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Violence and Problems of the Phenomenological Method

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Abstract

The first part of the article outlines three problems in the phenomenology of violence: the relation between violence and order, the desideratum for an integrative concept of violence, and the perspectivity of violence. This leads to the question of whether the eidetic reduction applies to the analysis of violence. The second part discusses the method of the *epoché* in the phenomenology of violence. Through the reconstruction of Husserl's position, the distinction between the universal phenomenological epoché and the ethical epoché is presented. It is argued that the latter concept is taken up by Bernhard Waldenfels and developed through the lens of his responsive phenomenology. This interpretation can be applied to deal with the problem of the justification of violence as proposed by Michael Staudigl, which allows us to analyze violence as a violation.

Introduction

Violence is no longer a mere side topic for phenomenology. This, however, does not mean that it has been a subject of interest since phenomenology's inception. For the first generations of phenomenologists, it was not the central issue in this philosophy. This is striking when we consider the overwhelming reality of violence surrounding the early figures of the phenomenological movement: antisemitism, war, and the patriarchal social order belonged to the lifeworlds in which Edmund Husserl, Roman Ingarden, and Edith Stein—three exemplary figures of the early movement—lived, acted, and thought.

Recently, different phenomenological accounts of violence have been introduced, which have contributed to the formation of an explicit problem field marked by complex and stimulating discussion. This can be traced back to early contributions by Waldenfels, who has discussed violence through the lens of his responsive phenomenology (Waldenfels, 1991, 2006). Furthermore, important book-length studies by James Dodd (Dodd, 2009, 2017) and by Michael Staudigl (Staudigl, 2015) are worth noting. The latter has also edited collective volumes, e.g., *Phenomenologies of Violence* (2014), which helped consolidate the field. Currently, there are various phenomenological approaches to the issue developed by scholars such as James Mensch, Christian Ciocan, Pascal Delhom, and Debra Bergoffen, to mention only a few.

Recent phenomenology has been showing an intensified interest in social and political reality. In the German-speaking field, one encounters terms such as *political phenomenology* (Bedorf & Herrmann, 2020), or *phenomenologies of the political* (Staudigl, 2025). One speaks not only of a “*political turn* [emphasis added] of contemporary phenomenology” (Herrmann et al., 2024, p. 2), but also of challenges and dangers posed by such a *politicization of phenomenology* (Rinofner-Kreidl, 2025).¹ Within this broader phenomenon of “politicization” we also find the emergence of the influential and stimulating movement of *critical phenomenology*, committed not only to the “transformation of classical phenomenology” but also to *social and*

¹ This collective interest has led to several edited volumes, including *Political phenomenology: Experience, ontology, episteme* (Bedorf & Herrmann, 2020), *The Routledge handbook of political phenomenology* (Herrmann et al., 2024), and *Phänomenologien des Politischen* (Staudigl, 2025).

political transformation more broadly.² The latter caused quite a stir in phenomenological philosophy, especially in provoking intensified debates on the phenomenological method (Salamon, 2018; Davis, 2020; Guenther, 2021; Aldea et al., 2022; Oksala, 2022; Heinämaa, 2025). The problem of violence may be considered in interaction with these trends, as it constitutes one of the grave issues of social and political reality.

I believe that phenomenology offers unique tools to analyze violence. Drawing on resources from the rich phenomenological tradition, one can describe violence without reducing it to a pre-given essence or to a causal explanation. Instead, violence can be described as a lived experience from the first-person perspective, including the interplay of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, embodiment, and the world. A distinctive feature of this approach is thus its non-reductive perspective, which is grounded in its methodology. Nonetheless, if we situate violence “against” phenomenology, we are confronted with a fundamental methodological concern: is it even possible to analyze violence phenomenologically? Is violence a sense-correlate, or rather something that undermines the possibility of sense constitution? Should it be considered as a “limit phenomenon,” “limit-problem,” or perhaps even a “limit-situation” (Mensch, 2017; Ciocan, 2025)? Is violence even a “phenomenon” in the classical sense?³ This liminal character of violence brings about methodological problems in the way in which *Grenzprobleme* motivate reflection on the methodological foundations of phenomenology.

In this article, I problematize two aspects of the phenomenological method when applied to violence: *eidetic reduction* and *epoché*. The former is presented against the backdrop of three problems: the relation between violence and order, the proposition of an integrative concept of violence, and the perspectivity of violence. The latter is challenged insofar as we consider the justification of violence. I show how Husserl differentiates between *universal epoché* and *ethical epoché* and argue that the ethical epoché gains a distinctive interpretation through Waldenfels’s responsive phenomenology. This interpretation can be applied to address the justification of violence, as

² The movement is also reflected in *50 concepts for a critical phenomenology* (Weiss et al., 2020), *Critical phenomenology: An introduction* (Magri & McQueen, 2023), and the journal *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology* (published since 2018).

³ For discussions of reformulations of the notion of the phenomenon, especially (but not exclusively) in French-speaking phenomenology (Gondek & Tengelyi, 2011, Novotný, 2012, Drwięga, 2019).

shown by Michael Staudigl. The aim of the article is not to resolve all the issues or to apply a ready-made methodology. Instead, it aims to point to certain methodological challenges and discuss one prospect of addressing them, i.e., through considering ethical epoché in a distinct sense, as a supplement to phenomenological epoché.

1. Three Problems of Violence and Eidetic Reduction

1.1. Violence and Order

Violence requires a change of perspective for a phenomenologist. The reality at stake cannot be considered a normal example of an external perception, which flows concordantly and is only accidentally destabilized by minor intrusions of abnormality (Steinbock, 1995). Violence carries a moment of *disturbance* as something disrupting, inhibiting, and potentially destroying the established order. It can be argued that it is not an instance of a “normal anomaly” (Hua XV, p. 212), which is predictable and, in a sense, familiar, so that one expects, overall, that everything will go on as planned. Thus, violence does not inhabit order in the way that, for instance, our daily routines of eating do. It carries a moment of strangeness that situates it on the border of the ordinary.

Nonetheless, to draw a strict dichotomy between violence and order would be a mistake. After all, violence is regulated, ritualized, and enters into various forms of discursivity, for example, in games and sports, in religion, or in the media and images (Waldenfels, 2006; Ciocan, 2021). Violence and order enter into a complex, tense relationship that cannot be reduced to a simple opposition. Drawing on Waldenfels, one can go so far as to argue that every form of order carries an unavoidable residuum of violence that can be traced back to its institution. That which *makes* the emergence of an order possible is never fully removed by that which was *made* possible. Each order is essentially selective and exclusive, and there is no ultimate justification for this being so-and-so. The exclusion from the order cannot be fully justified by recourse to an ultimate foundation, because no order rests on such a foundation (Waldenfels, 2011a, pp. 8–21).

It is problematic to draw a strict distinction between violence and its counterpart. Traditional propositions such as violence versus reason or

violence versus culture result in aporias (Staudigl, 2015, pp. 11–50). It can be argued that reason can be instrumentalized in the service of violence, and violence can operate according to its own forms of rationality. This is the case if we think of violence in terms of instrumentality, as something that is used to achieve certain goals, as in Carl von Clausewitz’s famous phrase conceiving war as “the continuation of politics by other means.” Furthermore, if we attempt to consider violence as simply belonging to the “barbaric state of nature,” that is, annulled through a social contract, we seem to be abstracting from various forms of legitimized violence, such as the state’s monopoly on the use of coercion or—to refer to Foucault—various disciplinary institutions (e.g., the penitentiary or the education system). It might be the case that the dichotomy between non-violent reason and unreasonable violence, as well as that of non-violent culture being haunted by barbaric outbreaks of the state of nature, is a “beautiful and simple fable” (Waldenfels, 2006, p. 77).

Following Waldenfels (1991, pp. 101–103), we can observe that the relationship between violence and order can be categorized. Violence can *serve* order as part of its strategy of self-preservation (inscribed in law, or legitimized uses of coercion), or it can *counter* order (as in revolts or revolutions aimed at overthrowing existing political structures). We can also speak of a confrontation *between* orders, each inhabited by its own structures of legitimization. It is especially this last situation that brings about the vicious circle of *violence* and *counter-violence*, where the use of force is justified as merely responding to some previous act of violence conceived as barbaric, senseless, and/or simply unjustified.

This means that the relationship between violence and order is neither that of familiarity or homogeneity nor that of separation and opposition. This is indeed a problem, because we seem to lack a stable ground from which the thematization of violence could achieve clarity regarding its essence. Violence is liminal, but at the same time inscribed in the orders that enable our everyday engagement with the world. It destabilizes our thinking, but at the same time we cannot reach a position of absolute violence-neutrality in thought without a certain naivety. This should not imply a form of fatalism, but instead a vigilant and perhaps even a skeptical way of thinking (Dodd, 2017) that would attend to the conceptual problematicity of the matter at hand.

1.2. The Integrative Concept of Violence

There are numerous different things and situations that could be described as violence, but it is not clear what links them. Think of such phenomena as a punch in the face, suicide, gaslighting, racial segregation, colonialism, deportation, child neglect, economic exploitation, pollution, hate speech, war footage, or everyday microaggressions. We can attempt to find a semantic core for the concept of “violence,” which could justify its use in all these different contexts, but most intuitive propositions collapse, either providing a definition that is too broad or too narrow. “Physical force” would exclude mental injuries; “harmful intention” would not account for indirect suffering caused by pollution; “lack of legitimation” could not account for state-sanctioned violence.

The conceptual problems with violence are rooted in its semantic ambiguity. In analyzing these different phenomena, one can establish certain distinctions that can help us navigate them. We can distinguish physical violence that involves bodily harm from psychological violence involved in derogatory speech, insults, or threats, which does not have to involve physical contact. Both can be analyzed through a structure of *actor–act–recipient* (Waldenfels, 2006), meaning that somebody does something to someone else. Furthermore, we can observe, following Christian Ciocan, that a violent encounter can be both *symmetrical* and *asymmetrical* (Ciocan, 2020). The former can be illustrated by a duel, where two parties enter the event as active poles. The latter finds its extreme exemplification in the case of torture, where the maximization of the activity of one party is parallel to an extreme form of passivity in the other.

However, we can find other forms of violence that cannot, in principle, be traced back to one specific actor that could be identified as a responsible party. In the case of structural violence, a concept introduced by Johan Galtung (one of the key founders of the discipline of peace and conflict studies), we speak of violence as a *process* in which different parties participate and contribute to it in differing degrees. Structural violence is an *indirect* form of violence that is rooted in social, economic, and political structures that are sustained by an interplay of different actors. This could manifest in gaps in life expectancy between different groups that are not grounded in a lack of resources for their prevention, but rather in, e.g., their unequal distribution. This gap between “potential realizations” and “actual realization” is

what lies at the core of the definition of violence that, according to Galtung, should bring together both personal-direct violence and structural-indirect violence under one concept. For him, violence can be conceived as “the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is.” Violence is that which either “increases the distance between the potential and the actual” or “impedes the decrease of this distance” (Galtung, 1969, p. 168).

Broadening the conceptual scope of the notion of violence opens the discussion about its indirect forms that function on the level of culture, knowledge, or norms. These dimensions are thematized by such concepts as Johan Galtung’s *cultural violence* (role of culture in justifying both structural and personal violence), Pierre Bourdieu’s *symbolic violence* (a habitualized and embodied relation of domination), or Judith Butler’s *normative violence* (exclusive and oppressive aspect of functioning norms).⁴ It might be the case that including these aspects would presuppose a broad concept that would be faced with the problem of distinguishing different levels of violence in a way that would do justice to different recipients without flattening harms and comparing that which is incomparable. It is crucial to signal these debates when one speaks of a concept of violence, but their thorough discussion would lead me too far astray from the scope of this article.

These different notions point to the problem of establishing an “integrative concept of violence” that could consider these “many faces of violence as parts of a unified phenomenon” (Staudigl, 2014, p. 4). While this might be a plausible desideratum for phenomenological violence research, it also poses a methodological question concerning eidetic methodology. It might be the case that eidetic variation, which attempts to link the different facets of the phenomenon, would find irresolvable tensions rather than similarities. This poses a challenge for the operation of identifying an invariant, an unchanging core of the matter at hand, which remains the teleological correlate of the eidetic reduction (Husserl, 1973, pp. 340–348).

⁴ For the discussion of these different concepts through the lens of postcolonial studies, see Brunner (2020).

1.3. Perspectivity of Violence

It is widely discussed that phenomenological analysis of violence must recognize the irreducible perspectivity of the phenomenon (Staudigl, 2015; Delhom, 2019; Ciocan, 2020). The experiential spectrum of violence spreads from the perspective of its actors, recipients, and observers. This perspectivity, however, differs from the eidetic insight into the perspectival givenness of the external object in perception that Husserl has analyzed. One should carefully consider the extent to which eidetic investigations of the latter can be translated into similar observations about perception in the experience of violence.

For Husserl, the experience of objectivity in perception is not the correlate of my primordial (solipsistic) experience, but receives the status of genuine perception insofar as it includes the intersubjective dimension (Zahavi, 1997). This means that the other, as co-constitutor, plays a central role in Husserl's reflections on the constitution of objectivity. My necessarily limited, and essentially "inadequate" perception (Hua I, pp. 96–97/61–62) implies the other as viewing the same reality from another perspective. I perceive it from "here," while the other perceives it from "there," where the latter cannot be reduced to the former. The interplay of these perspectives, and crucially the possibility of their concordant unification, is what enables the experience of the shared world grounded in intending the same objectivities.

This shared intentionality is central to the conception of transcendental intersubjectivity that Husserl developed in his late writings. According to him, each subject is conscious of itself while simultaneously being conscious of the world and of the other. Intersubjectivity means that intentionalities interpenetrate each other (Hua VI, p. 258/255), where one's own and alien validities are connected in modes of concordance and discordance. However, the modes of discordance always occur against the backdrop of an ineliminable possibility of correction, which grants that the unification of different perspectives is conceived "in advance as possibly attainable by everyone" (Hua VI, p. 166/163). This means that "always and necessarily, through reciprocal correction, agreeing consciousness of the same common world with the same things finally achieves validity" (Hua VI, p. 257/254). For Husserl, this signifies that the different perspectives in intersubjectivity are transformed into "mere appearances of the world, the life-world for all" (Hua VI, p. 258/255).

I do not mean to question this fundamental reflection. Rather, I would like to point to very different initial circumstances in the experience of violence. How would the latter appear against the backdrop of intersubjectivity as a diverse field of varying degrees of concordance and discordance, which is dynamically interconnected by processes of correction? It is plausible to argue that inasmuch as there is an ongoing event of violence, this possibility of correction, which conditions the intentional grasping of the “one world” or “world for everyone,” is put into question. In other words, the phenomenology must consider that the “reciprocity of perspectives” may not apply to violence (Staudigl, 2015, p. 71).

This is the case for extreme forms of asymmetrical violence, such as torture, where we might speak of extreme *polarity* between recipients and actors of violence (Breyer, 2016), but also in cases of symmetrical violence, which occur in the horizon of being against one another that tends to make different perspectival accesses to the phenomenon at stake into something that resists reconciliation. In the experience of violence, what we encounter is, from the outset, a certain polarization of perspectives. Participants in violence, considered as a “relational event” (Staudigl, 2015, p. 63), are not necessarily unified by the overarching and common goal of objectivity. Rather, they encounter an event of disruption, which may challenge the very plurality of perspectives and the possibility of a shared space of meaning (Mensch, 2014, 2017), because at the heart of this relational event we find a functioning *antagonism* (Ciocan, 2020, 2025).

The problem of the perspectivity of violence again puts at stake the eidetic method. This should not imply its rejection, but rather a need to rethink the scope to which it is applicable. Insofar as violence can be considered a limit problem for this methodology, we are confronted with the question of methodological transformation.

2. Phenomenological Epoché, Ethical Epoché, and the Phenomenology of Violence

In the previous section, I discussed three problems that, in my view, pose a challenge to eidetic methodology. Now, I turn to the second methodological challenge, that of applying the method of epoché. Although for Husserl the “breakthrough” (Hua VI, p. 169/166) into phenomenology was made in

the *Logical Investigations*, the mature phenomenological project begins in the laboratory of the phenomenological attitude, which ultimately opens the phenomenological field through epoché and *reduction*. These constitute the fundamentals of the phenomenological methodology, which, nonetheless, remain saturated with inherent problematicity throughout the lifework of their inventor and beyond. Husserl ultimately discussed different “paths to reduction” such as the Cartesian path, the path through psychology, or the path through the lifeworld (Kern, 1962). The first is associated with the initial formulation of transcendental phenomenology that we find in *Ideas I*, which Husserl later criticizes, and the distancing gesture is made possible through discussion of the alternatives mentioned (Hua VI; Hua VIII).

Husserl offers us a unique philosophical project that, from the outset, is framed by an ever-recurring methodological question, in which different problems are encountered in intrinsic connection with the exposition of the method. In such a problem field as violence studies, where the very phenomenal nature of the issue at stake is challenging, slips from intentional grasp or even opposes it, this methodological focus is of utmost importance. Nonetheless, we must carefully observe the foundational motives that are very strong in Husserl’s perspective: the quest for rigorous science, the idea of the “first philosophy,” the ambition of absolute lack of presuppositions, and the striving for apodicticity might be at odds with attempts to analyze experiences in which what is at stake are forms of both subjective and intersubjective disturbances.

I argue that we need an epoché to set aside the “natural attitude” when approaching violence, in order not to reduce it to, e.g., a causal explanation. However, violence also occurs as paired with its justification strategy. For this reason, we should consider supplementing methodology with an “ethical epoché.” This term is discussed by Husserl and plays an important role in his ethics. Its application to the problem of violence as the suspension of justification strategies, which results in the thematization of violence as violation, requires us to go beyond Husserl and include some concepts of Waldenfels’s responsive phenomenology.

2.1. Natural Attitude and Phenomenological Epoché

At the core of the epoché lies the suspension of the natural attitude. The latter is defined as the everyday, unreflected mode in which the surrounding world

presents itself as being “simply there,” “on hand.” The conscious life that is oriented by this cognitive tendency remains unthematized and operates without any critical hesitation. It posits the world as the “factually existent actuality,” and accepts it as such (Hua III, p. 63/57). This is the *general positing of the natural attitude*. It is not altered by any doubt, negation, or alteration regarding this or that appearance within the world, which is why the *general thesis* is not a particular act, nor a judgment of existence, but precisely something prevailing throughout the duration of the attitude. The increasingly precise determination of this world is the perceived aim of the sciences belonging to the natural attitude. The natural world prevails “on hand” and “simply there” as long as the latter remains undisturbed by a *new attitude* (Hua III, p. 61/55).

The way of dealing with the natural attitude is the opening gesture of phenomenological philosophy as such. It is a reflection that does not remain within the natural attitude but attempts its radical alteration. This is a point at which Husserl introduces his own methodological perspective. The method employed concerning the general thesis is that of *bracketing*. Each thesis can be modified, and bracketing is precisely a specific kind of *modification* of a thesis. Through this operation, the positing in question is *annulled*: it “remains what it is,” but it is “*put out of action*,” “*excluded*,” “*parenthesized*.” It is retained as “the parenthesized in the parentheses,” or “the excluded in the context of inclusion.” The positing remains part of the mental process, but we “*make ‘no use’ of it*” (Hua III., p. 59). Bracketing adds a specific mode of consciousness to the original positing, one in which a *change in value* of the original positing occurs.

This modification is something distinct not only from *doubt* but also from *negation*. This is the case because doubt is a *doxic modification* of belief that turns from certainty to uncertainty and ultimately to disbelief about something. This is not the case with bracketing, which does not in any way change the doxic attitude regarding the real world. The latter remains posited with absolute certainty, and is resistant to any sort of doubt. Furthermore, bracketing is *not* a negation. It is not the case that bracketing issues a sort of counter-positing, which annuls the previous positing and replaces it with a belief in the non-being of the world. This proposition is described as *sophistry*, and the phenomenological perspective should be definitively distinguished from it.

This subtle argument remains clear when we consider isolated existential positings in experiential life. Epoché as bracketing would allow us to grasp particular objects in their “how,” that is, as phenomena of consciousness. However, Husserl encounters a problem when we try to establish a *universal and phenomenological* epoché as the neutralization of the entire world belief. For Husserl, this is not achievable through mere bracketing of individual validities and domains of being one by one. This is the case because each validity is given in the horizon, which entails co-consciousness of other validities and is ultimately grounded in the persistent validity of the world-horizon (Hua VI, pp. 145–146/142–143). This is why the universal epoché cannot but attempt to overcome the natural attitude not step-by-step, but rather radically—“with one blow” (*mit einem Schlage*, Hua VI, pp. 78/77, 153/150, 242/239).

This issue is taken up in his lecture course from the winter semester 1923–1924, which was published under the title *Erste Philosophie II* as the eighth volume of *Husserliana*. There, he outlines the “theory of the phenomenological reduction” and presents the distinction between the first path (Cartesian) and the second path (psychological). The Cartesian path proceeds from the requirement for an Archimedean point of absolute certainty, which requires a rigorous critique of world belief as a whole that would lead to consciousness as a “residuum” of world-bracketing. For the path through psychology, what is at stake is to leave the confines of phenomenological psychology and enter the transcendental attitude *sensu stricto*, which is characterized by the attitude of the “disinterested observer.” But insofar as we speak here of the attitude of disinterestedness regarding the *whole* world, i.e., the world horizon in its totality, Husserl encounters the central question, “What could be the *motive* for this?” (Hua VIII, 98/302).

2.2. Ethical Self-Reflection and Ethical Epoché

This leads him to a unique reflection in which he attempts to establish an analogy between universal *ethical self-reflection* (*Selbstbesinnung*, Hua VIII, 154/355) and universal phenomenological epoché, where his initial hypothesis is that the former could function as a preparatory step for the latter. He posits that the reflection about the ethical life of oneself as a person “can prepare us to glean the possibility of a rigorous universal Epoché” (Hua VIII, 155/356).

This preparation starts with an important distinction between different kinds of personal reflections: reflections on *single affections or acts* (which become articulated as “I perceive...,” “I judge...,” “I like/dislike...,” etc.); reflections on *entire stretches of life* (e.g., past student life, or the coming Easter holidays); reflections on *my entire life*. Each reflection can be accompanied by an evaluative act or an act of will and ultimately lead to a future-oriented decision. For instance, I might appreciate my past actions and want to continue them, but I might also critically evaluate my past life (e.g., student life) and decide to act differently in the future.

The most radical reflection entails carrying out a “universal critique of my entire life up to now” (Hua VIII, 154/355), which is followed by a decision about my entire future life. Although this decision might be oriented by a “universal value valid uncritically” (a value affirmed naively, such as power or success), what Husserl aims at is a truly ethical life subordinated to “ethical self-reflection, self-critique, and self-governance” (Hua VIII, 154/355). This possibility serves to establish an authentically ethical life, but it can also function as a preliminary step to the universal phenomenological epoché. This is the case because radical critical self-reflection requires one to “posit out of action all validities at once” (Hua VIII, 153/354), which includes their past, present, and future horizons.

However, precisely at this point Husserl makes an important correction. In Supplement 10, the initial hypothesis that was discussed in the lecture is rejected. It is only here that Husserl explicitly distinguishes between phenomenological epoché and *ethical epoché* and notices a fundamental difference between them: “the ethical Epoché has an entirely different universality than the phenomenological one” (Hua VIII, 319/516).

He characterizes ethical epoché as confined to the *personal acts*, i.e., validities posited in the personalistic attitude. He specifies that it concerns “all acts related to the *absolute ought*” (*absolute Sollen*) and the relevant validities in the “*universal practical field*” (Hua VIII, 319/517, emphasis added). However, in the radical ethical self-reflection, “*the pre-given world*” is always presupposed as that to which personal actions remain related. This means that “the ontic validity of the world is *not affected*” (Hua VIII, 319/516, emphasis added). The ethical epoché therefore remains within the natural attitude as it leaves intact the surrounding world of the personal subject. Thus, while the ethical epoché suspends the personal validities of my

entire life up to now, the universal phenomenological epoché brackets the entire world-thesis in one stroke.

The notion of the ethical epoché plays an important role as part of Husserl's ethics, especially his "late ethics" developed after World War I (Melle, 2002; Geniusas, 2023; Laferté-Coutu, 2024). However, what is crucial for me in this article is its different reading, one that brings important insights into the prospect of phenomenological analysis of violence.

2.3. Responsive Phenomenology and Ethical Epoché

Waldenfels reads this specific passage from the *Erste Philosophie II* through the lens of responsive phenomenology. This perspective is centered on the experience of the *alien* as something encountered beyond the established order. It is characterized by the difference between the demands of *pathos* and the *response* to it, where the latter can never replace or even fully articulate the former. This approach, articulated in numerous books and articles, also develops *responsive ethics* through which the ethical epoché gains a distinguished meaning.

Waldenfels seeks a way to formulate the domain of responsive ethics as dealing with the level that precedes established rules, values, and laws. This is rooted in the *responsive difference* between that "to which" (*worauf*) we respond and the "what" (*was*) of the content of the specific answer we provide. The former is articulated in terms of *pathos*, understood as *Widerfahrnis*, that is, as something that happens to us, that befalls us, in a way that slips the grasp of anticipation. In answering it, we become *respondents*, but always remain related to it as *patients*.

If we situate ethics against these distinctions, the experience "from which" it wants to articulate itself acquires characteristics of a "radicalized experience" (Waldenfels, 2011b), understood as an *event* (*Ereignis*) that can be accessed only indirectly and requires a specific methodological step. The latter, in reference to Husserl (Hua VIII, 319/516), Waldenfels calls an *ethical epoché*, but offers a specific interpretation of the relevant fragment:

By putting out of action the validity of the prevailing morality, it [ethical epoché] actually gives rise to a new kind of ethos. This ethos breaks through the everyday attitude, in which we take the morality for granted, even if we question or oppose it.

(Waldenfels, 1998, p. 9, translation M.M.)

What the ethical epoché should open is the ethical *in statu nascendi* (Merleau-Ponty) and the ethical in the strong sense, where the claim of the other articulates itself (Levinas). What interests him are the “blind spots” that characterize each moral order, that follow from the characterization of every order as selective, exclusive, and instituted, but never ultimately founded. Each moral conception carries an irreducible contingency, from which its own categories emerge, but which cannot be explained through them.

To make this layer tangible, Waldenfels echoes the Nietzschean gesture of the “genealogy of morals” and of going “beyond good and evil” as he wants to trace the ethics back to the point *before* the emergence of the dualities of wrong or right, good or bad, legal or illegal (Waldenfels, 1998, p. 8; Waldenfels, 2024, pp. 11–12). Responsive ethics is “born from pathos” (Waldenfels, 2024), that is, from the demand of the alien that affects us before we can respond to it by applying a rule.

Ethical epoché, in this reading, abandons “what we practically take for granted,” but it does not discover an absolute ought that “leaves all relativities behind.” Instead, what is required is a “*special kind* of ethical epoché,” that is, the *responsive epoché* which, “starting from what we intend, goes back to the demands to which we respond when we say or do something” (Waldenfels, 2014, p. 194, emphasis added). As such, responsive epoché goes back from the responses as rule-guided, meaningful, and value-laden to the *pathic*, which interrupts and demands an answer (Waldenfels, 2011a, p. 32).

What is crucial here is that this methodology does not result in indifference, but rather seeks the thematization of the alien *as* alien, which is expressed in ethical categories of demand and responsibility even before it can be recognized by normative ethics as, e.g., a subject of rights that articulates claims which can be considered valid or invalid. I believe that it is not the ethical epoché in a strictly Husserlian sense, but rather its interpretation that involves the perspective of responsive phenomenology, and specifically, responsive ethics. This reading can allow us to address one problem encountered in the phenomenology of violence.

2.4. Ethical Epoché and the Phenomenology of Violence

What is unique about the phenomenological approach to violence is the focus on the way something is experienced. The phenomenological epoché allows us to consider violence as *experienced* and not as “explained away” in the

natural attitude. However, we need an additional methodological strategy that would address a different dimension of the phenomenon, which is not addressed through the suspension of the natural attitude in the Husserlian sense. As Waldenfels argued, an important part of the phenomenalization of violence is mediated through the functioning strategies involved in the justification of violence (Waldenfels, 1991; Maczuga, 2023).

For this reason, one can argue that a phenomenological approach to this issue requires an additional methodological gesture, one that addresses the matrix of appearance of violence, where it enters the phenomenal field as, in a sense, paired with its justification (or counter-justification) strategy. If we want to access violence *in statu nascendi*, we need to apply an epoché that would be vigilant to this layering of the phenomenon in question.

The application of the ethical epoché to this specific problem was proposed by Staudigl (2015, pp. 163–167). He takes up the main features of Waldenfels’ reading of this operation and applies it to suspend “the normative justifications or legitimations of violence” (Staudigl, 2015, p. 166), which is needed if we want to analyze violence as *experienced* and not reduced to its preconceived essence, to a causal explanation, or mediated by the interplay of its justifications and counter-justifications.⁵ What ethical epoché aims to show is that violence does not primarily appear on the reflective level, but rather affects the subject as an embodied being, triggering a responsive dynamic. It is a *Widerfahrnis*, an event that befalls us before we can act on its basis. Here, the recipient of violence is not (yet) the bearer of rights but rather enters the scene as articulating the demand not to be violated on the level preceding distinctions of “right and wrong” (Waldenfels, 2006, p. 80).

This perspective offers us the possibility to describe violence as a *violation* (*Verletzung*)⁶ in a distinctive sense. Violence as a violation affects a being

⁵ This does not exhaust the scope of Staudigl’s own project of the methodological transformation of phenomenology, which, in his view, is required in order to provide a phenomenological account of violence. However, discussing it in detail is beyond the scope of the present article.

⁶ The German verb *verletzen* (“to violate/injure”) is semantically rich and multidimensional. It covers:

- a. Physical harm: bodily injury through impact or force.
- b. Psychic harm: wounding of feelings, honor, dignity, etc.
- c. Symbolic harm:

characterized by self-relatedness and integrity (Waldenfels, 2006). In this context, we can refer to the second volume of *Ideas*, where the distinctive feature of the animal being is characterized by its embodiment. The latter cannot be encapsulated by its physical characteristics, as something extended in space (*Körper*), because it is also a lived body (*Leib*), one that can feel, that is open to affectivity, and that cannot be fragmented without violation (Hua IV, pp. 32–33/35–36).

The sense of violation arises prior to consciousness as characterized by intentional dynamics, because it corresponds more fundamentally to the dimension that Emmanuel Levinas described in his analyses of the face of the Other (Levinas, 1979, pp. 194–219). The claim raised by the Other renders the Self responsible beyond the latter's sense-bestowal, which grants access to the Other as an intentional object. In this way, violence as violation disrupts what Levinas calls the *ethical resistance* (Ebd., p. 199) that the face, as transcendence, offers against the injury it suffers. Thus, violence as violation constitutes a negation of the responsiveness of an embodied subject. Due to this, it is marked by a certain *singularity*, which stems from the uniqueness of the demand raised from the recipient of violence.

This brings into play the question of the “ways in which violence violates (...) and how it is experienced in its inherent power to violate” (Staudigl, 2015, p. 164). To analyze it as such, it is plausible to argue that ethical epoché in this reading, i.e., as the suspension of moral, legal, or political justifications and counter-justifications of violence, is an important methodological strategy that carries the potential to broaden the applicability of phenomenology in the field of violence research.

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- i. Violation of norms or laws (e.g., breaking confidentiality, etiquette, or legal boundaries).
 - ii. Violation of boundaries (e.g., national borders or airspace).

This semantic spread does not map cleanly onto English (“violation” emphasizes symbolic or moral breach) or Polish (“zranienie” leans toward physical injury). This polysemy of *verletzen* reflects the multilayered nature of violence itself and seems to be actively in play in German-speaking discussions of the subject. See *Duden Onlinewörterbuch* (Bibliographisches Institut GmbH, n.d.)

Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined three problems in the phenomenology of violence: the relation between violence and order, the desideratum for an integrative concept of violence, and the perspectivity of violence. This led me to the question of the applicability of the eidetic reduction to the analysis of violence. In the second part of the article, I have discussed a methodological problem connected with the epoché. In reconstructing Husserl's discussion of this operation, we encounter the distinction between universal phenomenological epoché and the ethical epoché. The latter concept was taken up by Bernhard Waldenfels and developed through the lens of his responsive phenomenology. This interpretation can be applied to deal with the problem of the justification of violence through the suspension of its justification strategies, as proposed by Michael Staudigl, which allows us to analyze violence as a violation.

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