ABSTRACT. This paper presents an interpretation of Husserl’s phenomenological epoché or bracketing (Einklammerung), which makes it possible to compare his position with philosophical programs developed within the framework of modern analytical philosophy. At the same time it asks in what sense Husserl’s phenomenology is a form of idealism or exceeds the traditional discussion of idealism versus realism.

1. THE EPOCHÉ AND THE GENERAL THESIS

The target of the epoché is the so-called “natural attitude” ("die natürliche Einstellung"), i.e., the everyday, pre-philosophical attitude that pervades our everyday conscious life. According to Ideas: General Introduction to pure Phenomenology (Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie; Husserl 1913) the natural attitude may be summarized in the so-called “general thesis of the natural standpoint”, i.e., the thesis that “'The' world is as fact-world always there; at the most it is at odd points 'other' than I supposed, this or that under such names as 'illusion', 'hallucination', and the like, must be struck out of it, so to speak; but the 'it' remains ever, in the sense of the general thesis, a world that has its being out there". Although Husserl also sometimes talks about bracketing the natural world as such (Husserl 1962, 96), it is fair to say that it is basically a thesis, i.e., something that may be expressed in a language, which is the target of the epoché. Of course, the so-called General Thesis ("Generalthesis") is normally neither formulated as a thesis in natural consciousness nor expressed as a statement in a language (Husserl 1962, 94), but Husserl nevertheless takes for granted, that the essential impact of the natural attitude can be given the form of a thesis – and therefore also expressed as a statement in a language.

Having located the target of the epoché as the General Thesis, we are confronted with two basic questions:

(1) What does the General Thesis say?
(2) What exactly does it mean to put the General Thesis into brackets?
Basically the General Thesis tells us two things: (1) the world, i.e., the totality of all entities, exists all the time whether or not we experience it; and (2) the entities have more or less the properties we experience in daily life and in the sciences. Of course macrophysical things – like trees and mountains – or cultural intersubjectively given objects – like cars, houses and theatrical performances – are part of the world, but the General Thesis is not restricted to mentally external objects. Also our own mental (psychological) states belong to the natural world (Husserl 1962, 39). The natural world even includes abstract entities corresponding to traditional eidetic analyses in logic, mathematics and ontology. In other words, the General Thesis formulates a version of ontological realism concerning both the existence and the qualities of physical, psychological, cultural and abstract entities referred to in our common sense, scientific and ontological theories.

This General Thesis – understood as a version of ontological realism – is the target of the epoché. According to Ideas the epoché involves “a certain refraining from judgment”, and in Cartesian meditations (“Cartesianische Meditationen”, 1931; Husserl 1960) Husserl talks about “the abstention from position-takings” (“das Sichenthalten”), “depriving them of acceptance” (“das Aussergeltungsetzen der Stellungnahmen”), “the inhibiting” (“das Inhibieren”) or “the putting out of play” (“das Ausserspielsetzen”) (Husserl 1960, 20), but we are never told precisely what that means. Given that the epoché has something to do with a statement, two strategies for an interpretation seems plausible: either the epoché has to do with a shift at the semantic level or the pragmatic level. Or to put it in Husserl’s own, broader terminology, the epoché either deals with the matter (“Materie”) or the quality (“Qualität”) of the act (Husserl 1982, Section II/V§20). At the semantic level Husserl rejects the idea that the epoché has anything to do with a negation of the General Thesis (Husserl 1962, 100), i.e., Husserl neither denies the thesis of ontological realism nor the statements expressing our common sense, scientific or ontological assumptions about the world. At the pragmatic level he refuses to identify the epoché with “just thinking” (Husserl 1962, 99), “assuming” (Husserl 1962, 99) or “doubting” (Husserl 1962, 100). Certain obvious interpretations are thereby ruled out, but apart from this negative demarcation, Husserl only gives us some indirect hints about what the epoché really is. It is even an open question if Husserl himself had a positive understanding of the epoché. Every interpretation that presents a positive answer, has therefore a touch of rational reconstruction and cannot be entirely a matter of scholarly paraphrase.