

Phenomenological Writing – Techniques

“The Epoche”

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In this episode of Phenomenological Writing, I wish to examine the technique of “the epoche.” As is commonly known among participants in this seminar, the *epoche* is the effort or determination to temporarily suspend all prior conceptions, opinions, biases, categories, beliefs, or preconceived notions about a particular phenomenon before undertaking its study. The reason for enacting this suspension is so that the phenomenon may be perceived afresh, anew, such that uncompromised essence may be revealed. The *epoche* is an effort to overcome the cognitive inertia of the ‘natural attitude,’ an attitude which automatically assumes the validity and legitimacy of the structures of our everyday lifeworld. The ‘natural attitude’ is an unexamined, taken-for-granted perspective that obscures the revelation of essence.

From what I have read, the *epoche* is presented as an ideal: I would like to believe that with enough phenomenological background I will be able to approach a phenomenology study with open and clear perceptual ‘apparatus,’ as it were, unclouded or untainted by the natural attitude; yet how does this play out in actual practice? Are we to expect that the phenomenological researcher may suddenly *will* the natural attitude away? Will he or she, upon approaching the study, engage in earnest internal dialogue: “OK, now I will suspend all prior conceptions, opinions, biases, categories, beliefs, and preconceived notions so that I may perceive this phenomenon afresh and anew.” Somehow this sounds to me unconvincing, even slightly wishful thinking – maybe it will be effective and maybe not? The natural attitude is deeply ingrained with long practice; I would suggest that it is not so easily brushed aside, except perhaps by the most experienced practitioners.

For that reason, I would propose preparatory exercise for the *epoche*: If the goal is to achieve a state of mind that is clear and uncluttered, free from judgment and attachment, open to whatever may present itself, then there are precedents: The above conditions sound remarkably similar to the effects achieved through *meditation*. What if the phenomenological researcher, before embarking on a study, were to engage in disciplined meditation practice just prior? Would not the mind relax into a ‘base state’ more amenable to perceiving essence? I’m thinking of this ‘base state’ as existing *below* the threshold of typical mundane mind chatter. Perhaps this state could even be considered as *pre-conscious*, in the sense of *un-discriminating*, *un-reflective*, *un-thinking* – the state of mind that is simply registering perceptions without the need for reflexively evaluating them.

I plan to put these ideas into practice in my coming Dissertation. I am proposing to extract the essence of moving through contrasting settlement morphologies as the source of research data. As typical methodology, I (or a co-researcher) will 'move through' a settlement morphology while recording the perceptual experience of that phenomenon. The goal is to discover whether palpable (ultimately neurological) distinctions can be ascertained between the phenomenological description of moving through these contrasting morphologies. Obviously, I will be hoping for the ideal lucidity of the *epoche* during the recording of this experience; however, I am proposing not to leave it to chance.

Before embarking on the task of 'moving through' a settlement morphology, the researcher will engage in 30 minutes of Anapana meditation. Anapana meditation is the technique of focusing the attention on the natural breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils. With the attention thus focused, the purpose is to discover whether any sensations may be occurring in this limited frame of reference – that's all, just notice the sensations, whatever they might be. After a half hour of Anapana meditation, the mind becomes still, open, and attentive. With continued practice, the mind may become very sensitive to subtle perception; hence, it is an ideal technique to prepare for the *epoche*.

In an earlier protocol, I described the experience of a more detailed meditation, a meditation I do that moves through a sequence of stages. These stages are like markers on a path: after an initial Anapana focusing, I move my attention to the space between the eyebrows, then I search for Sahasrara chakra, then I move to the occipital lobes, finally locating the brainstem and moving up the brainstem to rest at the diencephalon, the seat of the thalami and pineal gland, which is understood to be the locus of Ajna chakra, or the so-called 'third eye.' Upon reading this protocol, Professor of Phenomenology Valerie M. Bentz made the following observation:

I wonder what you would have described if you bracketed concepts, such as chakras, and glands, and various centers of the brain. These concepts come from eastern and western thinkers and scientists. Or am I going too far here with bracketing?¹

This is an astute observation, and it's taken me some time to think of an answer. My lead came while reading David Seamon's book *A Geography of the Lifeworld* (p. 27), in which he says:

The phenomenologist faces a dilemma in doing phenomenology: he strives not to pre-judge the thing, yet in order to study it, he must organize some guidelines, some pathway by which he can explore the thing.

I certainly can imagine a meditation with no markers on the path, yet that would be a different kind of study, and the resulting description, I sense, would be for a different kind of

¹ "Bracketing" is another way of describing the *epoche*.

audience with a different kind of purpose. I think these concerns are directly relevant for my Dissertation: As researchers embark on the task of 'moving through' a settlement morphology, I am likely to want to give them a route to follow, in a most general way, with some markers on the path. It would be a different kind of study to have them wander aimlessly, with no direction: how could the results be correlated? Yet to respond to Professor Bentz's observation, it might be best to "bracket" the specific markers, not mention them at all in the description, so that the perceptual experience appears more fluid...