

SEE ALSO EPISTEMOLOGY; KNOWLEDGE, THEORIES OF

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## EPOCHÉ

*Epoché* designates for phenomenologists an entryway into philosophical contemplation and self-reflection in which the meditating “I,” the thinker, gains distance

from the concerns of everyday life. From the Greek ἐποχή (suspension of disbelief), the term was used by ancient skeptics. The word was revived by Edmund HUSSERL (1859–1938), who taught Martin HEIDEGGER (1889–1976) and Edith STEIN (1891–1942) and who was an important influence on Max SCHELER (1874–1928), Dietrich von HILDEBRAND (1889–1977), Karol Wojtyła (Pope JOHN PAUL II; 1920–2005), Robert Sokolowski, and many others.

By performing the epoché, I (the thinking person) disengage from belief or disbelief by holding off on assertions or questions about the existence of things that extend beyond (transcend) their appearance in my conscious life. That is, I suspend my belief in such things as cats, atoms, houses, psychological states, scientific theories, and so forth—things that are “transcendent” in the sense that they appear to be what they are independent of any ideas that I may have about them. Philosophical disinterestedness is thus made possible.

For Husserl, philosophy is marked off from the “natural attitude” of human life in which, without much ado, we accept the existence of this or that object. In the natural attitude we occasionally doubt or deny the reality of something (the tooth fairy) or suspend judgment on a possible truth (the existence of extraterrestrial life). When we do, our intellectual step back happens within our overall acceptance of the world, the whole in which every real thing has its causes, effects, and meaning. That is, in normal living, we always believe that the world’s reality goes beyond our experience of it. Such world-belief is naïve because lacking in self-understanding—we are not self-aware of our motives for positing transcendent reality. Usually we are carried along by the evidence, but do not reflect on the conscious acts by which we accept—and thereby “constitute” for ourselves—the world we believe in.

Husserl’s epoché “neutralizes” this basic belief and “brackets” the existence of the world, so that we can trace any reality’s being-for-us back to conscious acts that establish its validity for us. This tracing-back is called the *phenomenological reduction*. (If we do not practice the epoché consistently while philosophizing, Husserl claims, the reduction would become a false *psychological* idealism, a relativism claiming that reality depends on our psychological states.)

The epoché primarily appears as an ascetic act: while engaging in *theoria*, we refuse to participate in the natural attitude and deny ourselves any appeal to transcendent facts. Husserl emphasizes what is gained from this philosophical entryway. In overcoming the naïveté of normal belief, we do not reject its truths or deny its realities but deepen our understanding of them as accomplished by persons. The things appearing as real are parenthesized, not denied; we contemplate the phenomena but do not turn them into mere phantoms

or meanings. For Husserl, the epoché conceals nothing. It reveals what straightforward life overlooks: (1) the spiritual and intellectual life by which reality is real for us and truth is achieved by us, and (2) the presence-to-us of the world and its objects, a presence that we usually live through without appreciating. Phenomenology seeks to follow the ancient command “Know Thyself,” while also clarifying the objectivity of the world. Finally, the epoché reveals that persons have a transcendental (spiritual and intellectual, not just psychological or thingly) mode of being.

SEE ALSO EIDETIC VARIATION; PHENOMENOLOGY.

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## EQUALITY

The concept of equality is an important aspect of political and moral philosophy and also of theology. It is a bedrock principle of economic and political justice and of efforts to advance human dignity and human rights. Thus it is not surprising that meditations on the notion of equality have formed an essential ingredient of the earliest works of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the preaching of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. In turn, for two millennia the Catholic Church, together with its philosophers, theologians, and doctors, has preserved its own understanding of this concept in its teachings about humanity and in its charitable practices.

**What Is Equality?** Equality is usually understood as sameness in regard to some specific kind of measure when comparing entities of the same species or kind. The idea can apply to the size, weight, stature, worth, extent, or nature of an entity. Applied to human beings it can refer to their inherent being or to their material condition or status, and thus it could apply to their

nature, moral worth, dignity, station, rank, status, economic class, social condition, or legal standing. Equality need not always imply exact identity but rather similarity, recognizing that individual differences among a class of beings can subsist in the midst of the equality of kind. Equality aims at the essence of the nature of a thing, even while accidents, such as shape, size, color, age, and position, may differ.

Some kinds of equality are easily measurable, such as the distribution of wealth or material goods. Other kinds of equality refer less to outcomes than to opportunities. Equality of income, for instance, is unlikely for human beings, so long as they are left free to use their talents, to work and to innovate in ways that could readily lead to economic disparity. But legal equality would presume that all individuals have the same access to justice and opportunities. In democratic systems equality applies to the principle of one-man, one-vote, and to equal treatment before the law. The essential equality of human beings does not presuppose equal virtue, talent, or effort in individual human beings. But it does imply that persons are not discriminated against as persons.

In terms of moral or essential equality, Judeo-Christian teaching insists that all persons have equal dignity as members of the one human family, all of which are created in God's divine image and likeness (see, for example, Gen 1:26–27 and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 356–360). In the history of Western Civilization, this fundamental teaching would prove extremely influential in the ultimate development of the idea of equality in Western thought.

**Equality in the History of Philosophy.** The issue of equality played an important role in Aristotle's ethical (*Nicomachean Ethics*) and political philosophy (*Politics*). He showed that justice demands that equals be treated as such, and that unequals should be treated unequally. In the *Politics*, Aristotle (384–322 BC) noted that unequal distributions of wealth in a city could lead to conflict, whereas a large middle class could serve as a check on rebellious tendencies and their consequent injustice. In his *On Duties*, Cicero (106–43 BC) included all humanity within the orbit of duty, thereby implying human equality. Hebrew thought warned that aliens and slaves should be treated with consideration because all men spring from the same divine creative activity. Greek and Roman Stoics regarded all human beings as part of a universal brotherhood of men. In the New Testament, Jesus treated everyone, the mighty and the lowly, with respect. Christ's particular care for the poor, and his charge that they be charitably served, became a clarion call in Christian social development, giving rise to the modern expression of the “preferential option” or “preferential love” for the poor in the work of the