

Sam Mickey, April 21, 2017, 10-12 pm PDT, SOPHERE webinar
Living the Epoché: A Phenomenological Realism of Religious Experience

In contrast to constructivist and reductionist denials of the existence of religious experience, this paper presents a phenomenological realism of religious experience, particularly by elucidating the function of the epoché in the phenomenology of religion. Some interpretations of the epoché preclude any commitments to realism. For instance, Husserl's epoché is typically understood as a methodological device for "bracketing" any assertions arising from the natural attitude, which would entail holding in suspense any metaphysical claims about the existence or non-existence of religious experience. Drawing on the works of Emmanuel Levinas and the Dutch phenomenologist of religion Gerardus Van der Leeuw, I outline a different interpretation of the epoché, one that suspends the understanding while nonetheless affirming the real existence of religious experience.

Van der Leeuw and Levinas approach phenomenology from different contexts, Christianity and hermeneutics for the former and Judaism and ethical metaphysics for the latter. Following Heidegger's existential turn in phenomenology, both thinkers seek to live the epoché such that it is not a mere methodological device but a pre-reflective mode of being, a restraint that is fundamental to the openness of human existence to the world. Bracketing is the process whereby the understanding reaches a limit that opens out onto that which is other in its irreducible otherness (Levinasian "alterity"). The reality of the other is given in a pre-reflective encounter while one suspends one's own understanding of the other. Furthermore, both Van der Leeuw and Levinas argue that such openness to the other is what defines religious experience, which means that religious experience is real, and it is a constitutive feature of human existence. The human is thus "*Homo religiosus*," as Van der Leeuw says. This entails a provocative suggestion that the practice of phenomenology involves a religious dimension, and conversely, every religious experience involves an epoché.