

# Mind and (Bracketed) World (Could There Be an Externalist Epoché?)

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1. Wittgenstein's remarks (1953) concerning both rule-following and the unintelligibility of the idea of a private language are often taken as grounds for externalism about mental content. We can neither exercise conceptual capacities nor obtain contentful sensations or beliefs without an appeal to practices in a shared public language. Externalism about mental content (the thesis that our thinking gains content outside the realm of what is mental) can easily encourage epistemological externalism (the thesis that one does not need to acknowledge one's knowledge in order to know). If mental contents are world-dependent so could be an attitude towards contents, such as knowledge (see Williamson 2000, Vahid 2003). Externalism is a general way of thinking that favours the idea that mind and world are not independent variables and, therefore, our mental life is not indifferent to the way the world around us happens to be. Externalism is therefore a decisive departure from several Cartesian assumptions that have guided quite a number of philosophical preoccupations and objectives in the last centuries. In particular, a Cartesian model has informed ways of thinking about our experience of the world and of other people. In this work I examine a strategy to conceive of our experience in a noncommitting way: the endeavour to think of experience in a bracketed world. The idea, often labeled *epoché*, is that our thinking can take place with some amount of indifference concerning how the world is. We can think and have experience irrespective to whether the objects we experience and think about exist. An *epoché* assumes that it is possible to think about  $p$  without any commitment as to whether or not  $p$  is the case. Thought about whatever is in the scope of an *epoché* involves no more than the person who thinks. The world, and the objects we think about and experience, is kept outside as a methodological assumption that aims to clarify what is at stake when we think and experience.

The *epoché* method is one that intends to analyse experience (and thinking) in itself, isolating it from its surroundings in the world. As such, at least at first sight, the idea of an *epoché* contrasts with an externalist approach to knowledge and mental content. I shall maintain here that the contrast is indeed profound. In fact, the contrast will prove to be itself a good way to characterize the externalist perspective.

2. Descartes championed the idea that the price of certainty is to distance ourselves as much as possible from our predetermined judgments and our common ways of thinking. Safety for our beliefs can only be attained through a recoil into the mental realm that provides legitimacy (and content) to our thinking. The idea is that we can recoil to a sphere that is free of suspicious preconceptions and that enables us to start from scratch somewhere independent of those suspicious preconceptions; indeed independent of any preconception. This sphere, that we learned to identify with the mind, is understood as a neutral ground where our thinking happens. It is conceived as independent of however things are outside it: we do not know how things are but we can safely recoil to this mental realm. Descartes then envisaged a method for good thinking that would start out with the materials provided by the mind and proceed in a way to avoid the risks of stepping in shaky

territory. Mind is safe because it pre-exists every content and indeed it is what instills content into our thinking. The adequacy of what we think, whether or not our thoughts are true, is a matter of fact about which our beliefs can be fairly oblivious.

With his idea of the mental sphere, Descartes has encouraged an agenda to look for certainty that proceeds from the mind towards the world in order to counter the skeptical suspicion that the world becomes unattainable. This agenda has greatly shaped the philosophical endeavour ever since and is precisely what externalism intends to revert. Externalist typically springs from a deep suspicion of the Cartesian agenda: it is not a roadmap to exorcise skepticism but rather the toolkit that any skeptical challenge demands. Cartesian assumptions picture mind as an independent variable and in doing so they make the world irremediably alien to our processes of thinking and experiencing. If the content and the origin of our beliefs are mental, and therefore private, we can never attain certainty about the world: we are confined in a stage of representations. Moreover, externalism holds that the Cartesian, and the skeptic, have to defend a number of positive theses to give them right to maintain that mind is independent; for example, that content could be oblivious to the world or that our beliefs are not responsive to the world when they are formed (by a mechanism of reliability, for instance). The Cartesian skeptic, according to an externalist diagnosis, has to accept the burden of the proof in some matters before she can be entitled to a global doubt. So, for example, a Wittgensteinian externalist would require the skeptic to show her credentials before she engages in global doubt, for doubt cannot take place in a belief vacuum, and a Davidsonian externalist would ask her to prove that she could both understand what she is doubting and having a global doubt. In any case, the skeptic has to show that her position is available.

Externalism changes the philosophical landscape by focusing on how the world provides the furniture for the operations of the mind. Our mental life is not a starting point for our inquiry into the world, it is rather already fully world-dependent. Our mental operations are spread in the world for we cannot provide an account of them without appealing to the world. If mental content is in the world, there is no specified arena of the mental, mind is dissolved in our actions and inquiries in the world. So, for instance, we cannot wonder whether the future will resemble the past as a matter of fact in the world if we do not possess the concept of future and therefore of a clock and therefore of the regularities in the world: that the future resembles the past. The externalist argues for a conception of mind as something very different from an organ, a substance or an object in the world. Externalism then ascribes to the skeptic the burden to prove that her conception of mind is a workable one.

3. Skepticism is often related to a quietism about philosophical theses. Pyrrhonism attempted to achieve a position where no philosophical commitment had to be taken. The method envisaged was to appeal to an *epoché*, a state where we suspend judgement about something, usually a set of (philosophical) theses. The idea is akin to that of

abstaining from committing concerning something. For the Pyrrhonist, it is recommendable to abstain from commitment because of *diaphonía*, that is, because of the incorrigible difference of opinions. Whenever there is incorrigible *diaphonía*, an *epoché* is the most suitable attitude. The idea of the *epoché* is that we can recoil somewhere beyond the reach of the *diaphonía*, and the Cartesian move was to inaugurate a realm where we could, so to speak, put the rest of the world in *epoché*. A challenge, already for the Pyrrhonist, was to show that we can divest ourselves completely from *diaphonía* without the risk of ending up making any discourse impossible.

The idea of an *epoché* is a generalization of what McDowell (1982) called the highest common factor model for knowledge and perception where we replace items of perception (or knowledge) that could be wrong, like objects for we can hallucinate, by less committing ones like sensations. These less committing items are supposed to be intelligible highest common factors between, say, the object we think we perceive and an object of hallucination. Like with the *epoché*, it seems that fear makes us recoil to a realm that appears to be safer and the question of course is whether this realm is really both safe and intelligible. McDowell rejects the model on three grounds. First, it is not compulsory (his disjunctive conception of appearances is an alternative). Second, the highest common factor is a postulated item that can hardly be contentful without appealing to the world (that we intend to bracket). Third, it makes contact with the world through knowledge and perception a mystery, as the intentional items that are thought and perceived are short of being items of the world. Merleau-Ponty, who was a critic of any appeal to mental objects in our accounts of perception, remarked that to isolate appearances from what they are appearances of amounts to sign an insurance against doubt that costs more than the potential loss (1964, 58-9). We can attain certainty, but we will certainly not attain certainty about the world.

Husserl's phenomenological method involves the idea of performing an *epoché* to analyse experience so that we would rid ourselves of any preconceptions about, for example, the world and other people that we carry with us. Husserl's effort (1929, §44) is to think from a point of departure that abstracts away our commitments concerning anything that is beyond the reach of the thinker. His transcendental *epoché* is a method to consider experience in itself, free of whatever is projected in it by both commonsense and philosophical doctrines (see 1913, §32). The idea is that we would consider experience independently of any item beyond what is available in experience itself and therefore without any commitment to any existence claim. *Epoché* makes us focus on our intentional objects irrespective of the objects beyond the reach of our mental acts. The purpose is to acquire a relative neutrality concerning whatever is not at stake in our research exercise, for example, in our effort to look at experience. We can provisionally put aside our beliefs (for example, about the world and other people) while we investigate so that we can reap the benefits of the *epoché*. We could not live in a constant *epoché* but we can engage in one whenever an effort of phenomenological analysis is necessary. In the best construction I can think of, a Husserlian *epoché* is a method to consider experience as it appears to us and is no more than part of what is required for a general account of our experiences.

Now, I think this method is not really available to an externalist. The realm where we are taken when we perform an *epoché* is not one that is unfurnished by items of the world, if it is an intelligible realm at all. Christian

Beyer (2001, 2004) believes that we can reconcile the *epoché* method to an externalist perspective. He draws on the distinction between local and universal *epoché*. The latter requires one to *epoché* all existence claims regarding the external world at once, whereas the former requires one to bracket only *particular* existence claims. Universal *epoché* is connected to Husserl's belief in a separable realm of experience beyond any particular object; if intentional objects are intrinsically indexical or otherwise world-dependent, we are to restrict ourselves to a, perhaps more clearly methodological, local *epoché*. Beyer's (2004) diagnosis runs like this:

Only the universal *epoché* seems to conflict with [externalism]: if no extra-mental existence assumptions whatsoever are admitted, then phenomenologically there cannot be object-dependent indexical contents, as externalism would have it. By contrast, there may be some such contents, even many of them, without indexical content generally having to be dependent on a particular extra-mental object. Which leaves enough room for the method of local *epoché* to apply to any given particular case [...] Now we can apply the local *epoché* to specify the [content] of both veridical perceptions and hallucinations so as to bring out their *singularity*. [...] Husserl stressed that objectless representations such as hallucinations can in a sense be characterized as "representing an intentional object", provided that this characterization is understood to be made "under an existential assumption", as follows: "If the act of hallucination were veridical, it would successfully represent such-and-such an object (under such-and-such aspects)".

It seems that there is a representation, present in both cases, which is the product of a recoil towards the highest common factor. Beyer, however, further claims that an externalist reading of Husserl would be possible if we take the content (the noema) to be different in both cases. It seems to me that we can force an externalist reading but only at the expense of rendering whatever results of the *epoché* contentless: no item results from the *epoché*. If, on the other hand, we recoil further so that we find a proper highest common factor, the points McDowell raises against this model apply: it is not compulsory, it has to come with a proof that neutral contents are intelligible (which probably requires the intelligibility of private, world-indifferent content) and it renders the world inaccessible to the mind. So, with an *epoché*, Husserl cannot be made externalistically kosher, without an *epoché*, Husserl would have an analysis of content akin to the disjunctive conception of appearances that McDowell espouses.<sup>1</sup>

4. Externalism seems to preclude most forms of *epoché*. How general should this rejection be? Sometimes we need to abstain from commitment in order to investigate something. If externalism is right about the worldly furniture of our minds, less world taken into consideration entails less content in our analysis. Maybe, however, there is something to gain when we take less mental content into account in our analysis of mental activity. If recoil would not take us to anything like a sphere of mental objects, we can abstain from some commitments while holding others (and so being contentful). Such efforts of *epoché* would be still granted but it is doubtful whether they are more than an exercise of careful selection of commitments.

<sup>1</sup> McDowell's appeal to intentionality could be taken as itself residually Cartesian. Davidson's externalism, for instance, manages to avoid any appeal to intentional relations. For the contrast between these positions concerning intentional relations consult Bensusan 2003. Thanks to FINATEC for financial aid.

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