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Epoché beyond naïve suspension: Toward an epistemological reformulation in phenomenological research in education

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Five years after the republication of *L'esistere pedagogico* by Piero Bertolini (2021), thirty years after the founding of *Encyclopaideia*, and twenty years after the death of its founder, the debate on phenomenological research in education and pedagogy stands at once at a mature and delicate juncture. These anniversaries are not merely commemorative. Rather, they invite a renewed critical reflection on the epistemological status of phenomenological education and, more specifically, on the role of empirical research within it.

A significant portion of Bertolini's work emerged from sustained engagement with concrete educational practice, real situations, and lived experience. Even where the empirical grounding of his thought is not systematically thematized, decisive passages acknowledge its foundational value. Within an authentically phenomenological perspective, he assigns empirical inquiry a structural role, defining it as "an indispensable instrument if education [...] is to have concrete possibilities of realizing itself according to sound and, above all, correct perspectives of scientificity" (Bertolini, 2021, p. 228). Empiricity, in this framework, does not amount to data accumulation, but to methodical work on lived experience. It is precisely here that phenomenological education tests its claim to rigor.

Yet, at the very moment when phenomenological qualitative research has gained significant traction in educational studies, a quasi-ritualized representation of its distinctive methodological gesture has consolidated: the *epoché* (Schnegg, 2018). Frequently presented in qualitative methodology handbooks as the *sine qua non* of phenomenological inquiry—"bracketing" theories, beliefs, and presuppositions to access experience "as it is given"—the *epoché* has assumed the status of a methodological myth.

1. The *epoché* as methodological myth

As Dan Zahavi has argued, the centrality attributed to the *epoché* in empirical research is historically and theoretically problematic (Zahavi, 2019; Zahavi & Martiny, 2019). In the work of Edmund Husserl, the *epoché* belongs to the transcendental project: it enables the shift from the natural attitude to the thematic analysis of constituting subjectivity (Husserl, 1970). It was not conceived as a technical protocol for analyzing interviews or narratives. To transform it into a methodological procedure risks committing a category mistake: a philosophical move is misconstrued as a psychological technique.

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More radically, Zahavi contends that it is "safe to ignore the *epoché*" in applied phenomenology (Zahavi, 2019)—if by *epoché* one means the aspiration to a total suspension of presuppositions. No empirical inquiry operates in a vacuum. Every analysis is guided by theoretical questions, conceptual frameworks, and disciplinary language. The claim to absolute neutrality is not only psychologically implausible; it contradicts any historically and socially situated account of subjectivity (Schnegg, 2018).

The issue, then, is not whether reflexivity should be abandoned, but whether it should be disentangled from a naïvely purificatory image.

2. Husserl, Bertolini, and the operational marginality of the *epoché*

A return to Husserl reveals a significant point: the *epoché* is thematized when clarifying the meaning of the transcendental project (Husserl, 1982), yet it is never converted into an operational manual for empirical investigation. Nowhere in his corpus does one find a detailed procedure translating the phenomenological reduction into a qualitative analytic technique.

The *epoché* does not amount to epistemic amnesia. It designates a modification of attitude, a shift in the mode of thematizing the world, not its erasure. To "put in brackets" does not mean eliminating the lifeworld but suspending its claim to self-evidence.

In *L'esistere pedagogico*, Bertolini receives this tension in formative terms: the *epoché* becomes a critical exercise, an (auto-)educational device (Bertolini, 2021), a practice of liberation from the technical reduction of the human being—an orientation already underscored by Enzo Paci (1963). It assumes the sense of vigilance against methodolatry, against the uncritical application of procedures that present themselves as neutral (Janesick, 1994).

In this light, fidelity to phenomenology does not consist in proclaiming the suspension of presuppositions, but in subjecting research techniques to critique. A scientific practice is phenomenological in the strong sense when the researcher interrogates their own conceptual tools rather than applying them as invariant schemas.

3. The *epoché* as an attitude of the researcher tout court

If this reconstruction is taken seriously, a thesis with decisive implications for education/pedagogy emerges: the *epoché* is not the distinctive feature of phenomenology, but the mark of any rigorous inquiry (Zahavi, 2019). Every mature scientific discipline entails a form of critical distancing from immediate evidence. In this sense, the *epoché* is not phenomenology's monopoly; it is a paradigmatic figure of scientific reflexivity.

What distinguishes phenomenological research is not an assertion of neutrality, but its orientation toward the structural description of experience: the analysis of intentionality, intersubjectivity, and embodiment (Zahavi, 1994; 2003). For education, this implies that phenomenological specificity lies not in the promise of total suspension, but in the quality and depth of the interrogation of educational experience.

4. Beyond naïve suspension: an epistemological reformulation

Accepting Zahavi's critique does not entail abandoning the *epoché*; it calls for its reformulation.

First, presuppositions must be explicated rather than eliminated. Reflexivity consists in rendering operative categories visible, monitoring their use, and assessing their adequacy in relation to the phenomenon under study.

Second, a dialogical dimension must be acknowledged. In educational research, meaning emerges through interaction between researchers and participants. The phenomenological attitude is not a solipsistic act, but an intersubjective process of clarification.

Third, a structural dimension comes into view. What is suspended is not the world, but the assumption that it is already definitively understood. The *epoché* thus becomes openness to revision, readiness for surprise, and exposure to the resistance of the phenomenon.

Understood in this way, the *epoché* is not a methodological switch to be activated at the outset of a study, but a regulative principle orienting the entire research process.

5. Implications for phenomenological education

Within educational research, the rhetoric of "bracketing" has at times produced an implausible image of the researcher as capable of divesting themselves of history, theoretical positioning, and institutional belonging. An epistemologically mature phenomenology of education must instead recognize the situatedness of all descriptions.

The task is not to deny one's location, but to assume it critically.

To maintain—provocatively, with Zahavi—that it is "safe to ignore the *epoché*" does not legitimize naïve empiricism (Zahavi, 2019). Rather, it frees applied phenomenology from an unrealistic performative burden and redirects attention to what genuinely qualifies it: the rigorous analysis of the structures of lived experience.

For a journal such as *Encyclopaideia*, born in the wake of Bertolini's project, this reformulation represents not a rupture but a coherent deepening of its original vocation: to safeguard the rigor of phenomenology without transforming it into methodological ritual. Rethinking the *epoché* today is therefore not an exegetical exercise, but an act of epistemological responsibility toward the pedagogical community.

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