent,
originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye,
that also is on fire.

The Fire-Sermon
(Warren, 2002, 352)

1. HUSSERL'S WAX DOLL

At the end of his 1933 article devoted to the objections raised against Husserl's phenomenology, Fink points out a "three-fold paradox, which continually obscures the phenomenological problematic," and affects every possible critical take on it. The first mentioned is the paradox of the situation of utterance, or the "*paradox of the position from which statements are made*" (Fink's emphasis). He reminds us that "phenomenology is established by the performance of the reduction," and reduction entails the transformation of the philosophizing ego into the "phenomenologically theorizing ego," who also reaches the status of the "transcendental observer" (Fink, 1970, 142). The paradox thus concerns the subject of the phenomenological research: by putting "out of action" the acceptance of the existence of the world and regaining the world as "pure 'phenomenon'" (Fink, 1970, 142), the subject undergoes a complete and radical

personal transformation. At first glance, as Husserl noted, this transformation is almost a “religious conversion.”¹ The problem arises when the knowledge that has been phenomenologically acquired must be communicated. Indeed, with the performed reduction, the phenomenologist has “broken out” of the very basis of communication, particularly with dogmatists, which is the case made by Fink. In order to understand phenomenology, this is the paradoxical conclusion of the impasse: “we must presuppose that one has developed the ‘transcendental attitude,’” or, in other words, that the subject to whom the analysis of the phenomenological experience is communicated has already performed that same radical transformation, which alone allows access to the gate of phenomenological knowledge (Fink, 1970, 143).

Thus, before being a complete and disposable doctrine, phenomenology is a research method and model, it is training and teaching, always marked by provisional achievements and acquirements, as Fink suggests by introducing the second “fundamental paradox,” “grounded within the first,” the “*paradox of the phenomenological statement*” (Fink’s emphasis). Phenomenological research has no other language at its disposal than “the language of the natural attitude,” the “worldly concepts” found in our experience. There is no such thing as phenomenological jargon, just as there is no remedy for the deficiencies of phenomenologically driven analyses: the “mundane meaning” of the words available to phenomenologists and used in their analysis, “cannot be entirely removed, for their meaning can be limited only by the use of other mundane words.” The paradox lies in “the use of a mundane expression for a nonworldly meaning,” a problem that “cannot be eliminated by the invention of a technical language.” A constant conflict is displayed in every phenomenological state-

¹ See: (Husserl, 1970, 135): “There are good reasons for my stressing so sharply the vocational character of even the ‘phenomenologist’s’ attitude. One of the first things to be described about the *epoché* in question is that it is a habitual *epoché* of accomplishment, one with periods of time in which it results in work, while other times are devoted to other interests of work or play; furthermore, and most important, the suspension of its accomplishment in no way changes the interest which continues and remains valid within personal subjectivity i. e., its habitual directedness toward goals which persist as its validities and it is for this very reason that it can be actualized again and again, at different times, in this identical sense. This by no means implies, however, that the life-world *epoché* — to which further significant moments belong, as we shall show — means no more for human existence, practically and ‘existentially,’ than the vocational *epoché* of the cobbler, or that it is basically a matter of indifference whether one is a cobbler or a phenomenologist, or, also, whether one is a phenomenologist or a positive scientist. 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, which then, however, over and above this, bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to mankind as such.”

ment between the mundane meaning of a given word in use and “the transcendental meaning which it serves to indicate” (Fink, 1970, 143–144).

The third paradox summarizes the crisis of the identity of the ego that performs reduction. Fink lists a series of logical aporias that come to light as one tries to determine the identity of the transcendental ego and discovers that “all ontic forms of identity are unable to define ‘logically’ the constitutive identity of the transcendental and human egos” (Fink, 1970, 144), egos that, by definition, are faceless².

Once the reduction is performed, as explained in Husserl’s *Ideas I*, we enter the phenomenological sphere of subjective waking consciousness, the continuous “waking now,” where the world is there for us, remaining “one and the same world, though it is constantly changing with respect to its make-up, contentwise” (Husserl, 2014, 49). In such a “shift of focus,” all the positions of belief experienced as actual are radically modified. They are still there, but “only under an altered operation sign.” This is what Husserl calls “neutrality modification,” an effectuation by which “everything translates into the modification of being ‘as though it were the case,’ namely, everything is translated into “the language of neutrality” that characterizes any phenomenological endeavor (Husserl, 2014, 221–222, *Ideas I*, § 113)³.

*Die Sprache der Neutralität*⁴, *le langage de la neutralité*, as Ricoeur translates (Husserl, 1950, 381), the “language of neutrality:” such is the language in use in transcendental phenomenology to describe its method. Still, as Fink reminds us, there is no technical phenomenological language. It may well be that, in this particular case, Husserl uses the term *Sprache* metaphorically, and that it is not worth stressing this type of occasional occurrence. But the fact is that the language of neutrality is actually spoken while investigating in the phenomenological field, it is enacted in the descriptions, and it discloses a series of rather peculiar acts that must be performed in order to gain access to the phenomenological attitude⁵.

The aim of this paper is to take a closer look at the phenomenological language of neutrality, first presenting what ‘neutrality’ means, then situating it in the context

² Accordingly, Fink concludes that “[i]n place of a ‘transcendent’ relation between man and the world-ground we must posit a ‘transcendental’ relation which does not overlook man’s worldly finitude, frailty, and impotence, but which comprehends it as constituted meaning, thereby taking it back into the infinite essence of spirit” (Fink, 1970, 144–145).

³ On the *Neutralitätsmodifikation*, see, esp., *Ideas I*, §§ 109–117 (Husserl, 2014, 213–234). For more on this topic, see: (Hennigfeld, 2010, 199).

⁴ See *Husserliana* vol. III/1 (Husserl, 1976b, 258).

⁵ Wilberg (2020, 139, note 2) insists on the linguistic nature of neutralization, stressing the “translating” (*übersetzen*) mentioned twice by Husserl in paragraph 113 of *Ideas I*.

of phenomenological analyses. Finally, some key features of the method of *epoché* are pointed out, suggesting that the peculiar neutrality involved in the latter can contribute to answering the question on the nature of *epoché*, namely, whether we should consider it as an act or, perhaps, as a gesture⁶. Even though we will not be able to provide an answer to this issue, we can, in turn, provisionally assume that what we call “gestures” have something of the phenomenological *epoché* as conceived by Husserl. Indeed, all gestures demonstrate a sort of “*epoché* that stills,” so that they “commemorate and exhibit” movements at one and the same time (Agamben, 2018)⁷.

In Husserl’s “doctrine” of neutralization (Husserl, 2014, 231–234), the neutrality modification pertains to an unusual kind of act, described as the “‘shadow’ of an act” (Husserl, 2014, 223)⁸. Consciousness in “the mode of cogito” has two fundamental possibilities: to effectuate actual acts of actually positing, or to effectuate shadows of acts “as though it were the case,” or “quasi’ positing” acts, “whose positing is improper, namely neutrally modified”⁹.

Whatever kind of act neutralization might be, it is radical. In the natural attitude, we express the belief in a “general thesis,” namely, that the world in which we experience the objects “is always there,” as “an actuality” (Husserl, 2014, 52). More precisely, neutralization concerns the “suspension of one’s participation in the general thesis and the general positing of the world,” and it can occur in various experiential contexts, such as in doubt, for instance, when belief is modalized so that we can neutralize a judgement by “neither affirming nor denying it” (Drummond, 2007, 143). Our attention is then focused on what is expressed by our judgment simply as

⁶ That *epoché* should be considered as “gesture” is the main thesis of a group of Italian scholars that have recently devoted to this topic an entire issue of the important phenomenological journal founded by Paci, “aut aut” (the issue is entitled: “The phenomenological gesture”). See esp.: (Rovatti, 2021, 5) and (Kirchmayr, 2021, 71). In cases where there is no English version available of the cited texts, all translations are this author’s own.

⁷ Here, Agamben is taking the movements of dancers as the main examples of what he deems crucial for gestures in general: “the instant of interruption and of suspension,” which reveals the essential relationship between gestures and time “conceived as a linear chronological succession” (Agamben, 2018). See also the *Notes on Gesture* (Agamben, 2000, 49–60).

⁸ See: (De Warren, 2015, 250): “What is intriguing about this peculiar modification is that strictly speaking one cannot even speak of an *act* of consciousness, even if Husserl tacitly understands the possibility of neutralization (an eidetic possibility for any positional consciousness) as a supreme manifestation of freedom — the freedom that prefers *not to have a view in order to have view*” (De Warren’s emphasis). On this, see: (Fink, 1966, 69–70).

⁹ The last three short quotes are taken from the 1983 translation of *Ideas I*, Appendix 58, see the footnote in Husserl (1983, 269). Consequently, the neutrally modified conscious act turns out to be a “shadow-image” of conscious actual positing acts (Husserl, 2014, 225).

a supposition about an experience occurring in the pregiven world. The neutrality modification, as Drummond stresses, involves a “shift from the natural to a critical attitude” that is typical not only of the ordinary acts of doubt, but also of scientific and theoretical attitudes. In fact, it marks the phenomenological reduction of the “natural world-belief,” “although in this case the neutralization is universal in scope”: the natural belief is neither affirmed nor denied, and the existence of the world is neither posited nor negated; rather, “the world and its objects, precisely as experienced, remain available for the phenomenological reflection” (Drummond, 2007, 143).

By the term “neutralization” (Husserl, 2014, 213–214), Husserl defines any modification determined in contrast to the modality of “positionality.” In the acts of positing, the composition of the meaning of what is meant, judged, or recalled is posited as actual. In these neutralized acts, which are non-positional, the object, in turn, is not “intended” while accepting its actuality; rather, it is simply objectivated, or presented, that is, offered to intuition, regardless of its actual existence (Serra, 2010, 208).

The analysis of neutrality modifications expands the case of deceptions in qualitative modifications, as discussed in the Fifth Logical Investigation (§ 27). Here, the concrete example is taken from a waxwork show, and the attention is focused on how deceptive the figure of a doll made of wax can be, which resembles a woman waving at us. As we see the doll-thing for the first time, it is indeed an act of apprehension that makes us see a lady. As long as we are deceived, the illusion counts as normal perception: we believe in it. Neutralization intervenes by modifying our previous qualitative act of positing, and, thanks to this modification, the human figure that was then perceived as an actual living human being is now discerned as a wax figure, a mere puppet¹⁰.

The distinction between neutrality and positionality holds a prominent part in the transcendental architecture displayed in the first volume of *Ideen* (esp. paragraphs 109, 113, and 117)¹¹. In this context, by “neutralized consciousness” (Husserl, 2014, 214–215), Husserl understands both the neutralization of acts of consciousness, “in which cases one might speak of the self-neutralization of consciousness,” and “the neutralization of the object of consciousness.” In the first case, the conscious act of positing is neutralized, and the object “is presented to consciousness without any attached stance of belief.” In the second case, “the object is presented to consciousness in a neutralized manner, as neither ‘real’ nor ‘unreal,’ as bereft, in other words, of any determinate doxic characterization” (De Warren, 2015, 249).

¹⁰ See: Hua XIX/1 (Husserl, 1984a, 458–460).

¹¹ In his 1930 doctoral dissertation devoted to pictorial consciousness, discussed with Husserl and Heidegger as supervisors, Fink (1966, 68–72, § 29) addresses these paragraphs (esp. *Ideas I*, §§ 109–112) providing an extended analysis of neutrality modification.

As the general intentionality of subjective waking consciousness is tackled, in *Ideas I*, via the crucial distinction of the noematic side from the noetic sphere, the differentiation of neutralization from positionality reappears as a decisive issue¹². With respect to a noema posited as actual, a neutralization is needed in order to cancel out all the doxic modalities, that is to say, to “suspend” or to “bracket” (Husserl, 2014, 52–55, *Ideas I*, § 31) the positing mode of judging (Serra, 2010, 208) at work in the state of certainty, or doubting, or questioning, and so on¹³. As Scheler aptly observed, this is the basic rule for phenomenological investigations:

In a genuine phenomenological investigation we abstract from two things when we execute the so-called phenomenological reduction (Husserl): First, *the actual performance of the act* [*realen Aktvollzug*] and all the accompanying phenomena which do not come within the sense and direction of the act itself, along with all the characteristics of its bearer [*Träger*] (animal, man, god). Second, we disregard any *positing* (belief or unbelief) *of the particular coefficient of reality* with which the content of the act is “given” in natural perception and in science (e. g., actuality, appearance, imagination, illusion). (Scheler, 1973, 156)

The caveat provided in *Ideas I*, § 114 is important to situate neutralization right at the core of what a conscious waking subject can do. Neutrality modification, Husserl states, “*is not a special modification* attached to the *current* theses (the sole theses that are actually theses) but instead concerns *a fundamentally essential peculiarity of any consciousness whatsoever*,” (Husserl, 2014, 223, Husserl’s italics for emphasis). The neutrality modification is a modification that has no direction, but consists in “arresting the de- and in-cline of the affirmative and negative modifications,” as discussed by Husserl in *Ideas I* (Wilberg, 2020, 136)¹⁴.

¹² The noema is the intentional correlate that corresponds to the noetic component of a given reduced conscious experience, while noeses are those components of intentional experiences that “afford” sense to them (Xolocotzi, 2010, 23), see, e. g., *Ideas I*, § 96 (Husserl, 2014, 192–193). On *Sinngebung*, “affordance of sense,” see, among others places, *Ideas I*, § 55 (Husserl, 2014, 102–104). On the origin of the concept of ‘noema,’ see: (De Warren, 2015, 230).

¹³ See: (Moran & Cohen, 2012, 86–87). The noema, as Bernet recalls, should be considered as a phenomenologically reduced object, that is, an object that is “given and meant ‘intuitively’” (Husserl, 1984b, 230) in a “phenomenologically reduced act,” and not as an actual component of the act; rather, the noema is the intentional correlate of a particular act, or the *cogitatum* of a particular *cogito* (Bernet, 1991, 83). The author goes on to discuss three different versions of the notion of noema: besides the one mentioned above, he pinpoints the noema as an ideal meaning, and as the constituted object (see esp.: Bernet, 1991, 91–100).

¹⁴ See an essential clarification in § 109, on how powerful the neutrality modification can be, once performed: “[t]he character of positing has lost all force. The belief is now, in a serious sense, no longer a belief, the presuming is not seriously a presuming, the negating is not seriously a negating,

If neutrality modification entails a “state of exception” of the noetic-noematic structure (Wilberg, 2020, 137), neutralization (*Neutralisierung*), in turn, as a conscious, that is, effectuated, counterpart of all producing or accomplishing, is widely applied to any modality of belief. As opposed to negation, which is itself a potentially extreme modification of belief, neutralization “accomplishes nothing; rather, it annuls all positional characters in the mode of ‘merely thought of’” (Hennigfeld, 2010, 199), so that the particular posited characteristic becomes “powerless” (Husserl, 1983, 258). As Husserl puts it in paragraph 109 of *Ideas I*:

At issue here is a modification that in a certain way completely cancels, completely disempowers every doxic modality to which it is related albeit in a sense totally different from negation that additionally has, as we saw, a positive accomplishment of its own in what is negated, a not-being that is itself again being. By contrast, the modification that concerns us does not cross out; it “accomplishes” nothing; it is the counterpart in consciousness to all accomplishing: its *neutralization*. It is included in every case of holding-back-from-accomplishing something, putting-it-out-of-action, “bracketing”-it, “leaving-it-open,” and then, having-“left it open,” “thinking-oneself-into”-the-accomplishing, or “merely thinking” (without “adding to”) what was accomplished¹⁵. (Husserl, 2014, 213)

This short paragraph on neutrality modification shows a summary, a minimal sample, so to speak, of the typical lexicon of what Husserl calls the “language of neutrality.” Neutrality modification “exemplifies Husserl’s invention of a concept without historical pedigree,” “without precedence” (De Warren, 2015, 251, 248), and *die Sprache der Neutralität* expresses the *epoché*, the methodologically crucial novelty introduced in the Second Lecture of the 1907 cycle, *The Idea of Phenomenology* (Husserl, 1999, 23–31). Since languages rely on words, a brief overview of the key meaningful expressions of such a language is in order.

2. THE LEXICON OF NEUTRALITY

One particular rule of the “language of neutrality” can be pinned down from the outset: not to make use of what we already have, not to make use of what is given. It has been noted that neutralization “brackets” or “suspends” the positing mode of

and so forth. It is ‘*neutralized*’ believing, presuming, negating, and the like, the correlates of which repeat those very correlates of the unmodified experiences, but in a radically modified manner” (Husserl, 2014, 214).

¹⁵ A question mark is placed in the margin opposite these two last sentences, while a *deleatur* has been used to mark the four that follow, see: (Husserl, 1983, 258).

judging. However, this does not mean that we introduce new judgments to replace the previous ones, “which is precisely what we do not do.” On the contrary, in neutralization, the modification is such that what has been posited in a conscious act “remains in itself what it is,” is “still here as before,” but we “*place it as it were ‘out of action’*,” “*we ‘suspend it’*,” “*we ‘bracket it’*” (Husserl, 2014, 54). The positing, or the thesis, put “out of action” (*außer Aktion*) is “still here as before,” just as the elements we put in parenthesis (*Einklammerung, einklammern*, therefore also rendered as “parenthesizing,” see (Husserl, 1983, 59)), remain there, but with changed signs. Again, what undergoes this exclusion, or suspension (*Ausschaltung*), is “still here as before,” but it is not active, just like the flow of electricity is still at hand when we switch off the circuit, ready to spring into action again once we switch it back on¹⁶. As Husserl explains in paragraph 31 of *Ideas I*, we can also say that “the thesis is an experience [*Erlebnis*] but we make ‘no use’ of it [, *keinen Gebrauch*“], and that is to be understood naturally not as privation (as when we say of someone lacking consciousness, he makes no use of a thesis)” (Husserl, 2014, 54). The “radical alteration of the natural thesis” (as the title of the paragraph reads (Husserl, 2014, 52)) provided by the *Ausschaltung* is addressed to the very existence of the world in its validity for me. Its scope has no limits, involving the subject, and even God (Husserl, 2014, 105–107, *Ideas I*, §§ 57–58)¹⁷.

In the abovementioned paragraph 109 of *Ideas I*, we found the expression “holding-back-from-accomplishing” something (*sich-des-Leistens-enthalten*), or “abstaining-from-producing” (Husserl, 1983, 258). This important phrasing pertains to a basic effectuation of the phenomenological attitude. Indeed, the possibility to hold back from effectuating a certain act presupposes that I am free to do it, that I am free to abstain from it. The first step in order to enter the phenomenological attitude is then to actualize this freedom and “abstain from every believing involved in or founded on sensuous experiencing.” Now, “the being of the experienced world remains unaccepted by me,” but the abstaining is still there, and with it my freedom, as well as my “whole stream of my experiencing life” (Husserl, 1982, 19).

¹⁶ The *Ausschaltung*, also translated as “exclusion” (Husserl, 1983, 51), is used along with “suspension” as a synonym in the third of the 1907 lectures (“All positing of a ‘non-immanent reality,’ a reality not contained in the phenomenon and therefore not given in the second sense, even if it is intended in the phenomenon, is shut off, that is, suspended,” „ausgeschaltet, d.h. suspendiert“, see: (Husserl, 1999, 34; Husserl, 1973, 45).

¹⁷ It should be pointed out here, in passing, that since *Erlebnis* implies time, to understand how neutrality modification works, a consideration of the constitution of original time-consciousness becomes pivotal, see, e. g., *Ideas I*, § 113, in (Husserl, 2014, 219–222). This involves the sphere of passivity and of passive syntheses, too, see: (Husserl, 1966; Husserl, 2001b).

As is made clear in the first Cartesian meditation, the *Enthaltung* involves a “universal depriving of acceptance” (*universale Außergeltungsetzen*) with respect to all positions assumed toward the already given world, and, in the first instance, toward “all existential positions (those concerning being, illusion, possible being, being likely, probable, etc.).” This “parenthesizing of the objective world,” Husserl also calls the “phenomenological *epoché*,” by which I, the meditating subject, acquire my “pure living experiences” (*Erlebnisse*) along with all that is purely meant within them: “the universe of ‘phenomena’ in the (particular and also the wider) phenomenological sense” (Husserl, 1982, 20–21)¹⁸.

What is called *universale Außergeltungsetzen* (this latter meaning, literally, to put out of validity) hints back to a “putting out of action” (or “putting out of play,” *Außerspielsetzen*), as Husserl writes in passing in this First Meditation. The paramount importance of this possibility is clarified from the very outset of the Meditation, when the “new beginning” of philosophy provided by the phenomenological attitude is described: “at first we shall put out of action [*außer Spiel*] all the convictions we have been accepting up to now, including all our sciences” (Husserl, 1982, 7). As a matter of fact, to put out of validity any given science has profound consequences on philosophizing. In order to philosophize, no knowledge that has not been subjected to previous “methodical criticism” (Husserl, 1982, 3) is permitted, and we cannot make use of any of our transmitted scientific acquirements, because everything “that makes a philosophical beginning possible we must first acquire by ourselves” (Husserl, 1982, 13)¹⁹.

With the phenomenologist — who here should not be considered a sophist nor a skeptic (Husserl, 2014, 55–56) — now meditating, philosophy gains a new beginning, albeit a solitary one. It should be further stressed that, by going down this path, philosophy does not gain any solid ground, as it relies on a method that “completely cancels, completely disempowers” (Husserl, 2014, 213) anything that can be given to our faculties and that can be used for philosophical inquiry.

¹⁸ Husserl goes on to say: “The *ἐποχή* can also be said to be the radical and universal method by which I apprehend myself purely: as Ego, and with my own pure conscious life, in and by which the entire Objective world exists for me and is precisely as it is for me” (Husserl, 1982, 20–21). Trans. mod., we have followed the Husserliana edition, which reports the use of the Greek word (Husserl, 1991, 60), as it is found in paragraph 32 of *Ideas I* (cf. Husserl, 2014, 55–56). A similar argument can be found in the Paris Lectures (Husserl, 1964, 7–8).

¹⁹ As is well known, psychology is the first science to be subjected to criticism, and to be abandoned, see, for instance, the second step in the phenomenological consideration, in the *Train of thoughts* of the 1907 cycle *The Idea of Phenomenology* (cf. Husserl, 1999, 64–66). See also the much later 1929 Paris Lectures (Husserl, 1964, 9–10).

Lying behind these difficulties, which were picked up by Husserl along the path of his exploration of transcendental phenomenology as “commencing” science (Husserl, 2014, 193), we can recognize the Kantian heritage. The neutralized consciousness challenges the problem of self-consciousness, summarized in the “general expression I think” (Kant, 1998, 250), that is, the impossibility of knowing the living subjective consciousness itself “thetically, thematically, as positing,” and, above all, intuitively (Guaraldi, 1965, 74–75)²⁰. Husserl’s take on the problem of self-definition of the transcendental consciousness gets complicated by the insistence on functional intentionality. The subject, Guaraldi argues (Guaraldi, 1965, 75), has no other knowledge of itself than the one provided by self-presentations in the midst of its own operations, expressed in accomplished acts. Still, the presentations of its “thinking spontaneity” belong to the realm of “dim presentations,” which are “devoid of any noticeable intuitiveness” (Husserl, 2014, 215, 61), and, therefore, are unacceptable for phenomenological science, insofar as they fall outside Husserl’s basic rule given to transcendental phenomenology, its “principle of all principles” (*Ideas I*, § 24)²¹.

The “operative insubstantiality” (Guaraldi, 1965, 74) of the phenomenological subject (a subject that is nothing else other than what it performs) is such that the unclearness of self-presentation is the upper limit for transcendental consciousness, reached thanks to all the neutrality modifications achieved through the method of reduction²². But that unclearness comes with the neutralization of the empirical subject, it is the price that needs to be paid, so to speak, since neutralization can only achieve representations of the “I think,” and a representation — Guaraldi (Guaraldi, 1965, 75) turns again to Kant — “does not produce its object as far as its existence is concerned” (Kant, 1998, 224)²³.

²⁰ Guaraldi recalls the *Analytic of Concepts* in Kant’s first *Critique*, see esp. §§ 16–18 in (Kant, 1998, 246–251).

²¹ As is well known, this fundamental *Prinzip*, which also provides an “absolute beginning” to philosophy, and serves as “*principium*” for it, is the following: “*that each intuition affording [something] in an originary way is a legitimate source of knowledge, that whatever presents itself to us in ‘Intuition’ in an originary way (so to speak, in its actuality in person) is to be taken simply as what it affords itself as, but only within the limitations in which it affords itself there*” (Husserl, 2014, 43–44).

²² According to Guaraldi, Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology shares the problem of the neutrality of the philosophizing subject with many other thinkers that she lists in analytic philosophy, such as Wittgenstein, Russell, Carnap, Ryle, Hare, Austin, and Lévi-Strauss. In particular, they share the exclusion of the sensuous perception as a reliable source of knowledge and certainty, an idea which leads to the very identity of the philosophizing subject being called into question (cf. Guaraldi, 1965, 76, 96–106).

²³ Here, Guaraldi refers to the *Transition to the transcendental deduction of the categories* in Kant’s first *Critique* (cf. Kant, 1998, 224–226). On the differences between the Kantian system and Husserl’s

Indeed, in the neutralized mode, what is thought, meant or objectivated is generally intended in a way that is very similar to the acts of phantasying (*phantasieren*). Phantasy implies acts in which a given content is presented in the “as-if” mode (*als ob*). The reality of what is presented in phantasies is “put out of action,” and we are not concerned with its actual existence (Serra, 2010, 208).

However, the nature of phantasy must be carefully specified within the general scope of the function of neutralization²⁴. The neutrality modification “occupies a completely isolated position,” since it is “a modification not belonging specifically to the sphere of belief at all,” instead it is “a supremely important, *universal* modification of consciousness.” Moreover, “the neutral consciousness in no respect plays the role of a ‘belief,’ for what it is conscious of” (Husserl, 2014, 213–214). In the ordinary sense, phantasy is understood “in opposition to perceiving,” “to all acts that posit something individual and concrete as existing” (Husserl, 2005, 4). Phenomenologically construed, “phantasy” designates a non-positing act, and what defines actual existence, those characteristics which present us something “as concrete and individual,” “cannot be invented” through a non-positing act (Husserl, 2005, 665).

The possible confusion is triggered by the fact that phantasy itself is a neutrality modification, and, just as the neutrality modification is a universal modification of consciousness, phantasy is for Husserl “in spite of the particular character of its type [...] of universal significance,” insofar as it is “applicable to *all* experiences” (Husserl, 2014, 215), but it depends on the re-presentation of something already posited. Phantasy “plays its role in most configurations of ‘thinking to oneself;’” but “it must nonetheless be distinguished thereby from the general neutrality modification, along with the latter’s manifold configurations, following every kind of positing.” Hence, Husserl points out that phantasizing, “*in general is the neutrality modification of the ‘positing’ re-presentation*, thus, of memory in the widest conceivable sense” (Husserl, 2014, 215)²⁵.

phenomenology on this topic, see also Guaraldi (1965, 80–82, 89).

²⁴ As De Warren affirms (2015, 250) “the neutralized object does not appear as ‘irreal’ or ‘non-being’ since this would in turn impart a doxic characterization. The question of how exactly to understand this liminal sense of neutralized constitution, as not identical with ‘inactuality’ (*Unwirklichkeit*) or ‘irreality’ — the provenance of fiction and imagination, is very much open.”

²⁵ “Re-presentation” (*Vergegenwärtigung*, see (Husserl, 2014, 215)) is an *Erlebnis* in which — just as in the cases of phantasy, memory, or expectation — what is experienced appears only intuitively and not in person, *leibhaftig* (cf. Cobos, 2010, 294). *Vergegenwärtigung* is rendered in Husserl (1983, 260) as “presentation,” while, in the English version by Hua XXIII (Husserl, 1980), it is translated as “re-presentation,” with “presentation” being used for *Vorstellung* (cf. Husserl, 2005, 1, note).

Phantasy remains a modification that neutralizes a previously given positing, without negating it, just leaving the validity of its being undecided, or “open.” Differently from the perception of a thing, and similarly to memory, phantasy re-presents something not present. However, while memories implicitly presuppose a positing, phantasies, on the other hand, inasmuch as they provide neutrality modifications of positing re-presentations, are involved in “nonpositing re-presentation” (Husserl, 2005, 350), as Alloa (2010, 236) notes. Still, the “radical difference” between a phantasy and a neutralizing modification remains: “[w]hereas the phantasy modification as re-presentation is *iterable* (there are phantasies on any arbitrary level, phantasies “in” phantasies), the *repetition of the ‘operation’ of neutralizing is essentially ruled out*” (Husserl, 2014, 217).

3. CENTAURS AND NYMPHS

The expression *Sprache der Neutralität* occurs in *Ideas I*, in the chapter devoted to “problems pertaining to noetic-noematic structures” (Chapter Four of Part Three), particularly in the discussion on “neutrality modification” (§ 109). Based on a footnote in *Ideas I*²⁶, we can trace this latter notion back to *qualitativer Modifikation* as opposed to *imaginativer Modifikation*, as discussed in the Fifth Investigation (§ 39)²⁷. Guaraldi (1965, 77) pinpoints seven key features of qualitative modifications. Among these, we find that qualitative modification belongs to the very essence of subjective conscious acts, which means, as we have already mentioned, that it should be attributed to the noetic sphere. Furthermore, with the neutrality modification, we enter the region of “mere thinking,” which leads to an appreciation of the “incomparable peculiarity of consciousness.”²⁸ Thirdly, with regard to what directly affects our theme, by

²⁶ See: “With respect to the points treated up to this point about the doctrine of neutrality-modification, the *Logical Investigations* had already managed to work its way through to the correct construal of what chiefly matters, particularly concerning the relationship to phantasy. Compare from the Fifth Investigation, in § 39 in particular, the contrast of ‘qualitative’ and ‘imaginative modification,’ whereby the first possessed the sense of the neutrality modification discussed *here*” (Husserl, 2014, 218, § 112). See the footnote in (Husserl, 1984a, 473), Fifth Investigation, § 31, for a quasi-cross reference to paragraph 109 of *Ideas I*.

²⁷ On this, see (Fink, 1966, 68) and (De Warren, 2015, 149, note). Belussi (1990, 35) notes that in *Logical Investigations*, Husserl does not expand on the case of the neutral attitude of leaving ‘something open’ or “having-‘left it open,” “undecided” (*dahingestellt-haben*) (Husserl, 2014, 213), whereas it becomes much more important in the context of transcendental phenomenology, under the heading of “neutrality modification.”

²⁸ See (Husserl, 2014, 214), where the “peculiarity” is expressed as follows: “*the question of reason and unreason makes no sense for the neutralized noeses.*” The inquiry on neutrality modifications moves

referring neutrality modification to “thinking,” Husserl can positively separate it from both phantasy and memory.

In *Ideas I*, § 111, Husserl notes that “in the usual way of talking, *re-presenting* (reproduction) and *phantasy* are confused with one another” (Husserl, 2014, 216). The texts collected in volume XXIII of *Husserliana* show the effort to describe phantasy as a “fundamental form” of *Vorstellung* (presentation)²⁹. Husserl addresses “intentional, or better, objectivating experiences” of phantasy, in the so-called “phantasy presentations” (*Phantasievorstellungen*), which are also ambiguously called “phantasy activity,” “for example, the experiences in which the artist sees his phantasy formations.” However, the phenomenologist is not interested in such a phantasy activity. In fact, the “ability” of phantasy is not important at all. To be sure, the disposition toward phantasy “is an important methodological concept in psychology, but it does not concern us” (Husserl, 2005, 2–3).

The way phantasy enters the range of phenomenological inquiry distinguishes the phenomenologist from both the psychologist and the artist. It is not the action of phantasy, rather, it is the “phantasy experience,” “the so-called phantasy presentation,” that must come into consideration for the phenomenologist as “a phenomenological datum” (Husserl, 2005, 3). The phantasy *Erlebnis* is an “objectivating experience,” since, in phantasying (*im Phantasieren*), objectivities are brought to appearance. Yet, once again, what appears in the course of phantasying does not directly concern phenomenology, in precisely the same manner as what appears in the perception of physical things does not directly concern phenomenology (Husserl, 2005, 3). The “appearing centaurs” in my phantasying, for instance, “are nothing phenomenological, just as the appearing objects of the perception of physical things are not phenomenological” (Husserl, 2005, 3). Still, the centaur acquires a crucial phenomenological function as the phantasy experience “shows the immanent peculiarity of bringing to appearance precisely this object appearing in such and such a way,” it receives attention inasmuch

us close to what ‘thinking’ means for Husserl, on the condition that we separate ‘thinking’ not only from anything that is actually posited, but also from what is hypothetically posited. “In addition to this possible equivocation,” Husserl goes on to say, “there is the equally misleading equivocation inherent in the word ‘thinking’ insofar as it refers sometimes to the pre-eminent sphere of thinking that explicates, conceives, and expresses (logical thinking in a specific sense), and other times to simply entertaining a position as such, the sort of thinking that, as we just saw here, makes no inquiry into explicating and conceptually predicating” (Husserl, 2014, 215).

²⁹ See the translator’s “Introduction” in (Husserl, 2005, xxxvi). In what follows, just as it has been expressed throughout the present paper, *Erlebnis* is rendered as “experience,” see the translator’s note in (Husserl, 2005, 1–2).

an objectivating experience — in phantasying, in this case — brings to appearance this object “as *this* object” (Husserl, 2005, 3).

In these lectures from the winter semester 1904/05, Husserl’s attempt to obtain a phenomenological notion of phantasy in contrast to the “ordinary sense” of this word generates a tentative, but important general distinction between perception, memory, and phantasy: “Perception makes a present reality appear to us as present and as a reality; memory places an absent reality before our eyes, not indeed as present itself, but certainly as reality. *Phantasy*, on the other hand, lacks the consciousness of reality in relation to what is phantasied” (Husserl, 2005, 4). This distinction will play a pivotal role for the transcendental investigations in *Ideas I*. Phantasy can also be understood as “neutralized memory;” it is of “fundamental importance, however, not to confuse this modification with the sort of neutrality modification that can be set in contrast to any ‘positing’ experience. In this respect, memory is a completely specific, positing experience” (*Ideas I*, § 111: “Neutrality modification and phantasy,” (Husserl, 2014, 216)).

In this context, the difference between positionality and neutrality becomes crucial in order to understand the larger scope of neutrality. The line is drawn between two different attitudes. In the “attitude of positional living,” “I always have something existent,” which is put forth as “lasting *positum*.” In both attitudes, I can describe what I have, but in the case of “neutral attitude,” all such descriptions will have an accordingly neutralized “*modified sense*” (Husserl, 2005, 689).

However, to describe phantasies phenomenologically, I cannot ‘phantasy’ anymore. The phenomenological description of a phantasy cannot remain a phantasy itself. Phantasy entails the *epoché* of actuality, first and foremost, the *epoché* of my living actuality, so that I am able to ‘phantasy’ about the house of my dreams, which is not the actual house I am phantasying in. A second *epoché* is then required if we want to apply the phenomenological method to phantasy experiences. Thanks to this second *epoché*, or better, to a redoubled *epoché*, I change attitude, and “[i]nstead of describing something while living in phantasy [...], I describe the phantasy image, the phantasy processes in an actual positional description.” This second *epoché*, applied to the previous one that granted the phantasying process, allows us to put “out of action” the “neutral acts” of the “Ego lost in phantasy and generally in the as-if” (e. g., the representation of proportions and the intended use of the spaces in my dream house) as “*quasi-performances*” (*quasi-Vollzüge*), and subsequently, to modify them (Husserl, 2005, 690)³⁰.

³⁰ The following is how Husserl summarizes this “double epoché or neutrality” in *Phantasy — Neutrality* (1921–24): “Hence we have a *double epoché* or neutrality here. 1) In one case, there is the *epoché* that belongs to the phantasy as phantasy or to the neutral consciousness as neutral (perhaps

The difference between neutrality and phantasy goes back to the general distinction between experience and presentation, between “acts that actually experience something” and acts that “‘merely’ present something.” This distinction first implies that the latter “are not actually experiencing acts but *quasi*-experiencing acts,” which means that a “phantasied individual” is not actual, whereas “a concrete individual is an actual individual and actually exists in this or that mode of actuality” (Husserl, 2005, 605, 608)³¹. However, as understood in that fundamental form of re-presentation that phantasy is, what is phantasied is “in its own way, something positable,” and, therefore, “a substrate of possible descriptions, of possible true judgments;” a “this” that “exists as a figment,” ‘hovering before us in phantasy’ (Husserl, 2005, 608), like this “centaur,” or these “water nymphs” presented in the related phantasy experiences (Husserl, 2005, 606)³².

A footnote from the abovementioned text entitled *Phantasy — Neutrality* presents the topic of this reasoning as: “What is most universal about the ‘epoché’ as act-abstraction in relation to the idea of neutrality” (Husserl, 2005, 689). Here, *epoché* is mentioned as an *Aktenthaltung*, a rather peculiar kind of act, since it expresses the act of holding back, or abstaining³³.

produced by an active epoché). And then 2) there is another *epoché*, which is related to the *quasi*-acts that as dreaming Ego I *quasi* perform. This *epoché* belongs to the change in attitude brought about by the establishing of a positional Ego over the neutral Ego and to the grasping of the ‘images.’ Now it is not a question of an abstention from actual positions with respect to the dreamt objects; they are by all means dreamt objects” (Husserl, 2005, 691).

³¹ An insightful assessment of the issue of phantasy by Husserl can be read in (De Santis, 2021, 195–199).

³² On this topic, see also Appendix LXIV, in (Husserl, 2005, 709–711). Husserl deemed that, in general terms, *Ideas I* had provided a suitable and correct distinction between neutrality modification and positionality, “although the exposition would have to be worked out in more detail and with greater emphasis and clarity” (Husserl, 2005, 692). Again, it is worth briefly noting that the inquiry on the nature of phenomenologically construed neutrality provides precious hints about what Husserl means by “thought” (see, e. g.: Husserl, 2005, 708).

³³ In Ryle’s terms, *epoché* would entail negative acts. Ryle (1973, 81–82) questioned that “negative ‘acts’” can be considered acts at all: “What is interesting is the class of acts (if they *are* acts) which consist in the agent’s intentional *non*-performance of some specifiable actions. [...] This class of negative ‘acts’ (if they *are* acts) includes *refraining, abstaining, postponing, shirking, neglecting, disobeying, overlooking, condoning, forgiving, acquiescing, ignoring, idling, pausing, resting, hesitating, omitting, enduring, waiting, remaining, permitting, letting, keeping (still or a secret), holding (one’s tongue), sparing, economising, relinquishing, yielding, relying, trusting, [...]* A few of these things can be ‘done’ unintentionally and by inanimate agents; the snow can *remain* on the hilltop, though not patiently or impatiently; the wind can *pause* for a moment, but not for a rest. Or are these metaphors?”

The phenomenological experience of the “nonparticipating onlooker” or “spectator” who performs the second *epoché*, and is witness to the phantasying in its making³⁴, can be compared with the more everyday experience of being at the theater, as we read in the text devoted to the modes of intuitions (probably from 1918). When a play is presented, in the theater — or in any context appropriate for experiencing a play — “[w]e live in neutrality; we do not carry out any actual positing at all with respect to what is intuited.” Everything that might happen during the play, everything that might be said or done “all of this has the characteristic of the as-if” (Husserl, 2005, 617).

During the theatrical presentation, the illusion is set *ab initio*, and it persists. We do not begin with the positing of what appears by considering it as real, and then modify this perception. In a way, in the theater, neutralization has already been elicited for the spectators, so that in “a certain inactive (passive) manner, everything that is ‘seen’ here has the characteristic of what is null, of what is cancelled, or, better, of what is annulled with respect to its reality” (Husserl, 2005, 618). The theater, scenes, settings, scripts, and “performance of the actor” (Husserl, 2005, 616–617) are all constantly unfolding in the as-if mode. The whole artistic theatrical illusion is a particularly interesting field for phenomenological inquiry committed to the description of the “use of oneself”³⁵, and, more specifically, in dealing with the analysis of acting techniques by drawing on the “language of neutrality.”

4. HUSSERL'S ANGEL

A particular kind of neutralization is performed through *epoché*. As a phenomenological observer, the ego can bracket its own acts, thereby not assuming them as actual, valid existing objects. In phantasy, as we have seen, an *epoché* is effectuated when the validity of an act is bracketed in the mode of “as if.” The subject then gains a representation of itself as acting in the phantasy, in the world related to the current phantasy, so that a distance is opened up between the phenomenological observer or “witness” and the previously phantasizing ego. Thus, the ego can “bracket the validity of those particular phantasized objects and reaches a higher neutralization, thanks to

³⁴ See: “as nonparticipating onlooker I am supposed to contemplate and fix what offers itself in this living-as-if just as it offers itself. I can also say: As onlooker, I now stand above the dreaming Ego that formerly had forgotten itself entirely and that was *quasi*-active in its dreaming, but [I stand above it] as nonparticipating spectator, as the positional Ego, the Ego that witnesses the dreaming and the dream itself.” (Husserl, 2005, 691).

³⁵ See: (Agamben, 2016, 49–57; Virno, 2015).

which the purely correlated objectivity of both the acts and the objects of these acts can be obtained” (Serra, 2010, 208)³⁶.

In the 1904/05 lectures, this peculiar phenomenological take on phantasy served to clarify the differences between the phenomenologist, the psychologist, and even the artist. Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s fairy tales are mentioned as an example of the specific “mode of completely pure phantasy”³⁷. The topic emerges in Husserl’s 1907 famous letter to Hofmannsthal. Both “phenomenological seeing” and “aesthetic seeing,” Husserl writes, share the same demand for the “strict exclusion” of all positions concerning existence, of any “position-taking” that come from any intellectual activity, or from feelings and acts of willing (Husserl, 1994, 134)³⁸.

In pure phenomenological seeing, “every science, and every actuality (even the one of my own I) become mere ‘phenomenon’” (Husserl, 1994, 134). Both the artist and the phenomenologist are not psychologists, nor scientists of human nature; rather, to their eyes, “the world, insofar as it is observed, becomes phenomenon” (Husserl, 1994, 135).

While in the letter addressed to Hofmannsthal, Husserl basically summarizes the methodological consequences of the *epoché*, the “Preface” to the English edition of the first volume of *Ideen*, for the most part taken from the 1930 *Nachwort* published in the *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, clearly explains that *epoché*, by which “the psychological subjectivity loses just that which makes it something real in the world that lies before us,” paves the way to the pure ego (Husserl, 2012, xxxvii)³⁹.

³⁶ See Husserl (2014, 215–217, *Ideen I*, § 111). Serra also refers to Hua VIII (Husserl, 1959, 114–116) (where a land of centaurs is phantasized) and Hua XXXIII (Husserl, 2001a, 333–335).

³⁷ “In the case of a domestic comedy or drama, depiction is obviously omitted; and the same is true of stories, even when they begin with ‘once upon a time,’ as fairy tales commonly do. They are intuitive or partially intuitive reproductions of what is past that are offered to us specifically in the mode of the phantasy of the past and, on occasion, in the mode of completely pure phantasy, as in the fairy tales of Hofmannsthal” (Husserl, 2005, 616). This quotation is taken from the 1918 text discussed above. On Husserl and Hofmannsthal, see, among others, Popa (2011), Wilberg (2020), and De Warren (2020).

³⁸ Neutralization with respect to artworks is discussed in *Ideen I*, § 111, with the example provided being Dürer’s copperplate engraving, “Knight, Death and the Devil,” see Husserl (2014, 216–217). On the functioning of esthetic neutralization, see Belussi (1990, 251–260) and Ferencz-Flatz (2009).

³⁹ See the much more detailed elaboration of this argument in the *Nachwort*, in (Husserl, 1930, 554–558). On pure ego, see, e. g., the first Cartesian meditation: “The *ἐποχή* can also be said to be the radical and universal method by which I apprehend myself purely: as Ego, and with my own pure conscious life, in and by which the entire Objective world exists for me and is precisely as it is for me. Anything belonging to the world, any spatiotemporal being, exists for me — that is to say, is ac-

In those years, Husserl also calls *epoché* a “complete transposition of the ego” which gives birth to a “new will” for life (Husserl, 1976a, 472), instead of continuing on the basis of what one has had before. He intends it in the widest sense, as the “possibility of radically changing all human existence through this *epoché* which reaches into its philosophical depths” (Husserl, 1970, 151). The idea was set from the beginning, namely, since *epoché* was first explained in the 1907 *Lectures*: the first step towards pure knowledge is gained by bracketing any natural attitude and excluding “all that is posited as transcendent” (Husserl, 1999, 63). What is referred to here as “epistemological *reduction*,” fulfills the basic principle:

[A]ll the transcendence that comes into play here must be excluded, must be supplied with the index of indifference, of epistemological nullity, with an index that says: the existence of all transcendent entities, whether I believe in them or not, does not concern me here; this is not the place to pass judgement on the issue, to do so is entirely beside the point. (Husserl, 1999, 30)

This methodological starting point, which takes up and further develops Descartes’s gesture, aims at focusing on the intentionality of experience to reconstruct the latter in pure *cogito*, so that “we drop anchor on the shore of phenomenology” (Husserl, 1999, 34).

Husserl’s *epoché* — literally “abstention” — is that methodological move by which

[w]e are to “bracket,” or abstain from positing the existence of, the natural world around us. That is, we put out of action the general thesis of the everyday “natural” standpoint, our background presupposition that there exists a world independent of our experience. (Smith & Smith, 1995, 11)

Through the phenomenological *epoché*, as Carr explains, “any independence the object might have is taken away.” The method itself is described as a reduction, since “it reduces the world to the status of intentional object or representation,” and thanks to this process, the transcendental subjectivity “achieves full *Gegebenheit* [givenness] to itself” (Carr, 1994, 408).

However, the phenomenological method is not that homogeneous. Crowell pinpoints at least three different operative modes of methodological ‘reduction:’ the

cepted by me — in that I experience it, perceive it, remember it, think of it somehow, judge about it, value it, desire it, or the like. Descartes, as we know, indicated all that by the name *cogito*. The world is for me absolutely nothing else but the world existing for and accepted by me in such a conscious *cogito*” (Husserl, 1982, 21, trans. mod.).

epoché, the transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and the eidetic reduction (Crowell, 2012, 28)⁴⁰.

The accomplishment of phenomenological reduction presupposes *epoché*. Husserl distinguishes the *epoché*, which is oriented to single conscious acts with the purpose of bracketing them, putting them out of play, from the *epoché* as the “radical and universal method” (Husserl, 1982, 20–21) that suspends the validity of the world in its being. *Epoché* intended in the second, all-encompassing sense provides the basis for the transcendental phenomenological attitude in the first place, according to which the universal theme of the world becomes the universal theme of “world-phenomenon,” which has validity for the transcendental subject⁴¹.

In its general performance, *epoché* is an attitude towards annulling, for I do not make use of what is posited, especially of what I have posited as existing. *Epoché*, says Patočka in the “Glosses” to his *Heretical Essays*, is “something more negative than negation which is always also a thesis.” In the *epoché*, a “radical *no*” is performed, giving birth to “one of the deeply negative acts of our consciousness which demonstrate how deeply rooted in it is an understanding for no, for a negation deeper than all logical negations.” So, according to Patočka, *epoché*, as a sort of “negative act” (if it is an act at all, we may add, along with Ryle), is quite a peculiar act, but it is not an act of “pure abstraction,” “rather, it is a free act which does not have to do with things and as such is always possible” (Patočka, 1996, 151–153)⁴².

Therefore, as Levinas noted (Levinas, 1982, 36), *epoché* entails a certain violence, namely, a violent shift is needed in order to gain pure thinking. Perception, memory, phantasy: phenomenology requires that all data be transformed into thoughts. The language of this translation into thoughts is the “language of neutrality” (*Ideas I*, § 113, Husserl, 2014, 221–222) spoken by phenomenologists⁴³.

It bears repeating here: we do not simply cancel the world as it is, even when the doubt is radical; we are not powerful enough to cancel nature. Levinas’s doctoral dissertation on Husserl’s theory of intuition, published in 1930, provided, at that

⁴⁰ The concept of reduction, together with a tentative formulation of the method, goes back to summer 1905, see (Schuhmann, 1973, 162–183; cf. Husserl, 2002, 315), although, in this period, reduction is only phenomenological and not yet transcendental, the latter appearing later in the 1906 introductory lectures on logic and the theory of knowledge (Husserl, 1984b), see Lavigne (2005, 425).

⁴¹ On the points just presented, see (Staiti, 2010, 84–85).

⁴² See also (Patočka, 1988, 287–289). For further developments of the neutrality modification involved in the methodological *epoché* by Patočka and Merleau-Ponty, see Şan (2015).

⁴³ Earlier, in the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl had already noted that “the source of all difficulties” lies in the “unnatural orientation” demanded by the phenomenological attitude in intuition and thinking (Husserl, 1984a, 14).

time, one of the most insightful takes on the phenomenological method. As Levinas explains it:

Instead of positing the existence of the world as we do in the natural attitude, we are suspending our judgment, as Descartes does when he exercises his doubt with respect to all his assertions. But our doubt [*scil.*: the phenomenological doubt] has a different meaning from the Cartesian doubt: it is purely ephectic. Descartes's suspension of judgment has, according to Husserl, the character of a universal negation. But we posit neither the existence of the world nor the non-existence of the world. We "disconnect," we "bracket," the position of its existence. We do not assert existence, and we do not deny it. We want to remain neutral with respect to this assertion and study it. [...] The phenomenological epoché does not destroy the truths proper to the natural attitude but wants only to clarify their sense. (Levinas, 1995, 146, 147)⁴⁴

By relying on one of the defining terms of ancient skepticism, Levinas carefully separates the Husserlian effort from the Cartesian attempt. "Ephectic" is indeed one of the four key terms of the nomenclature of skepticism, as Sextus Empiricus reports in *Pyrrhonianae Hypotyposes* (I, 7), along with "zetetic" ("investigative" because of the activity spent in questioning and inquiring, see the *ζήτημα*, "that which is sought"), "aporetic" ("from being at a loss whether to assent or deny"), and "Pyrrhonian" (since Pyrrho "attached himself to Scepticism more systematically and conspicuously than anyone before him")⁴⁵. Thus, the term chosen by Levinas also reveals to us one of the ancient sources on which phenomenology partly draws⁴⁶. And it is exactly such an "ephectic" attitude ("we do not assert existence, and we do not deny it"), which is

⁴⁴ On Cartesian doubt replaced by *epoché*, see *Ideas I*, § 31 (Husserl, 2014, 52–55), as well as the following paragraph 32: "We should now be able to let the universal 'ἐποχή,' in our sharply determined and new sense, take the place of the Cartesian attempt of a universal doubt" (Husserl, 2014, 55).

⁴⁵ See: (Annas & Barnes, 2000, 4). "Ephectic" is a calque from the ancient Greek *εφεκτικός*, literally: "able to check or stop," able to suspend judgments, for instance, and derives from *ἐπέχω* ("I have or hold upon," also "I keep in check"). The term *ἐποχή* (cessation or suspension of judgment) is also originally found in ancient Greek skepticism. See, e. g., *Ideas I*, § 31 (Husserl, 2014, 55–56): "If I do this [*scil.*: bracketing the entire natural world], as I am completely free to, then *I do not negate* this 'world,' as though I were a sophist; *I do not doubt its existence*, as though I were a skeptic. But I exercise the 'phenomenological' ἐποχή that *utterly closes off for me every judgment about spatiotemporal existence.*"

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, too, addresses the ephectic attitude in his genealogical inquiry on ascetic ideals, see the third essay in the *Genealogy of Morality* (paragraph 9): "If we draw up a list of the particular drives and virtues of the philosopher—his drive to doubt, his drive to deny, his drive to prevaricate (his 'ephectic' drive), his drive to analyse, his drive to research, investigate, dare, his drive to compare and counter-balance, his will to neutrality and objectivity, his will to every '*sine ira et studio*'—: surely we realize that all these ran counter to the primary demands of morality and conscience for the longest period of time?" (Nietzsche, 2006, 81)

different from any form of doubt, that leads to the “language of neutrality” used by phenomenologists to express the universal *epoché*.

With the emergence of this skeptical heritage in the language of neutrality, we are back to where we started. As Fink aptly points out, phenomenology is established by the “performance of the reduction,” and reduction entails the transformation of the philosophizing subject into the “phenomenologically theorizing ego,” or the “transcendental observer” (Fink, 1970, 142). It is from this perspective that Sloterdijk considers Husserl’s investigations, focusing on a region of theoretical purity through the disabling of the natural attitude, a sort of pause or stop on the “white line” of theory, which the founder of phenomenology was not willing to trespass, and he describes his efforts as a “struggle for the possibility of the absence of struggle, a struggle fought to achieve a para-existential or extra-existential neutrality” (Sloterdijk, 2012, 18)⁴⁷.

The neutral observer, or “*homo theoreticus*,” as Sloterdijk (2012, 4) argues, is dead, just as God has been declared dead under the attacks by Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, among others. Since the neutral observer is the “angel” that inhabits us, Sloterdijk calls this killing an “angelicide” (Sloterdijk, 2012, 86–87)⁴⁸.

Now, aside from establishing whether the gesture of *epoché* leads to a *vita contemplativa* or, on the contrary, its public practice and performativity should be stressed — according to many phenomenologists, and, apparently, also to Husserl himself — the fact is that *epoché* involves a radical transformation, or, as we saw at the outset of this paper, a sort of conversion⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ On Husserl’s battle, see, e. g., the closing words of the 1935 Vienna Lecture (*The Crisis of European Humanity and Philosophy*) on the “danger of dangers,” the “great weariness”: “Europe’s greatest danger is weariness. Let us as ‘good Europeans’ do battle with this danger of dangers with the sort of courage that does not shirk even the endless battle. If we do, then from the annihilating conflagration of disbelief, from the fiery torrent of despair regarding the West’s mission to humanity, from the ashes of the great weariness, the phoenix of a new inner life of the spirit will arise as the underpinning of a great and distant human future, for the spirit alone is immortal” (Husserl, 1965, 192).

⁴⁸ On “Husserl and the angels,” see: (De Santis, 2021, 15–22).

⁴⁹ As Paci noted in his volume on time and truth by Husserl: the exercise—the “*ascesis*” in the originary Greek meaning—is fundamental for Husserl’s phenomenology, “since the reduction is not a philosophical theory, but an exercise, a doing, indeed” (Paci, 1961, 57). In his 1963 article on *epoché*, Paci (2021, 19) also stresses that the exercise of *epoché* is more similar to praxis than to contemplative life. It is worth recollecting here, for instance, the first lines of the second 1907 Lecture, where Husserl states that the critique of knowledge “must exercise” *ἐποχή* ((cf. Husserl, 1999, 23), and Hua II, 29, the verb is *üben*, “to practice”). On this, see also Chapel de la Pachevie (2000). On the notion of “performativity” related to phenomenology, see: (Guidi & Rentsch, 2020).

While explaining “conversion” in the *Encyclopédie Universalis*, Hadot notes that it basically means a reversal and change of direction, since the Latin word *conversio* derives from two Greek terms, which have different meanings. The first is *ἐπιστροφή*, which is a change of orientation and implies a return (return to a past condition, for instance). The second one is *μετάνοια*, which is “after-thought,” or “repentance,” and is based on the idea of mutation and rebirth⁵⁰.

This point was given serious consideration by the first interpreters of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, such as Fink and Levinas⁵¹. The change of direction, or orientation, entailed in any conversion, interrupts the experience of an individual life as it was until the turning point of conversion. This interruption certainly means a loss, and many renuncements come along with it, but it also offers a new meaning. In their early works, which we will take a brief look at now as a provisional conclusion, Levinas and Fink recognized these two crucial, albeit problematic, features of the gesture of *epoché*, which interrupts life as we know it, with the inconspicuous simplicity of a gesture that interrupts the continuous unfolding of a series of actions (Dattilo, 2018).

The issues pertaining to the phenomenological conversion are addressed with clarity by Fink in the theory of the “three egos” of phenomenological reduction, presented in his 1933 article mentioned in the introduction above (Fink, 1970, 115). Fink, here, is defending the idea of reduction as a scientific method against the misunderstandings of it as a “mental technique,” and against the misconceptions of *epoché* in terms of “mere abstinence-modification,” or of “a method of turning away and withdrawal” (Fink, 1970, 113–114). The three egos, which belong “to the performance structure of the phenomenological reduction,” are: the ego who is “preoccupied with the world” (that is, equivalent to “I, the human being as a unity of acceptances, together with my intramundane life of experience”); the “transcendental ego,” who accepts the pregiven world, does not suspend belief in it, “but rather enacts it with greater intensity”; and, finally, the “onlooker’ who performs the *epoché*.” The latter, the “transcendental theoretical” onlooker, “renounces all sharing in the belief in the world, re-

⁵⁰ See (Hadot, 1968, 979–981), and the discussion of Hadot’s entry for the *Encyclopédie* in Guidi (2018, 47–48). According to Rovatti (2021, 6), the phenomenological gesture is essentially a gesture of producing *epoché* that draws its meaning from the mutual, “intersubjective listening” and the “silence” that marks it as an “ethical attitude.”

⁵¹ Heidegger should also be included. According to Sommer (2005, 120, note), Heidegger’s phenomenological doctrine and praxis belong to the lasting tradition of the spiritual exercises. In particular, Sommer notes what Heidegger, in the wake of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, calls the “art of existing” (*Existierkunst*) (cf. Heidegger, 1984, 158). See also the phenomenology of religious life in Heidegger (2004).

nounces all taking part and concurrence,” by making “no use of individual mundane positing, be this theoretical or a-theoretical” (Fink, 1970, 115–116).

In a similar manner to Fink, Levinas also points out the paradoxical impotence of the theoretical onlooker, who *has* the world but does not *use* it. However, he focuses on the consequences for the philosophizing subject, by noting that the reflection needed in order to perform the phenomenological reduction is “a reflection on life considered in all its concrete fullness and wealth, a life which is considered but no longer lived” (Levinas, 1995, 142). *Epoché* leads us to the intentionality of conscious life, which is “directed at being,” and reduces its objects “ready to be studied by phenomenology.” Thus *epoché*, as we already saw, “does not destroy the truths proper to the natural attitude, but wants only to clarify their sense” (Levinas, 1995, 147)⁵². Insisting on the methodological opportunities offered by phenomenological reduction, Levinas can point us to the wider range of neutralization, which involves life itself, as he states that, in Husserl’s philosophy, reduction is not a provisional attitude waiting to be abandoned for more solid ground; rather, it brings about the important discovery of the ontological value inherent to human subjectivity, and paves the way for a “return to absolute being or life, the source of all being” (Levinas, 1995, 149)⁵³. This constitutes, as Levinas argues, the “true basis” of Husserl’s thinking: “to be is to be experienced or to have a meaning in life,” and, accordingly, the purpose of the phenomenological reduction is to present our “genuine self” to a “purely contemplative and theoretical sight which considers life but is distinct from it” (Levinas, 1995, 149).

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⁵² Levinas refers to *Ideas I*, § 90 (see esp.: Husserl, 2014, 179–180).

⁵³ This reference relates back to *Ideas I*, § 50 (Husserl, 2014, 91–92).

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