

The Reference to Subjective Experience

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It is almost inevitable that a psychologist, convinced of the importance of taking account of subjective experience in the first person mode, should have had to come to terms with phenomenology. In so doing, one is rapidly forced to take note of the

phenomenology. However, over and beyond this truth confirmed both by Husserl and his successors, a difficulty arises with regard to Husserl's unceasing reminders relative to both the distinction itself (as though it could never simply be established once and for all) and to the need to demonstrate that a change in the mode of analysis suffices for a change in the point of view. In addition, the existence of a 'psychological way' of the reduction¹ as well as the project for a phenomenological psychology or pure psychology², introduces new tensions. My aim in this article is not to try to clarify this distinction³ but to investigate the approach to phenomenology which it implies by concentrating on the way in which its analyses can be carried through with reference to a diversity of source material. In so doing I do not want to obscure the difference between the two attitudes, transcendental phenomenology and psycho-phenomenology, but to question the way in which each takes account of what provides them with their basic material, in the conviction that the use made of this *materia prima*

⁴. But the common denominator certainly seems to be what is given 'in the flesh', subjective experience as Husserl himself shows us through his way of working with examples drawn from lived experience. Phenomenological philosophy does not bear upon an analysis of results in the sense of an empirical science; rather it clearly emphasises the analysis of essences. But do we not discern in the very dynamic of this analysis, an incontrovertible reference to a singular lived experience, even if it is neither its singularity nor its empirical character which matters in the final analysis? Can one extract essences without reference to a lived experience? Can one make honey without flowers?

It seems to me that in trying to answer this question one is perforce engaged in a reflective grasp of the very act of reference, of what it circumscribes, of what it is justified by, of what it is supported by. My aim is to run the risk⁵ of developing a methodological exchange of views with philosophers inasmuch as we are all of us interested in the study of subjective experience.

Two ways of gaining access to subjective experience seem possible. The first passes by way of a reflection upon texts⁶. But this can provide no more than food for thought because what is envisaged is the very same material as that to which reference is made.

¹ Deparaz, N., Les voies de la reduction

² Husserl, Lectures of 1925

³ A first seminar on this subject took place in 1995, which showed the extent of the work to be done. A further seminar was dedicated to this theme in 1997/8.

⁴ Vermersch, P., (1996), Pour une psycho-phénoménologie, Bulletin de GREX, 13, 1-16.

⁵ Multiple risks: in confronting phenomenological philosophers who, in discussions with experimntal psychology, have rarely been listened to in the past; in being misunderstood by psychologists themselves who are not convinced of the interest in taking up the first person point of view.

⁶ Ricoeur is very precise on this point concerning the motives which have governed his choice of texts.

The second passes by way of access to one's own experience in the first person. I am going to take account of both these two approaches one after the other.

The Reference to Texts

same reading practise or even the same mode of reference. As a primary distinction I invoke the difference between the text as 'object' and the text as 'sign'.

Text-object

Let us suppose that the text is considered in and of itself. In this sense it is an object which is subjected to a literary, linguistic, grammatical or lexical analysis, that is, to a hermeneutical examination. In this sense, a text on sleep⁷ by Husserl can be studied for what Husserl really wanted to say about it without the one who conducts this study being committed to any conclusions concerning the nature of the object 'sleep'. Responsibility for the discussion on the object 'sleep' is left to the author. The sole object of his analysis is the text as text. If I take as my point of reference Husserl's work of description and analysis as exemplified in texts like *Experience and Judgement*, *Thing and Space*

⁸, this analytical examination of the text as object pertains more to the history of the philosophy of exegesis than to the activity of phenomenology⁹. Nevertheless, this kind of reading also contributes towards a research interest which aims at an object over and beyond the text.

sign

object which features as its referent. What are the methodological characteristics of that operation which has made it possible to move from the referent, the object of my research, to a discussion about this referent which brings out its properties, its structure, essence, laws, etc. It is no longer a question of simply being sure of having understood what the author wanted to say but of examining the steps employed to justify the fact that he said it. Upon what are his claims founded? How does he establish his claims?

But perhaps it will prove necessary to draw further distinctions relative to this reference to texts as signifying. By taking account of the different aims and

⁷ Husserl, E., (1930-32)

⁸ § 12 of Lectures on the Phenomenology of Time Consciousness.

⁹ Depraz, N., reference to research texts.

procedures involved, I propose to distinguish between 'texts as results' and 'texts as testimony'.

Result-texts.

Result-texts bring together a group of conclusions and all or part of the steps which made it possible to reach them. They seek explicitly to arrive at formulations of results¹⁰. They can be situated at different levels of condensation: the basic level of a monograph bearing upon the study of a particular problem and a more comprehensive level aiming to draw up an inventory of all the evidence relating to the same question. This second level will raise further problems as regards the methodological procedures needed to establish the conclusions. Most frequently, the detailed information needed to develop a critical point of view is lacking and, on the basis of a document of this kind alone, it is impossible to establish the validity of what is presented as an acquired result.

The value of the conclusions reached in result-texts depends upon respect for the methodology which made it possible to generate them, that is, upon respect for the methodology proper to each disciplinary domain. If it is a matter of a mathematical text, this means respect for the rules of formal writing, respect for the rules of demonstration etc.; if it is a matter of genetic biology, this means respect for the measuring procedures (Latour 1989¹¹) and so on. Hence, with regard to psychophenomenology the question arises, what might be the methodologically correct way of reaching conclusions and with regard to which I can express either my agreement or my doubts? In each instance what is assumed is that the methodology has been developed, if not formalised. But this also assumes that I am able I understand its coherence with a view to determining whether or not I agree with it; failing which my agreement may only be based upon conventional criteria. For example, I may believe it to be true because it has been accepted for publication by the disciplinary community (see the examples offered by B. Latour). With regard to the case which concerns us, what is phenomenological methodology? If it is a matter of extracting an essence, it is obvious that the procedure is logical: an essence is that without which the object can not be thought (the classical instance being shape or colour). This chain of reasoning can easily be validated by confronting it with the conclusions drawn from a repetition of the analysis. But it is no guarantee of the completeness of the analysis for it does not preclude an essence being analysed out into more specific elements which bring to light new distinctions that leave the former summarily true but more or less irrelevant. In discussions on sleep, distinctions derived from material science have arisen regarding 'dreamless sleep', 'paradoxical sleep', 'deep sleep'. But studies on coma have given rise to the notion of 'reactive', designating a coma when a few efferent responses are retained and 'non-reactive' when there are no such responses¹². By comparison with such comas, 'normal' sleep seems extraordinarily lively! In barbiturate comas the subject is conscious of the world, hears, sees what is in his visual field but no longer responds to anything. Each case of 'non-lively' brings with it a need for further

¹⁰ for example on the theme of sleep, Hobson J. A., (1992)

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discriminations with a view to developing a general model capable of taking account of these states. If it appears that one face of intentional life can be lost while the rest remains intact, thinking of distinctions which makes it possible to envisage the autonomy of these facets becomes unavoidable. In the methodology of eidetic variations, the question is one of determining which domain of variations is the one recognised to be relevant. Without a specification of the criteria which determine its limits, without a specification of the limits of the field to be explored, it seems to me that the factors which determine the validity of the analysis remain elusive, since whether imaginary or evoked this type of variation sets the stage for any validation of the procedure of extracting essences. If a methodology does indeed exist for pursuing this kind of analysis, it seems to me that the classification of the domains to be retained, the way in which one relates to them or excludes them, is a question worthy of interest.

The result-texts derived from experimentation research, whether clinical or psychiatric, can be taken into account and serve as markers for the identification of different well known properties of the object under study (e.g. with reference to neuro-physiological correlation, dream periods occur at different moments in sleep - not permanently - and to deprive the subject of them, to wake him up just when he starts to dream is profoundly disturbing), of typologies differentiating different classes of fact relating to the object with a view to establishing conclusions (grouping together of states implying a 'loss of consciousness', coma, fainting, normal sleep, sleep under medication, anaesthetics, states of hypnotic absorption, trance), to enumerating the variables under examination, to describing the parameters capable of playing a role. These classifications, these ways of modelling laws and mechanisms, are not to be accepted as such since it is precisely the concern of a phenomenological investigation to question their presuppositions and whatever remains implicit in the descriptive language employed¹³.

Being in possession of a global knowledge of these facts relative to a research object one wishes to tackle in a phenomenological or psycho-phenomenological manner seems to me to provide a guarantee against an elementary naiveté leading one to base one's distinctions upon common sense whereas, in this particular field, science and clinical investigation have furnished results which can not be captured by common sense (cf. Bachelard's critique of naive realism). This does not mean that one should try to know everything as a condition of being able to make a start with the task of phenomenology. In his research on the imaginary, Sartre took account of the work of the psychologists of his time with a view to critiquing them and challenging them on their failure to get to anything like an imaginary consciousness. A parallel criticism can be formulated. Both the scientist and the clinical worker run a considerable risk of naiveté with regard to the way they define their object, with regard to the inexplicit horizons in which they risk getting trapped from the start, with regard to the concreteness with which they endow their data or denominate it. The phenomenological critique of first principles remains salutary no matter how little hope there may be of using it as a propaedeutic to a well founded psychology, in the Husserlian sense, rather than as a regulative critique

bearing a posteriori on the results of psychological research. This critique of first principles obliges the scientist to emerge from the natural attitude which leads him to believe that his world is the world, without therefore having relativised his point of view. Inversely, any phenomenological analysis which overlooked advances in any science whose subject matter was of interest to it runs the risk of falling into the naïveté of not having taken into account the factual data which both give rise to the question and delimit the field of enquiry. The greatest risk is run by those who ignore the data relative to the sub-personal level of analysis with regard to which the subject can have no experience and about which he can have no intuition, for the simple reason that this level is attained solely by inference (for example the role of the nose in taste evaluation, which could only be brought to light by an experimental procedure which suppressed the role of the nose).

A result-text can not therefore stand by itself. It's referential employment refers back to the underlying methodological stratum which generated its results.

Texts as testimony

status? Does what a patient avows automatically enjoy the status of an authentic, sincere, true declaration? If I am to exploit these materials, to what an extent do I have to have the competence needed to enable me to be critical vis a vis the methodology of the one who collected it (the specialist in the field)? Does not the illustrative use of the basic materials of one discipline in the context of another not raise delicate methodological problems?

In the case of a discipline bearing upon experience it is imperative that we have criteria allowing us to evaluate what is formulated in relation to the experience envisaged by the formulation.

For example, it is interesting to try and define the criteria making it possible to determine the relation between what is said and the experiential reference, what I have called 'the speech position'¹⁶. One good approach would be to check whether the reference to lived experience is singular. In fact any lived experience is, as an actual moment lived through by a real subject, necessarily singular. If not, it is no longer a lived experience but a generalisation, an ideal object. Verbalisation with regard to singular experience and with regard to a class of experiences is not going to bring with it the same information. When a person describes a class of experiences he himself extracts the 'invariants'. He himself produces the generalisations which are the expressions of his spontaneous, implicit theories. Instead of being informed about his lived experience, we are informed about what he thinks or what he believes his experiences to be (and in consequence we have no direct information about his own lived experience).

Even if the testimony relates to a specific lived experience this offers no guarantee that it will be formulated in a descriptive way, because it might be dominated by judgments, commentaries, subjective evaluations, that is, by a superfluity of detail concerning the context and the circumstances without teaching one anything about the experience itself.

And even if I really is a matter of testimony relative to a specified experience, formulated in the descriptive mode, therefore related to the description of this experience as such, it might be formulated at so microscopic a level as to bring with it very little original information.

One of the most interesting examples for phenomenology is that of the examples dotted around Husserl's texts. I have not worked at a systematic analysis of the different types of exemplification, of their role, of the use made of them by him. Others, who know Husserl's texts better than myself, will perhaps get around to it one day. But from my earliest contact with his work it seemed to me that they didn't always truly testify to the lived experiences in question or perhaps were not truly exploited as testimony but rather as simple illustration. (I am thinking in particular of *Ideas I* *the Lectures on Internal Time Consciousness*).

Dessanti (1992)¹⁷ one gets the same sense of a simple illustrative point of departure but

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also in the text by Besnier (1993)³⁸ which deals with the same theme. The example is set up as a moment of particular lived experience (the bus going by) and then disappears without being worked up any further, and this in the interests of a theoretical discussion with regard to which one might well ask whether it was even necessary to cite an example in order to be entitled to deal with it. By contrast, the passage from the text (p. 3470 in which Besnier insists upon the difference between the presentification of the object of the experience and the presentification of the experience directed towards this object seems to me a limpid example of reference to an experience under analysis (moreover does he not pass himself off as a phenomenological psychologist on several occasions?). Only he who has practised this type of reference is in a position to distinguish between different forms of presentification and to comment upon their respective difficulty.

Is it not the case that, from a methodological point of view, any serious assessment will have to pass by way of the production of written testimony which is complete and fully elaborated? Can one simply provide oneself with examples 'off the top of one's head'; can one work with them, integrate them into the analysis without constituting them as text? Utilising information derived from testimony-texts requires that one develop a critique of the way in which they are generated, of the type of verbalisation which produces them. In the case of reference to lived experience, we need to develop properly phenomenological instruments with a view to evaluating the interest and the bearing of testimony-texts. The act of referring can be divided up into distinct activities depending upon the nature of what is envisaged. The well-known text by Proust in which he recounts the episode of the madeleine has served as a text-object for innumerable literary and linguistic analyses. It can be envisaged as testimony-text, dealing in a very detailed and technically precise way with the manner in which evocation takes hold once the sensorial trigger opening up access to concrete memory has played its part. To be sure, the testimony is rationalised and in part reconstructed (we know of several versions of this passage made available by its preliminary sketches), but even then it attests, if not to the lived experience itself, at least to notions which could only have been derived from the lived experience. From a third point of view it functions as a result-text in which he expounds his theory of recall in reference to the example in question.

Reference to the reality-pole: Experimenting and Experiencing

Gaining access to this lived experience and., even more, describing it once the reflective act is operative, are expert activities which have to be learnt, and which can only achieve precision and stability through assiduous practise. In other words, this brutally narcissistic epistemological rupture has to be accepted. What is most intimate in the very act of living it is not given to me as a piece of knowledge, neither immediately given (it has to be developed) nor spontaneously given (the interior gesture has to be learnt) nor easily given (one has to work at it and often the lived experience eludes my clumsy efforts to seize it).

One practical field in which this data is very apparent is that of psychotherapeutic cure. An important part of the work is devoted to teaching the patient to relate to his interior world in a precise way, to construct and improve the mental gestures by means of which he takes note of his emotions, his thoughts, his secondary thoughts (those which slip beneath the threshold of his principal thoughts and which often contain the expression of reticences, refusals, resistances). He learns to let go in order to release free associations and to express them without censorship. Another example: In the field of practical analysis, of the analysis of learning difficulties, this problem is encountered in a massive way: the absence of any spontaneous or immediate ability to relate in a precise and detailed way to one's own experience. In these applications the lack of expertise on the part of the patient, the professional or the student can be made up for by a complementary expertise on the part of the psycho-therapist or the trainer who teaches interview techniques, who intervenes by guiding the patient towards his subjective experience as also towards the expression of it. Over a longer

time period (two or more years at least in most cases) it is possible to teach the other to develop these mental gestures in an autonomous fashion. This comes down to developing a competence for auto-mediation: teaching the individual how to treat himself as an other and to do it as well as an other would do it for him.

Lived experience is not automatically cognised but it is at least possible for it to be so. Making it possible for lived experience to become conscious presupposes a learned expertise and/or a no less expert mediation.

This capacity for becoming conscious accentuates the importance of the methodology needed for attaining access to experience.

If lived experience is not given immediately, easily, then what are the conditions regulating access to my own experiences? Methodologically, these conditions are not going to be evident of themselves²⁰. They will have to be created, decided; all kinds of choices have to be made. With this range of choice, risks of confusion appear concomitantly. I am going to draw upon the presentation of these risks to develop certain important points. This way of proceeding does not exclude the need to describe intrinsically the reflecting activity which is mobilised thereby, the different possible mediations needed to effect it, all of them factors which I have gone into elsewhere, either alone or in collaboration with others. The advantage of describing the risks of confusion is that it hereby becomes easier to highlight the methodological points which might otherwise appear self-evident but which in practise present real difficulties.

Risk 1: confusion in the means of access. Lack of distinction between understanding and experiencing.

In the gesture of referring oneself to one's own experience the principal risk is that of confusing the knowledge (reflected) that I have of my experience with intimate access (reflecting) to this experience from an authentically first person point of view. It is very easy for thought to isolate a little bit of experience and to intellectually construct extrapolations, commentaries, fantasies regarding what this item is or can be. And all this without taking note of the shift in the referential relation. Acute attention to the exercise of one's own cognitive activity is needed in order that this slippage should remain limited (it seems to me impossible to avoid it altogether), with a view, for example, to identifying the moments when I cease to refer to the lived experience itself and substitute for it an idea, what I know or assume regarding the experience. It is not a moral question but a question of competence and practise. He who draws a table spontaneously draws it as he knows it to be: rectangular. In fact, he has to learn to see the table just as it appears, together with the recessional lines which guide the determination of the deformed parallelogram which corresponds to what one analyses. The perception of colour values, in particular the colour of shadows, is the result of an expert training. These examples have been brought up to show that perception, the description of our own experience, presents equivalent and even worse difficulties, since the means of control are more indirect as a result of the fact that they bear upon reality which is unobservable from the outside and which consequently remains private.

This, for example, is what motivates my resistance to admitting that the perception by adumbrations which characterises Husserl's analysis of visual perception is as simply and obviously identified in perceptual experience as Husserl leads us to believe.

I hold that the difficulties involved in experiencing it are seriously underestimated.

- Difficulties which derive:

- 1) from the need to establish in advance the ability to operate the reflection of a perceptual act, of any moment of a perceptual act. The analysis of the putting into operation of the reflective act which has already been undertaken should however suffice to alert the reader to the difficulties involved in operating these two reversals - the problem of letting go which is assumed to have been resolved.
- 2) and in correlation with the absence of any awareness of the fact that I do not dispose of this capacity from the start, the fact that I have to develop it, practise it. Why should I go to the trouble of learning a competence which I am not aware that I lack? But then, what is required in order that I discover that it does not form a part of my existing know-how? The experiential dimension perhaps?
- 3) from the obstacle constituted by the fact that I immediately understand the idea in accordance with which I do not see the whole object at one and the same time and that necessarily it is only a part which is perceptible at any given time; that I immediately understand that seeing the whole object would not only require of me that I turn around the object or that I turn it around in front of me, but also that binocular vision has to be co-ordinated, and this while changes in the position of my head and lighting conditions prevent the perceptual spectacle remaining unchanged. All this is relatively easy to understand and follows from a trivial logical necessity.

The risk consists in my acquiescing in your idea of an outline without however experiencing the way in which my perception is only sketched out in outline.

The risk consists in my conceding all this intellectually without seeking to verify it in my experience of perception.

Then there is the risk that, although I only dispose of an idea, a concept, a piece of information bearing thematically upon experience, I nevertheless believe I have experienced it! As if talking about experience actually gave the experience of the experience under discussion! Even though the only experience I have is that of talking about the theme of experience.

- 4) from the subtlety of the criteria allowing me to distinguish between intellectual comprehension of, and a reflection upon, an experience (the experience itself is persistently had in a pre-reflective fashion)

Doubtful external criteria: It is not because a person warmly approves what I have said that he or she has experienced it, for certain non-verbal signs (lighting up of the face, smiling, positioning of the head can also corroborate the fact that the experience has been had (the experiential discovery is always a cognitive shock, making way for signs of conscious apprehension). It is sometimes possible to find linguistic indicators, forms of narrative which can corroborate the fact of experience.

Internal criteria: (how I recognise for myself that it's an experience and not just a simple intellectual comprehension): The ability to take internal criteria into account assumes that the problem has been resolved. He who knows how to identify these criteria for himself already has the competence for practising the reflective act, already has the experience of the reflective act, already knows what it is to experience as a form of self-referral! The distinctions, the criteria, the recognition of the risks of confusion in putting into operation a methodologically regulated reflecting act, presupposes the mastery of this very methodology, at least to a minimal degree. But being on the way may still be confused with the creation of the way. With regard to the subject matter, methodological scepticism confuses the absence of a way with the impossibility or possibility of finding the way, or even of creating a way.

Understanding intellectually and experiencing are two different things which can complement and support one another. As Piguet puts it²¹, 4447: 'first rule of realism: the primacy of the real over thought; second rule: the principle of the illegitimacy of passing from thought to reality - the fact that I genuinely recognise the real does not permit me to deduce therefrom the existence of this reality in the logic of realism.' By which the author means that the mere comprehension of a phenomenon provides no guarantee that this phenomenon actually exists.

Moreover, the act of reflecting upon my perception tells me nothing unless and until I carry it through (that I carry it through myself! May I again insist upon the fact that I am the only one capable of living through my own experience - on condition that I actually do it!)

Risk 2: not envisaging the experience as singular but as general.

Aside from the difference between understanding, knowing about my experience and experiencing it, therefore in relation to the act through which I refer to an object of research (an aspect, a moment, a type of subjective experience) it is important to discuss the delimitation, or the modes of delimitation, of the object envisaged.

The lived experience is singular, if not what?

What is essential from my point of view is the fact that if one envisages a lived experience (or any facet of it which can only manifest itself in a given lived experience), it can not be envisaged otherwise than in a singular apprehension. A lived experience which is not a singular moment in the life of a specific person is not a lived experience! It is a kind, a class of experience, a generality and as such has changed its status. It is no longer lived through but has become thought about (a certain) lived experiences.

What is at stake is the quality, the preciseness of the information which the subject can generate with regard to his own experience. The procedure consists in getting back, in a certain way, to the point of departure of any possible abstraction relative to subjective experience, therefore, to establish the conditions needed to obtain the most original access possible. This can only be a tangential approach because it is

impossible to suspend those pre-reflective horizons which are necessarily present. The objective is to get back to the conditions of (an) access, then to a description which minimises the risks of a priori generalisations, generalisations which arise when what one gathers is not a description but naive (or even sophisticated) theories developed by the subject

In presenting this need for singularity I have argued for a methodological option. In seeking to embody the practise of research, one has to reverse that of language and ask how, in the intimate experience of apperceptive access to my experience, I am able to identify the indicators, the criteria of the vivacity of the presentification, of its singular temporal index²².

Risk 3. In the case where my access comes after the experience: confusion of the memory of an experience with the presentification of a past experience.

In what I have written so far I have not distinguished between access in the present and retrospective access. Or rather, I have implicitly accorded priority to the dimension of the present, especially in analysing what seemed to me to constitute the major risk: confusing 'understanding' with 'experiencing' while knowing that the first does not necessarily imply the second and that the second does not necessarily imply the first, and even that the two are possible together.

In the context of retrospective access, it seems to me that there is a risk of confusing a haphazard access to scraps of past experience evoked in flashes which I do not go into in any depth with the evocation of a past experience in a lively fashion, right up to its vivid presentification. For example, I am engaged in the process of analysing materials making it possible for me to clarify the different ways available to me of referring to materials with a view to analysing them (the actual situation of the one who writes). Referring carefully to singular experience demands an effort and an attention which is not self evident. I succumb quite easily to the temptation to complete certain vague memories with reconstructions which introduce a coherence which satisfies my habitual writing criteria. The absence of any retrospective experiential reference which has been carefully elaborated (in the sense of having been presentified with clarity and fully thematised) means that I can easily slide into systematisation and that, without even being aware of it, I pass over to the pole of the reflected (and no longer of the reflecting). To be sure, on occasions this oscillation is legitimate. With equal certainty it can be said that no experiential thematisation is possible outside the context of my conceptual framework whether conscious, pre-conscious or non-conscious.

It seems to me that what is at stake is the need to distinguish the descriptive dimension, constitutive of elements entering into the analysis, from the dimension of interpretation, of synthesis and of integration. Not as though they can be formally distinguished (as if every description already contained certain formal elements by which it is organised and without which it would not be possible). However, it is possible to bring to light a tendency to privilege description, to accommodate it. Not that we need to suppose that there exists a real which has first to be described; rather we should take as our point of departure our responsiveness to the real (in the spirit of

L'enfance d'un dessinateur,

Elements for a Conclusion

