

Consciousness, Being and Life : *phenomenological approaches to mindfulness*

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Journal of Phenomenological Psychology 50 (2019) 127–161

Introduction

Speaking of phenomenological *approaches* of mindfulness sounds as if phenomenology could reach mindfulness from somewhere else ; as if phenomenology could adopt a particular distanced *standpoint* on mindfulness and see it from there. If this were the case, the phenomenological standpoint would just be complementary to other (truly) distanced standpoints on mindfulness, such as the neurobiological standpoint or the anthropological standpoint.

But phenomenology is no approach to anything, and even less a standpoint on anything, because it maintains no distance with its field of interest ; for that reason, it cannot be called a mode of *access* to anything, not even to some inner realm. Phenomenology consists of a radically participatory stance that bears existential similarities with mindfulness, at least to a certain extent we will have to evaluate. Then, for a phenomenologist, mindfulness is no (inner or outer) object of study, but rather a variant of its own methodological precondition. Phenomenology does not pretend to elucidate the alleged mechanisms of action of mindfulness, nor to locate it on a map of cultural practices. Phenomenology rather purports to induce a cross-fertilization between the state of mindfulness and its own state of *epochè*. It can then take advantage of this similarity of situation to describe the lived quality of being mindful from the midst of it.

For a phenomenologist, probing into the state of mindfulness means establishing a two-ways relation with it. On the one hand, a phenomenologist can practice variations on the state of *epochè*, and identify among these variations which one corresponds best to the definitional prescriptions of mindfulness. On the other hand, conversely, a phenomenologist can practice mindfulness and explore the possibility of making use of it for the same

purpose as the *epochè*. Just as she does in the state of *epochè*, a phenomenologist can take advantage of her practice of mindfulness to bring out what Husserl called “the mothers of knowledge”¹, namely the mental acts² that give rise to ordinary or scientific knowledge, and that eventually favor the so-called “natural attitude” of everyday beliefs and philosophical naturalism.

Our roadmap then involves five steps. As a preliminary, we will inquire with some more details into the differences between the phenomenological and naturalistic “approaches” of mindfulness (1). We will then attempt a comparison between the *epochè*, the phenomenological reduction, and the practice of mindfulness. This examination involves two sub-steps : similarities (2) and differences (3). A question will arise at this point : in what domain do we get when we have practiced the *epochè* and a form of reduction (4)? A significant part of the ongoing debate between phenomenologists (especially Husserlian, Heideggerian, and Merleau-Pontian phenomenologists) bear on that issue. Finally, we will take advantage of this latter discussion to wonder what kind of *state* (among those made available by the various phenomenological reductions) is reached by practicing mindfulness (5).

1. Tackling mindfulness as a participant

From what has just been said in the introduction, it turns out that the phenomenological “approach” of mindfulness is bound to differ in principle, in method, and in attitude from any other approach.

To begin with, any other approach to mindfulness relies on the standard philosophical division between being and appearing. For instance, a neurobiological approach aims at disclosing the objective signatures of the practice of mindfulness ; it looks for a set of structural or dynamical alterations of the brain that are specifically associated with the practice of mindfulness. These signatures are supposed to reveal the “being”, the real physical ground and nature of the state of mindfulness ; and this physical nature of mindfulness is opposed to its variegated ways of

¹ E. Husserl, *La Crise des sciences européennes et la phénoménologie transcendantale*, Gallimard, 1976, p. 174.

² Quest for invariants, intentional directedness, conceptualization etc.

appearing subjectively to the practitioner or the patient. By contrast, a central, though disputed, premise of phenomenological ontology is that being is strictly coextensive to appearing. The list of quotations of phenomenologists who support it, is almost inexhaustible. This premise has then been transformed into a slogan by the main lineage of contemporary French phenomenologists, from Michel Henry to Jean-Luc Marion and Renaud Barbaras: “autant d’apparaître, autant d’être”³. Such slogan has been poorly translated into English as follows: “something *is* inasmuch as it *appears*”. The latter translation sounds as if there were something that *is*, something whose being is secondarily displayed in appearance and revealed by appearance, something whose appearance is the criterion of Being. But the true premise of phenomenology differs considerably from this interpretation. Indeed, according to it, being is *nothing above and beyond* appearing. It is true that there is also a phenomenological sense of transcendence of things with respect to their appearing; but this kind of transcendence is self-generated by the very structure of appearance, and it is therefore aptly called “transcendence in immanence”⁴. As Eugen Fink wrote unambiguously, “(Phenomenology) simply claims that being is identical with the phenomenon”⁵.

Now, if we accept this premise, we must also apply it to mindfulness. From a phenomenological standpoint, the being of mindfulness is nothing above and beyond its variegated ways of appearing. Accordingly, phenomenology just purports to isolate invariants in the flux of experience that unfolds during the practice of mindfulness, and to extract therefrom stable “essences” that lend themselves to *description*. Not any essence, however: the general essence (or essences) of the state of mindfulness, rather than the essence of mental events that may occur during the practice of mindfulness. We must be cautious at this point, however. For we have good reasons to suspect that the very act of extracting eidetic invariants, a central methodological tool of phenomenology, is averse to the sort of state that is cultivated in mindfulness. This is a true problem, but I postpone its discussion,

³ See e.g. M. Henry, *Auto-donation : entretiens et conférences*, Beauchesne, 2004, p. 28 ; J.L. Marion, *Réduction et donation*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2015, Conclusion.

⁴ J. Patočka, *Introduction à la phénoménologie de Husserl*, Jérôme Millon, 1993, p. 127

⁵ E. Fink, *Proximité et distance*, Jérôme Millon, 1994, p. 120. Also M. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 107: “Being means appearing”.

and will only address it in section 2, together with the distinction between the *epochè* and the phenomenological reduction.

Another difference between the phenomenological “approach” of mindfulness and other approaches has even more import. Phenomenology can be seen as a radical overturn of a strong historical tendency in modern Western epistemology. This tendency, as described by Michel Foucault⁶, consists in disentangling knowledge from the existential transformation of the knower. Epistemological standards of modernity are based on the presupposition that the subject can reach truth without undergoing a radical self-transformation. This stands in stark opposition to the Ancient and Medieval standards according to which the subject had to make herself capable, and even worthy, of recognizing the truth by undergoing some sort of *ascesis*. At that time, truth was the reward of someone who had managed to become true to herself, and had become so to speak homogeneous with the field to be known truthfully. The climax, but also the disappointing failure, of this project was the gnosis, that “... tends to transpose, in the act of knowledge, the conditions, forms, and effects of spiritual experience”⁷. By contrast, science is the typical knowledge of modernity, since, in order to *know* something, the scientist has only one obligation: it is to learn intellectual and technological skills, while remaining mostly unchanged in any other respect; it is to position herself firmly in front of the field to be known, without being altered by the process of knowing. Far from that, phenomenology is a renewed strategy of *ascesis*, for it seeks a kind of knowledge that can be obtained only at the cost of an outright self-transformation of the subject.

Husserl himself insisted that the phenomenological quest implies a “complete personal transformation which can be compared *prima facie* with a religious conversion”⁸. According to Husserl, engaging in phenomenological inquiry requires much more than purely intellectual rigor. It requires a new “form of life” characterized by a high sense of “self-responsibility”. So much so that “(A true philosopher is one who has taken the) decision to make of her life a life devoted to the absolute, ... a life

⁶ M. Foucault, *L’herméneutique du sujet*, Editions du Seuil, 2001

⁷ Ibid. p. 18

⁸ E. Husserl, *La Crise des sciences européennes et la phénoménologie transcendantale*, Gallimard, 1976, p. 156.

entirely devoted to the idea of the supreme good”⁹. Phenomenology is a new kind of discipline that merges knowledge, ascesis and ethics. But instead of seeking salvation by means of a variety of knowledge suffused with spirituality (as Gnostics do), phenomenology seeks knowledge by basing it on a carefully channeled variety of spiritual exercise.

This status of phenomenology has an obvious consequence for its encounter with mindfulness. To inquire into mindfulness according to its own standards, a phenomenologist must accept to undergo the “complete transformation” that ... goes along the practice of mindfulness. I even consider that a phenomenologist must not refrain from aspiring to the final step of the path, to such slippery « *peak experience* » (or « peak state ») that may well entail the suspension of any desire, including the urge to extract essences and to describe them. From a purely epistemological standpoint, this is a threat ; but from a broader existential standpoint, this is a risk that is worth being taken. The hybrid form of knowledge that may be lost in the process could well be compensated by an existential access to a more decidedly participatory form of knowledge. If we use a French lexical game that was proposed by Paul Claudel¹⁰, that served as an inspiration to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this corresponds to substituting “connaître” with “co-naître”, namely substituting “knowing” with “being-born-together-with”.

No wonder that an important precursor of the phenomenology of embodiment¹¹ who lived at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the French philosopher and psychologist Maine de Biran, was a forerunner of the idea and the therapeutic project of mindfulness. According to Michel Henry, French phenomenology arose as a crossbreed of Maine de Biran, Husserl and Heidegger. Most remarkably, it turns out that Maine de Biran was also a non-religious meditator before his time. Let me quote a text of Maine de Biran that foreshadows the program (if not the practice) of mindfulness :

“A kind of sensory refraction shows us the external nature, sometimes pleasant and graceful, sometimes as if covered with a funereal veil. It makes us see in the same things, in the same beings, sometimes objects of hope and love, sometimes reasons of

⁹ E. Husserl, *Philosophie première (2)*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1972, p. 9, 15

¹⁰ P. Claudel, *Art poétique*, Gallimard, 1984

¹¹ M. Henry, *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps (Essai sur l'ontologie biranienne)*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2014

mistrust and fear. The source of almost all the good or evil attached to the various moments of our life is thus hidden in our inner recesses. We carry this most true source of good and evil within ourselves, and yet we blame fate, we raise altars to blind fortune! It is not in the power of philosophy, of reason, or of virtue, to create by itself any of the happy moods which render the feeling of existence so sweet, nor to change the fatal dispositions which may make it unbearable. Whoever would have found such a precious secret, by acting on the very source of inner sensibility, ought to be regarded as the first benefactor of mankind, the dispenser of the sovereign good, wisdom, and virtue. That would be true at least if one could call virtuous someone who would always be good without effort, since he would always be calm and happy”¹².

Acting on the very source of inner sensibility, on the source of what Heidegger called the affective tonalities of experience, may have motivated Maine de Biran’s exquisitely detailed inquiry into his inner life. This is all the more likely since Maine de Biran started this inquiry just after he lost his beloved wife. He declared that undertaking “reflective” studies about his inner life was the only thing that could give him relief¹³. This is also made likely by a remark of him that pretty much sounds like a Western formulation of the two first noble truths of Buddhism: the remark according to which “the self is fluctuating, changing, and painful”¹⁴. What Maine de Biran suggests indirectly, here, is that just *realizing* the impermanent and painful aspects of one’s own life may be part of our therapeutic strategies. But this is precisely the claim of mindfulness! From this short study of Maine de Biran, we thus see that one of the sources of the phenomenological project of self-knowledge appears closely related to the therapeutic project of mindfulness.

This is an additional element in favor of the claim that a phenomenological approach to mindfulness implies no separation, no distance between a subject of phenomenology and a sort of inner object called “mindful states of consciousness”, but rather a dialectic in which what is studied turns out to be the origin and method of the discipline that is used to study it. What we can expect from this dialectic is both mutual clarification, and mutual enhancement of the strategies of self-transformation.

¹² Maine de Biran, *Mémoire sur les perceptions obscures*, Paris, 1807, p. 22

¹³ Ibid. p. III

¹⁴ B. Bégout, *Maine de Biran, la vie intérieure*, Payot, 1995

2. Epochè, reduction, mindfulness¹⁵

Broadly speaking, the *epochè* neutralizes the tension towards objects of perception or handling, whereas the phenomenological reduction takes advantage of this neutrality to bring out the tensed acts of consciousness. This distinction between *epochè* and reduction is not clear to all authors. Some of them even claim that the two terms are virtually synonymous¹⁶. They say that Husserl did not succeed in clarifying their distinction¹⁷, or at least that this distinction is not permanent in his work¹⁸. But other authors declare that there indeed exists a momentous difference between the *epochè* and the reduction: “A reduction is what I do *after* having *first* already *suspended* the natural attitude (*epochè*)”¹⁹.

This disagreement is -surprising since Husserl himself was much less ambiguous than some historians of phenomenology seem to believe. In his work, the terms “epochè” and “reduction” are often found together in the same sentence, but their roles and meanings are repeatedly distinguished. One of the earliest distinctions (in 1913) is made in §33 of *Ideen I*: “(The) operation (of *epochè*) will be divided into different steps of ‘putting out of action’, ‘parenthesizing’; and thus our method will assume the characteristic of a step-by-step reduction. For this reason we shall, on most occasions, speak of *phenomenological reductions*”²⁰. Here, the “putting out of action” of explicit and implicit beliefs occurs step by step; and each step of this *epochè* yields a particular “reduction”, namely a particular level of analysis for the reflective gaze of the phenomenologist. Indeed, Husserl insists in §32 of *Ideen I*, the phenomenologist must “limit the universality of the *epochè*”. The phenomenologist must avoid suspending every judgment whatsoever, for she still

¹⁵ This section is partly derived from: M. Bitbol, *La conscience a-t-elle une origine ?* Flammarion, 2014. See also: M. Bitbol, *Physique et philosophie de l'esprit*, Flammarion, 2000

¹⁶ M. Russell, *Guides for the perplexed: Husserl: A guide for the perplexed*, Continuum International Publishing, 2010

¹⁷ M. Perniola, « The expanded epochè », *Iris*, 3, 157-170, 2011

¹⁸ J.L. Butler, « Rediscovering Husserl: Perspectives on the Epochè and the Reductions », *The Qualitative Report*, 21, 2033-2043, 2016

¹⁹ J. Morley, “It’s always about the epochè”, *Les Collectifs du Cercle Interdisciplinaire de Recherches Phénoménologiques*, 1, 223-232, 2010

²⁰ E. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Meiner, 2009, §33

needs to exert judgments about a new “scientific domain” : the domain of transcendental consciousness, as revealed by a deep yet partial *epochè*.

This distinction between the *epochè* and the reduction(s) is permanent in Husserl’s work, as can be seen from his unpublished manuscripts of 1926-1935 about “phenomenological reduction”²¹. One reads e.g. : “I have to *reduce* ... the universal objective experience to its purely subjective being, and, to do so, suddenly and totally subject the objective world to the *epochè*”²². Here again, the *epochè* is what prepares and allows the reduction : suspend judgment about the objective world, and then reduce the experience of objects to its subjective background of intentional directedness. But for us, the most important point to notice is that, taken together, the *epochè* and reduction induce a “change of attitude that imposes a *transmutation* onto the previously given lived experience”²³.

The *epochè* represents the preliminary *un*-mutation that is needed for giving rise to such “*trans*-mutation”. It is well-known that Husserl borrowed the term and the concept of *epochè* from ancient skepticism (more than to Stoicism), where it means the suspension or bracketing of explicit judgments. An Indian origin of the concept of *epochè* is likely, since Pyrrho of Elis, the father of Greek skepticism, had traveled in India²⁴, and had been impressed by the brahmanic *sadhus*, the Jain community, and the Buddhist monastic *sangha*, whom he referred to indiscriminately as “gymnosophists”. In this case, *epochè* could be taken as a Greek translation of the Sanskrit term “*nirodha*”, namely cessation or restraint, which is abundantly used in the Buddhist and Yoga literature to express either the cessation of sufferance or the taming of mental processes²⁵. Husserl’s use of the term

²¹ E. Husserl, *De la réduction phénoménologique*, Jérôme Millon, 2007 ; *Zur phänomenologischen Reduktion, Texte aus dem Nachlass, 1926-1935, Husserliana, XXXIV*, Kluwer, 2002

²² E. Husserl, *De la réduction phénoménologique*, op. cit. p. 96

²³ E. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, op. cit. § 78

²⁴ E. Flintoff, “Pyrrho and India”, *Phronesis*, 25, 88-108, 1980 ; G. T. Halkias, “When the Greeks converted the Buddha : asymmetrical transfers of knowledge in Indo-Greek cultures”, in : P. Wick & V. Rabens, *Religions and Trade*, Leiden : Brill, 2014, pp. 65-116

²⁵ The quasi-equivalence between *epochè* and *nirodha* was beautifully advocated by James Morley during his talk at the conference “Phenomenology and Mindfulness” at Ramapo

epochè is sometimes closer to its Indian inspiration than to its classical Greek use. Indeed, the phenomenological acceptance of this word does not limit itself to the suspension of *discursive* judgments about the world and society. It aims at suspending the perceptive, pre-discursive spontaneous position of objects, and neutralizing the tacit “natural” belief in an objective world allegedly given *out there* from the outset. The phenomenological *epochè* thus digs the *strata* of knowledge below the level of its skeptical counterpart. Initially, it even suspends the urge to *know*, for the *epochè* is a (not so paradoxical) step towards a radically new project of knowledge (the knowledge of the realm of transcendental consciousness).

Unlike the most advanced practices of Buddhism, this phenomenological descent towards the bottom of experience is usually stopped before it yields a complete dissolution of the categorial matrix of ordinary life, and before it leads to a state of pure bewilderment in the face of the unfathomable *given*. This is the meaning of Husserl’s limitation of the “universality of the *epochè*”. The *phenomenological reduction* represents a voluntary limitation of the dissolving power of the *epochè*, in so far as it amounts (i) to stopping the dissolution at a certain level, and (ii) to reshaping this level in such a way that a reflective inquiry can be undertaken on it. In agreement with this reflective move, Husserl repeatedly described the process of phenomenological reduction in a dualistic style, thus feeding misunderstandings about the nature of phenomenology. According to Husserl, the phenomenological reduction implies a “splitting of the I” into an “underlying I” and a “reflecting I”²⁶. This so-called “reflecting I” can indeed be called a “transcendental spectator”²⁷ in so far as it has no empirical feature by itself. It is so little empirical, in fact, that it no longer carries the characteristic features of a human being. As a consequence, the phenomenological reduction is said to have freed the “I” from its anthropological coating²⁸.

At this point, it may still seem that the phenomenological reduction is akin to the psychological reduction, which extracts

College, 26-28 may 2017, where I read the present text. This convergence of views is remarkable.

²⁶ E. Husserl, *Philosophie première*, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

²⁷ E. Fink, *Sixième méditation cartésienne*, Jérôme Millon, 1994, p. 62

²⁸ E. Husserl, *De la réduction phénoménologique*, Jérôme Millon, 2007, p. 263

mental objects from the continuum of lived experience, and undertakes to study them. But this is not (and should not be) so. Unlike the psychological reduction, the phenomenological reduction has no circumscribed object. It is rather an invitation to open out attention to the entire field of pure experience, of which any object whatsoever (including a mental object) is the intentional correlate. Indeed, far from being “reductive”, the phenomenological reduction is a process of expansion of attention and concern, aimed at overcoming the short-sightedness of the “natural ontological attitude” of everyday life and scientific research. It expands attention and concern towards the periphery and background of the objects of attention and handling, so as to encompass the mental precondition of the extraction of objects out of the continuum of experience. As Husserl pointed out, the phenomenological attitude aims at “... encompassing *everything* that is conceivable and knowable”²⁹. It encompasses the lived conditions of possibility of knowledge and emotion, in addition to the *objects* of knowledge and *motives* of emotion. Thus, the phenomenologist is not (only) supposed to redirect her gaze from ordinary objects of perception towards “inner” objects, but rather to become “clear-sighted about *everything*”³⁰.

This being granted, the former splitting of the “I” acquires a new meaning, quite far from the suspicion of dualism which arose from the somehow clumsy expressions used by Husserl. Indeed, the two standpoints which were distinguished by him, namely the “underlying I” and the “reflecting I”, must not be considered as separate but as *simultaneous* and *coexistent* in a single flux of experience. This is made clear by Husserl himself in the following sentence: “In this splitting of the ‘I’, I am settled *both* as a merely seeing subject *and* as a subject gaining a pure knowledge of itself”³¹. To paraphrase the title of an article of Francisco Varela³², in the phenomenological reduction I am not One, since I can split reflectively, but I am not Two either, since the reflected and the reflecting are not separate.

²⁹ E. Husserl, *De la réduction phénoménologique*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

³⁰ E. Husserl, *Philosophie première*, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² F. Varela, “Not one, not two”, *The Coevolution Quarterly*, 12, 62-67, 1976.

Yet, a misleading metaphor is still creeping around, making it difficult to clarify the issue of reflectivity : the metaphor of *sight*, of gaze. It looks strange that one can be simultaneously *seeing* and *seen* in the act of doing so. And yet, this is exactly what Eugen Fink proposes to accept. But in order to make sense of his proposal, he completely redefines the task of the so-called “spectator” in such a way that the very metaphor of vision is made irrelevant. When one practices the *epochè*, Fink writes, one “... breaks the tendency of life which takes the world as an end”³³. Then, according to him, the reflective task of phenomenological reduction is not performed by reversing the direction of the investigation, and trying to explore new areas of the world (say inner areas). Strangely, the reflective task is allowed by the cessation, the *breaking* of intentional directedness. To support this unconventional claim, Fink establishes a distinction between two basic *attitudes*. One is the standard, “natural”, goal-oriented attitude, and the other is the non-directional, receptive, neutral, attitude of the *epochè*. It *looks like* the second attitude can be the preliminary step to a reduction, that implies the reflective gaze of a transcendental spectator on the doings of the “underlying I”. But, here again, this is only a metaphor, in which the second attitude is misleadingly pictured by using the resources of the first one. Indeed, the differences between the “natural” and the phenomenological attitudes do not bear on the aim of action and the focus of attention ; they bear on the fundamental alternative of focusing or defocusing, using attention or identifying it as such, rushing towards an aim or recognizing the rush.

The second terms of the disjunction, that characterize the basic phenomenological attitude of the *epochè*, are similar to the “letting go” of the practice of mindfulness. To further explore this kinship, let me consider Jon Kabat-Zinn’s classical definition of mindfulness :

“Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment”³⁴.

³³ E. Fink, *Sixième méditation cartésienne*, op. cit., p. 77

³⁴ J. Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future », *Clinical Psychology*, Volume 10(2), 144–156, 2003

Every word is significant, in this short sentence. First of all, attention. But a defocused attention that concerns the whole of experience. And an attention that is not directed towards each item of experience taken as a node of stability across becoming, but rather expanded to the unfolding of unstable experience as a whole, namely to the very dynamics of experience. If we combine this reference to the dynamics of experience with the insistence on the *present* moment (on a careful monitoring *moment after moment*), we could say that mindfulness is a form of expanded awareness of “the living present”. Besides, the combination of two characterizations of the new kind of attention, namely as concentrating on the present moment and staying nonjudgmental, captures a fundamental feature of the *epochè*: not only the suspension of elaborate judgements, but even before that, the suspension of the *semantic* function of both mental and verbal activities, that tends to expel us from our present.

Let me explain the latter statement. The semantic function of mental and verbal activities is their tendency to meaning ascription: a perceived profile means a thing, a phoneme means an object or a state of affairs. But what does “meaning” mean? Meaning is tantamount to displacing attention. It displaces attention from the sound of a word to what it signifies, from the pointed finger to what it aims at showing, from the act of thinking to the content of the thought. Meaning thereby pushes us outwards, towards the future, towards something that is *not* close at hand. Thus, by suspending any semantic function, both the *epochè* and mindfulness inactivate the usual rush of mental life towards the future, towards something else than what is flatly *here*. The *epochè* brings out intentionality instead of rushing towards the intentionally aimed at object. And mindfulness inhibits the tendency to react to thoughts and feelings “in an automatic, habitual pattern of activity”³⁵ that tends to establish a future state of affairs. Both prescriptions fit with a metaphorical recommendation of Zen Buddhism, that urges us to stop projecting our feet ahead of our body, and rather “throw light on what is immediately under our feet”³⁶. Both prescriptions are

³⁵ S.R. Bishop et al., “Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition”, *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 11, 230-241, 2004

³⁶ Nishitani Keiji, “Qu’est-ce que la religion ?”, *Théologiques*, 20, 215-270, 2012

tantamount to suspending any step forward, and rather “take the backward step that brings us back to ourselves”³⁷.

As a natural consequence, the epochè and mindfulness may trigger a feeling of *meaninglessness*. The *epochè* may trigger the kind of feeling that was described in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*, after a spontaneous, involuntary, *epochè* undergone by his hero, Roquentin : a feeling of being lost in an incomprehensible world. As for the practice of mindfulness, it may sometimes trigger a negative feeling, similar to the depressing one experienced by a few practioners of shamatha meditation who have gone astray³⁸. But this feeling of meaninglessness is still an intermediate stage on the path towards a complete suspension of judgment and meaning-ascription ; at the end of this process, even the possible feeling of meaninglessness is taken as it stands, namely as a mere feeling. Indeed, mindfulness means seeing what unfolds in experience not “... through the filter of our beliefs, assumptions and desires”, but “... as if for the first time, a quality that is often referred to as ‘the beginner’s mind’”³⁹. By contrast with this beginner’s mind, the feeling of meaninglessness is the byproduct of the application of a filter : the filter of our desire for meaning, the filter of our desire for future horizons, which turns out to be disappointed by the firm adhesion to the ongoing wave of present experience. A truly mindful stance is thus one of full *acceptance*, of axiological neutrality⁴⁰, that often gives rise to a meta-feeling. This meta-feeling can be characterized sometimes as an unmotivated joy, sometimes as a glare of freshness, sometimes as an impression of seeing the crucial issues of existence answered without words, and without even asking them.

3. Some differences between phenomenology and mindfulness

After these remarks about some analogies between mindfulness and the methodological premise of phenomenology, namely the *epochè*, it’s time to turn to differences.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ W. Britton, “The Dark Side of Meditation: an Empirical Research Study”, Preliminary Research presented at Mind Matters IV: The Darkness Within. University of Toronto.

³⁹ S.R. Bishop et al., “Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition”, loc. cit.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

First of all, a difference of emphasis on *method*. Buddhist practice and mindfulness as well are very rich in methodological prescriptions about how to go through each step of the path. By contrast, the phenomenological literature is very discreet about methodological issues.

The methods of mindfulness, and the methods for going through the Buddhist path of awakening are quite well-known. For mindfulness, the method is simple. It is described thus :

“The client maintains an upright sitting posture, either in a chair or cross-legged on the floor and attempts to maintain attention on a particular focus, most commonly the somatic sensations of his or her own breathing. Whenever attention wanders from the breath to inevitable thoughts and feelings that arise, the client will simply take notice of them and then let them go as attention is returned to the breath ... As sitting meditation is practiced, there is an emphasis on simply taking notice of whatever the mind happens to wander to and accepting each object without making judgments about it or elaborating on its implications, additional meanings, or need for action”⁴¹.

These prescriptions are very similar to those of the first steps of the Buddhist path as described by the sutras. Paying attention to one’s own breath is expressed thus : “Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out”. As for the broadening of attention, it is prescribed this way : “Breathing in, I know there is a pleasant or unpleasant feeling in me. Breathing out, I know there is a pleasant or unpleasant feeling in me ”⁴². The latter sentence shows that the bodily object of attention, such as breath, is by no means taken as an ultimate focus of interest by Buddhist meditators. Breath is both a “compass for attention”⁴³, namely a marker by contrast with which attention can easily detect its own deviations, and a method to disconcert the sense of pragmatic “interest”. The true import of this method of concentration is to provide attention with sufficient stability to open it to the whole dynamics of experience which is usually ignored in view of its excessive triviality, familiarity and proximity. It is, in other terms, to favor a state of *epochè*.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, Broadway Books, 1999, p. 70

⁴³ N. Depraz, F. Varela, & P. Vermersch, *On Becoming Aware*, John Benjamins, 2004

Now what about phenomenology? Is there a clear sense of methods leading to the phenomenological *epochè*? Is there a path that goes from the “natural” attitude to the phenomenological attitude ; and can this path be taught? Is there a straightforward motive that makes us renounce the “natural” attitude and adopt the phenomenological attitude instead? Husserl had many doubts about this latter point. Yet, he started with mentioning that there exists at least an indirect motive for renouncing the “natural” attitude. Indeed, he noticed, a research undertaken along the line of the “natural” attitude is bound to meet serious obstacles. One such obstacle is that, in the “natural” attitude, consciousness becomes a mystery instead of being taken as an absolute given. In the “natural” attitude, unsolvable conundrums, such as the “hard problem” of the physical origin of consciousness, arise because the whole hierarchy of knowledge has been turned upside down. Indeed, those scientists who adhere to naturalism claim they can reconstruct everything, including the *lifeworld* which is their starting point, out of their objective entities or mathematical idealities, that are their final outcome. They turn their foundation into a secondary by-product and their constructs into a foundation. They claim to be able, at least in the long run, to locate the origin of conscious experience in some appropriate law-like connection between experienced objects. But this project is (obviously) flawed, and it is then not surprising that the “hard problem” remains inscrutable.

To recapitulate, according to Husserl, the obstacles met by a research performed according to the “natural attitude” arise from the forgetfulness of its lived origin. These obstacles should then act as a strong incentive to change our attitude and to overcome the said forgetfulness of the lived ground of research. But until now, the obstacles to research have been compensated somehow by a further increase of the headlong flight which is typical of the “natural” attitude. As Husserl recognized gloomily, this is not really a surprise since the the natural attitude “... is a state of being led astray in the world, which is inevitable at the beginning”⁴⁴, and which can hardly be given up. In the “natural” attitude, we have no desire to remember the lived source of our inquiry. We have no desire to do that, for the simple reason that we have unlearned to desire anything other than *objects*.

⁴⁴ E. Husserl, *Philosophie première*, vol. II, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

Therefore, we (“natural” inquirers) tend to believe that the solution of every unsolved problem lies in the future of our research about *objects*. The more we meet obstacles connected with our overlooking the constitutive background of knowledge, the more we rush towards new results, thus hunting for a solution that takes us further and further away from acknowledging this background. Therefore, Eugen Fink concluded, there is no incentive whatsoever *inside* the “natural” attitude to abandon it and adopt the phenomenological attitude instead⁴⁵.

Along with his pessimistic evaluation of the inexorable logic of the “natural” attitude, Husserl considered that the acts of *epochè* and phenomenological reduction are so to speak “against nature”⁴⁶. Indeed, any effort of this kind willy-nilly fades away and is soon replaced by a standard version of psychological reflectivity. It then looks like Husserl had no clear idea of a precise method to perform the sought change of attitude once and for all. But I suspect the method is latent in his very remark that any attempt at practicing the *epochè* is bound to be corrupted by the “natural” attitude. Husserl’s method might well consist in *noticing* this corruption as soon as it occurs, and compensating for it immediately after. It would then be somehow similar with the well-known method of *vipasyana* meditation *and* mindfulness, in which one is asked, when a mental disturbance occurs, just to notice it and come back to moment after moment attention. This interpretation is supported by the cyclic and somehow repetitive style of Husserl’s writings, in which he comes back again and again to one and the same issue. In many texts, Husserl starts with a reflective act, he realizes that the theme of this act is taken as a new object of study, and he then urges himself to suspend the last remnant of naturalism in order to be faithful to his project of unveiling the transcendental background of any belief about nature. Husserl’s key remark is that “It is difficult, when one is a beginner in phenomenology, to master the various attitudes of consciousness”⁴⁷. Such mastery has to be learned, and according to Husserl, no better approach than trial and error is available to do so. Yet, the ideal of

⁴⁵ E. Fink, *Sixième Méditation cartésienne*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁴⁶ N. Depraz, *Lire Husserl en phénoménologie*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2008, p. 91.

⁴⁷ E. Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, *op. cit.*, §61

phenomenology goes well beyond this hesitating process. This ideal is to transform the *epochè* into a permanent mode of being. According to Husserl, “the ‘transcendental’ *epochè* should be construed as a habitual attitude, that we decided to adopt *once and for all*. It is therefore not a transient act whose very repetition would leave to its contingency and isolation”⁴⁸.

As I mentioned previously, Eugen Fink confirmed Husserl’s pessimistic conviction about the power of attraction of the “natural” attitude to a certain extent. But Fink also thought that the phenomenological attitude is all-pervasive and latently present. According to him, there is an in-principle possibility to step out from the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude, since the phenomenological attitude somehow contaminates the natural attitude as a crack or an imperfection in it. The natural attitude is impure, and in this impurity something new can occur. This was the solution proposed by Eugen Fink to the problem of the motivation for performing the *epochè*: in the margins of the “natural” attitude, he writes, a “prior phenomenological knowledge”⁴⁹ is latently available. Lived experience tends irresistibly to self-reveal from time to time, and it may then come to the fore as soon as a major inconsistency arises in the course of a life dominated by the “natural” attitude. Yet, Fink also agreed with Husserl that the phenomenological attitude is usually repressed as soon as it has come through, because it is diametrically opposite to the kind of striving towards objects we were educated to privilege for the sake of survival and adaptation to a social life⁵⁰. In order to give full rein to the phenomenological attitude, and to let it rise from latency to actuality, one may then have to wait for a trauma inflicted to our psychism. This possibility of a spontaneous onrise of the phenomenological attitude in exceptional situations reminds us of cases of spontaneous awakenings, with no help of the methods of meditation or mindfulness: what the French philosopher Michel Hulin called “the wild mystics”⁵¹.

⁴⁸ E. Husserl, *La crise des sciences européennes et la phénoménologie transcendantale*, Gallimard, 1976, p. 171

⁴⁹ E. Fink, *Sixième Méditation cartésienne*, *op. cit.*, p. 86

⁵⁰ E. Fink, *Sixième Méditation cartésienne*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁵¹ M. Hulin, *La mystique sauvage*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2014

One must however remain nuanced about the contrast we have established between the methodological seriousness of meditation or mindfulness, and the methodological opportunism of phenomenology. Indeed, it turns out that phenomenology is not completely unaware that favorable circumstances can be cultivated systematically. A method to this effect was (too) shortly described at the end of Heidegger's *What is metaphysics?*⁵². To sum up, it consists in a three-steps prescription :

- (i) "make room for being as a whole" (broaden attention so as to encompass the whole field of appearance) ;
- (ii) "let oneself go into nothing, that is become free of the idols which everyone has" (drop any pre-conceptualization of appearance) ;
- (iii) confront the *lived* counterpart of Leibniz' basic question⁵³, "Why is there something rather than nothing?"⁵⁴ (contemplate the lack of foundation of what there is).

The first step is very much in line with the most advanced practice of mindfulness, or with the procedure called "open presence" in Tibetan Buddhism ; the second step ensures that no preconceived category or even preliminary perceptive interpretation is superimposed onto the integral field of appearance ; and the third step may be understood as an incentive to merge the deepest question of metaphysics with one's own phenomenological form of life. This latter prescription fulfills Heidegger's self-referential understanding of metaphysics. Indeed, according to him "to ask any metaphysical question, the questioner as such must also be present in the question, that is, must be put in question"⁵⁵. But what was hardly mentioned in such philosophical context, as opposed to a Buddhist context, is

⁵² M. Heidegger, *What is metaphysics*, <http://wagner.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/psychology/files/2013/01/Heidegger-What-Is-Metaphysics-Translation-GROTH.pdf>; See M. Ritte, "La filosofia di Martin Heidegger" <www.asia.it/adon.pl?act=doc&doc=1168>

⁵³G. W. Leibniz, "The Principles of Nature and of Grace, Based on Reason", in *Leibniz Selections*, ed. Philip P. Wiener, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, p. 527.

⁵⁴ The complete text reads thus : "making room for being as a whole; next, letting oneself come to no-thing, that is, becoming free of the idols which everyone has and among [which] we are in the habit of losing our way; finally, letting this suspense range out into what it permanently swings round to in the basic question of metaphysics which no-thing itself forces on us: Why be-ing, after all, and not rather no-thing?"

⁵⁵ Ibid.

that these words and prescriptions only make sense in the midst of a sustained practice and discipline inspired by them.

Besides methods, there are other momentous differences between phenomenology and mindfulness. I will try to combine two of them into a coherent whole : the difference in motivation, and the difference in the directions of inquiry.

Clearly, the most widespread motivation of the practice of mindfulness in our societies is psychotherapeutic. The vocabulary of *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* and *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapies* unambiguously bears the mark of this motivation. Being a combination of cognitive therapy and Buddhist practice, mindfulness has inherited both the goal-oriented strategy of Western therapies, and the broader potential of the Buddhist path. From their Western side, mindfulness-based therapies have inherited the limited goal of alleviating suffering by fighting its symptoms and its bodily or psychical causes. Just as any other Western therapy, mindfulness-based therapies aim at healing patients while disregarding the main existential source of suffering. But what is this existential source of suffering ? According to Buddhism, it is the combination of self-grasping and impermanence. In other terms, the existential source of suffering is likely to be the fact that individual pleasure, joy, health, life, and material possessions are ephemeral ; that even the calm and equipoise generated by mindfulness are ephemeral. However, from their Buddhist side, mindfulness-based therapies have also inherited a potentiality to a much more radical cure : the potentiality to complete cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering, by uprooting this existential cause.

By contrast, the central motivation of phenomenology is likely to be *knowledge*. Husserl's expression of this motivation was very ambitious, since what he wanted to reach was nothing less than the absolute foundation of science. Other expressions of this motivation are less stringent, however, since they only aim at exploring the almost uncharted realm of lived experience beneath its practical targets.

Before I develop this twofold difference between mindfulness and phenomenology, however, I wish to nuance its importance. Actually, there are two standard ways of cross-fertilization between the therapeutic and the epistemic projects. Firstly, in Buddhism, the aim of existential liberation (*mokṣa*)⁵⁶ relies on a deep form of knowledge by acquaintance, called “*prajña*” in Sanskrit ; it has therefore been said that Buddhism is a form of *gnosis*, in which (as we have seen in section 1) soteriology and epistemology are narrowly combined. Secondly and conversely, the phenomenological form of knowledge is by no means devoid of existential and ethical import. According to Sartre, for instance, there is a deep connection between the rise of a phenomenological attitude and a triggering existential trauma. Indeed, he writes (thus specifying Fink’s remark), this kind of trauma is almost impossible to avoid in the course of a lucid life. Far from having to be restricted to a scholarly process, the doing of the *epochè* and the discovery of the phenomenological attitude are almost inescapable. To justify his claim, Sartre points out that “... the ‘natural’ attitude unfolds as an *effort* that consciousness makes in order to escape itself and project itself into an *ego* ...”⁵⁷. According to him, this effort to escape from oneself cannot be sustained for ever, and sudden collapses of its tension are then bound to occur. As a consequence, the *epochè* becomes “... a pure transcendental event and a permanently possible accident of everyday life”⁵⁸. If one does not want to be left in disarray as a result of this “transcendental accident”, the natural move is to turn it into a form of knowledge, which here would be the phenomenological knowledge.

This being said, the overtly epistemic project of phenomenology implies a momentous divergence with the strategy of mindfulness. To summarize this difference in terms that have already been used, I consider that whereas a practitioner of mindfulness tends to dwell in the state of *epochè* and to continuously amplify it, the phenomenologist stops at some point and exerts a form of *reduction*. This distinction between *epochè* and reduction was already mentioned in a husserlian context. But it was very much emphasized by Jan Patočka. According to him

⁵⁶ J. Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti’s philosophy*, op. cit. p. 21-22

⁵⁷ J.-P. Sartre, *La Transcendance de l’ego*, Vrin, 1965, p. 83-84.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

“the idea of the *epochè* is independent of the reduction to immanence”⁵⁹. The *epochè*, Patočka said, is tantamount to freeing appearance from anything that may appear. If the *epochè* becomes universal and radical (unlike Husserl’s prescription to limit the *epochè*), no thesis whatsoever, not even about the subjective life, is possible. “The extended *epochè* no longer gives access to some being or pre-being, whatever it is, worldly or not worldly. It allows one to have access, not to what appears, but to the appearing as such (...) We bring the appearing to appear”⁶⁰.

Instead, performing the reduction to immanence means picking out some specific aspects of appearance (like in the natural attitude), while disconnecting these specific aspects of appearance from transcendent-like meaning-ascription (unlike in the natural attitude). Now, picking out circumscribed aspects of appearance is consubstantial with any project of knowledge, at least in the standard, non-Buddhist, acceptation of the word “knowledge”. In particular, picking out immanent aspects of appearance is a precondition of the phenomenological project of knowledge and description. But in order to yield a kind of knowledge that can be communicated to oneself later, and to others, the reduction to immanence must take the specific form of an *eidetic reduction*. The eidetic reduction is performed when one has isolated in the flux of experience, not the invariable features of the objects of mental acts, but *the invariable features of the object-directed mental acts themselves*. This act of extracting stable “essences” from the immanent flux of mental activity is an indispensable premise of the task of phenomenological description. For any phenomenological description uses words, and the words used by someone (say the phenomenologist) can be understood correctly by someone else only if they point towards a stable intersubjective or intersituational feature.

But, as Jan Patočka and Renaud Barbaras strongly pointed out, doing this, namely stopping the *epochè* with a reduction, and looking for “essences”, is tantamount to inaugurating a new domain of objects ; not a domain of transcendent objects, it is true, but a domain of immanent objects. Indeed, to found a domain of immanent objects, one uses the same general principle

⁵⁹ J. Patočka, *Papiers phénoménologiques*, Jérôme Millon, 1995, p. 163

⁶⁰ J. Patočka, *Qu’est-ce que la phénoménologie ?*, Jérôme Millon, 2002, p. 224

as to found a domain of transcendent objects. This general principle can be stated in a few words : freezing the stream of experience at certain points. As José Ortega y Gasset wrote, “The *being* of something is *its ‘always’* projected in a consciousness that lasts only a moment”⁶¹. So, unlike the preparatory *epochè*, the strategy of the phenomenological reduction can be construed as a way to seek the stability of immanent features of experience, and to capture it beyond the transient flux of conscious experience. Conversely, if one wishes to let the appearance reveal itself rather than to describe it, if the existential project dominates over the standard epistemic project, then the right strategy to adopt is to avoid performing the immanent reduction at all, and to hold the *epochè* throughout; which means to suspend the quest for eidetic invariants and let becoming unfold. In other words, “The *epochè* brought to an end does not lead to some absolute being, but to an *a priori* that can in no way be considered as a being”⁶².

Husserl’s strategy in phenomenology thus disagrees twice with mindfulness: it disagrees with its practice, and it disagrees with its Buddhist existential root. It is in disagreement with the practice of mindfulness, because the latter means paying exquisite attention “to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” without trying to grasp and immobilize any salient feature in it. It is also in disagreement with the Buddhist existential root of mindfulness because the latter crucially depends on the realization that a central cause of suffering is the hopeless attempt to freeze impermanence for the benefit of our meta-stable egos.

This being said, I wish to qualify once again this opposition between mindfulness and phenomenology based on the difference between *epochè* and reduction, between letting go in the flow and capturing stable “essences” in it, between existential concerns and purely epistemic concerns. We have seen that knowledge, at least a certain type of advanced knowledge, is crucial to promote the Buddhist liberation. An important aspect of this liberating knowledge is to favor a clear reflective

⁶¹ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (Appendice), *Œuvres complètes I*, Klinksiek, 1988, p. 205

⁶² J. Patočka, *Qu’est-ce que la phénoménologie ?*, op. cit. p. 226

awareness of the mental processes by which we come to believe in intrinsically existing things and selves when there is nothing like them. In the practice of Buddhism, becoming aware is a silent and purely experiential event. But phenomenology can also contribute to the sought reflective awareness in its own way : namely in a verbal and intersubjectively communicable way. Isolating “essences” of appearance serves the purpose of universalizing the deep realization that the world of the “natural attitude” has no intrinsic existence, but only existence relative to an act of constitution. And it may thereby promote a form of collective release from the fascination of the “natural attitude”. This is the reason why I think phenomenology can and should become a central Western partner of the Buddhism.

4. What is left after the epochè ?

A correlative advantage of phenomenology is that it provides us with *words* to express what is lived through during the practice of mindfulness. Its strategy of reduction, namely its strategy of inhibiting the dissolving power of the *epochè* at a certain stage, is a precondition for the verbal expression of its outcome. Even when this condition is fulfilled, however, the task of recognition and verbal expression is by no means easy. According to Husserl, as soon as the *epochè* has been achieved, we are usually disoriented. “We are initially in a situation that resembles that of someone who was born blind, who has just undergone surgery, and who must now literally learn to see”⁶³. We are bound to grope around, and to make abundant use of half-deceptive analogies. This is probably why the descriptions of what is left after each step of the *epochè*, namely the experienced material of successive phenomenological “reductions”, can vary to a large extent from author to author, and sometimes in the successive writings of a single author.

To recapitulate, the *phenomenological reduction* can be seen as a pause in the process of performing a systematic *epochè* of explicit and implicit beliefs. This pause, when associated to a redirection of attention, discloses a new field of reflective inquiry. But since there are many ways to redirect attention, and

⁶³ E. Husserl, *Philosophie première*, vol. II, Presses Universitaires de France, 1972

many corresponding modalities of the phenomenological reduction, there is a variety of reflective fields of inquiry as well. Let me give a few examples.

Reduction to the lifeworld is tantamount to suspending belief in the objects of a given science, and redirecting attention towards the practices, methods, and instruments that support this belief; namely towards the lifeworld of ordinary practice and laboratory activity. This procedure was advocated by Husserl in his *Crisis of the European Science*, as a first step of the procedure we must follow in order to overcome our usual epistemic naivety. But from time to time (usually in the revolutionary phases of their discipline), even scientists may perform the lifeworld reduction as an indispensable tool to make a clean sweep of entrenched prejudice. A well-known case is Einstein's reduction of space and time in his special relativity theory. There, one suspends ordinary belief in space, time, and the "ether", *qua* absolute entities, and attention is redirected towards the acts of *measuring*: "It might appear possible to overcome all the difficulties attending the definition of 'time' by substituting 'the position of the small hand of my watch' for 'time'"⁶⁴.

Eidetic reduction, one of the pillars of phenomenology, consists in redirecting attention from individual occurrences and objects to their "essences". The "essences" of lived experiences are their invariant structure, in which one has eliminated what is contingent and incidental, and retained only what defines them as belonging to a certain class. The paradigm of that kind of reduction can be seen in mathematics, where one overlooks (say) the details of a geometrical figure drawn on paper or a blackboard, and only retains an invariant universal set of features.

Transcendental reduction is typical of Husserl's mature version of phenomenology, from 1906-1907 on⁶⁵. It was elaborated in explicit contrast with the empiricist's reduction of

⁶⁴ A. Einstein, "Zur Elektrodynamik bewegter Körper", *Annalen der Physik*, 17, 891-921, 1905

⁶⁵ J.F. Lavigne, *Husserl et la naissance de la phénoménologie, des Recherches logiques aux Ideen*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2004

things to a continuum of sensations, with the idealist's reduction to a monadologic realm, and with the psychological reduction to a set of mental *objects*. Instead, the transcendental reduction aimed at capturing "... myself as a *pure* ego, with my own life of *pure* consciousness, a life *in* which and *by* which the entire objective world exists for me"⁶⁶. Here, the crucial adjective is "pure". What does it mean? Husserl clearly borrowed it from Kant, who used extensively the expressions "pure intuition" and "pure understanding" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. "Pure intuition" and "pure understanding" are defined as *a priori* forms able to shape out the empirical material without having empirical content by themselves. In other terms, the sought "purification" consists in approaching a formal background that does not belong to nature but is the condition of possibility of beliefs and judgments about natural objects. It purports to disclose the domain of the tacit presuppositions of "natural existence", which is called a "transcendental domain"⁶⁷: a self-perceived activity of aiming at (nature) and projecting to operate (on nature). However, the threat of missing the transcendental, and falling back into the empirical-naturalistic realm, is acute and permanent. If one does not pay sufficient attention to the crucial adjective "pure", Husserl's vocabulary of *ego*, consciousness, mental formations, and lived experience generates an irresistible inclination towards the psychological meaning of such words. This psychologization is all the more tempting since the standard Husserlian image of a "transcendental spectator" is retained. For, then, the "show" that is under the gaze of the said "spectator" is likely to be made of (psychological) objects. The only transcendental background that is left, seems to be the point-like and blank "spectator" itself, whereas the field of consciousness is irresistibly treated as an extension of the natural domain. Therefore, the idea of transcendental consciousness can be fulfilled only if the spectator metaphor is mercilessly criticized, and replaced with the alternative metaphor of participators dwelling in the midst of their experienced realm. Indeed, *pure* consciousness (as opposed to empirical consciousness) cannot be construed as a "show", but as a medium or an atmosphere. As a consequence, one can approach pure consciousness not by

⁶⁶ E. Husserl, *Méditations cartésiennes*, Vrin, 1992, p. 46, § 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 47.

directing one's own gaze towards anything, but by becoming receptive to the said atmosphere.

This distinction between a show and an atmosphere is also essential for the interpretation of certain states of meditation and mindfulness that tend towards a “*vacant gaze*”, thus dissolving the very directedness of what is usually called a “gaze”. In such states, writes Alan Wallace, one realizes that “(an) autonomous thinker and observer inside the head is nowhere to be found (...) your thoughts are not occurring here in your head, nor are they occurring out there in space. (This is) the meaning of non-duality”⁶⁸. The non-dual origin of any further dualizing polarity and naturalistic view, to which Alan Wallace alludes to, is precisely what is called the transcendental domain in Husserl's phenomenology. This domain can only be known by acquaintance⁶⁹, not by a distantiated examination.

Embodiment reduction arises from Husserl's distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*, between the pre-reflectively lived own-body and the objectified body⁷⁰. It has been systematized by three generations of French phenomenologists, especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Henry, and Renaud Barbaras. The central fact that inspired this new brand of the phenomenological reduction is that, as soon as we are *thrown in this world*, what we find is neither an *outer world* nor a *closed sphere* of consciousness ; what we find is rather a double-sided dense medium which happens to be both seen and seeing, heard and hearing, felt and feeling etc. It is true that the seeing, hearing and feeling is situated and centered at a precise location. It is also true that the seen, the heard, and the felt extends everywhere else, radiating from the locus of the seeing, hearing and feeling. But this does not mean that there is a fundamental difference between the two sides, between the feeling and the felt, nor that they express some underlying duality. Advocating such a duality would be tantamount to falling into what one might call “Nietzsche's fallacy” : “mistaking a *perspective* of sight for a

⁶⁸ B.A. Wallace, *The Attention Revolution*, Wisdom Publications, 2006, p. 87

⁶⁹ B. Russell, “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 11, 108–128, 1911

⁷⁰ E. Husserl, *Idées directrices pour une phénoménologie et une philosophie phénoménologique pures II, Recherches phénoménologiques pour la constitution*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1982, p. 206

cause of sight, this is the master stroke by which the ‘subject’ was invented”⁷¹. The perspectival structure of sight does not mean that there is a localized substance (say the *res cogitans*) that is the cause of seeing, and that looks at another distant substance (say the *res extensa*). Instead, if one remains candidly receptive to the double-sidedness of the given, one is bound to accept that there is no discontinuity, no true ontological gap between the seeing-hearing-feeling and the seen-heard-felt. As Merleau-Ponty insisted⁷², as soon as one has performed a full *epochè*, it becomes obvious that the seeing arises from the midst of the seen. Sight breaks through the landscape ; it arises from a certain region of this landscape referred to as the *body*.

As long as it is circumscribed to the body, the medium of this double-sidedness is given a familiar name : it is called the *flesh*. The flesh is the place of the seeing-hearing-feeling, and it occupies a volume that can be seen-heard-felt. But since, after a thorough *epochè*, the very distinction between the body and the rest of the visible landscape is neutralized, since this landscape is then perceived as a continuum of mutually overlapping areas with no further differentiations left in it, the concept of flesh is likely to become boundless⁷³. Far from being a marginal fragment of an objective world, the flesh is the locus of the process of objectification by its characteristic inner split or “dehiscence” of the seen and the seeing. According to Merleau-Ponty, the world is to be described as a universal flesh. This being granted, the standard physiological distinction between inner and outer perception collapses. There is no exteriority with respect to the world-flesh, and we are therefore left with only *one* kind of sensitivity and perception that is coextensive to that flesh. This unique kind of sensitivity can be called, after Michel Henry⁷⁴, the “*self-affection*” of the flesh. The self-affection of the flesh then operates as the hidden condition of possibility of any “affection” whatsoever. It underpins every kind of sensitivity and perception, including the goal-oriented perception called “exteroception”. Here, the prefix “extero-” only expresses misleadingly the intentional directedness by which some

⁷¹ F. Nietzsche, *La Volonté de puissance*, Gallimard, 1995, § 548.

⁷² M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’Invisible*, Gallimard, 1964, p. 185.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 178

⁷⁴ M. Henry, *Incarnation*, Editions du Seuil, 2000, p. 173

episodes of self-affection are ascribed a practical *meaning*. But such practical meanings are suspended by the *epochè* and what is left in the reflective field of the “embodiment reduction” is nothing else and nothing more than undifferentiated self-affection, neither internal nor external. In a few words, one could say that, under this variety of the phenomenological reduction, *any exteroception merges with unbounded proprioception*.

Similar findings were described, here again, as arising from certain practices of meditation and mindfulness. Here, “the very distinction between external and internal is purely conventional, having no existence apart from words and thoughts”⁷⁵. Self-identifying with a certain body that happens to be the center of perspective fades away, phenomena become selfless, and a general entanglement of “feelings ... thoughts, emotions, and mental processes” occurs⁷⁶. When the overlay of past habits and present objectification of the body subsides, the differentiation of appearances into inner and outer dissolves.

Michel Henry’s concept of “self-affection of the flesh”, this radically intransitive way of appearing opposed to the transitive way of appearing of intentional objects, is then a good way to approach the experience of meditation. Yet, Michel Henry himself did not establish a connection between recovering contact with the intransitive appearance of a lived life and the practice of mindfulness or Buddhist meditation. He was rather interested in how the nature of *Christianity* could be clarified by what he called a “material phenomenology”, namely a phenomenology of the sensory matter, of the self-affective *hylè*, as opposed to formal phenomenologies of noematic structures. According to Michel Henry, the truth of Christianity is characterized by the fact it does not differ from what it makes true. “In the truth of Christianity, Henry writes, there is no separation between seeing and what is seen, between light and what it illuminates”⁷⁷. In the truth of Christianity, “what is revealed is revelation itself, a self-revelation in its original fulguration”⁷⁸. Then, unlike the objectivist description of life as a

⁷⁵ B. A. Wallace, *Meditations of a Buddhist Skeptic*, Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 141

⁷⁶ B. A. Wallace, *Minding Closely*, Snow Lion, 2011, p. 9

⁷⁷ M. Henry, *C’est moi la vérité*, Editions du Seuil, 1996, p. 36

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

cycle of molecular functions, christianity “interprets life as phenomenological in essence, as self-revelation and as truth”⁷⁹.

However, this characterization of the mode of being of an incarnate God as intransitive self-revelation, can easily be transposed to the mode of being of someone who practices meditation or mindfulness. In meditation, just as in Henry’s characterization of the incarnate God, “it is not a progress of consciousness that provides salvation” (or, rather, liberation), but a “return to the absolute life”⁸⁰. In both cases, the forward movement of intentionality, desire, and possession is suspended, and a backwards movement to where this movement starts, occurs instead. In both cases, no motion is needed at all, if not as a symbolic correction of the rush to objects. “How can one *reach* true life, when one is a natural human being lost in the world?” Michel Henry asked. “This is a misplaced question; we are always already in life”⁸¹. To Michel Henry, asking for a way to *reach* the intransitive process of self-affection of life is tantamount to ask “How do I get to where I am already?”. This clear statement of the impossibility to access the living process very much sounds like Zen teachings. It sounds like the Zen tale of a fish who was desperately swimming to reach the ocean where it was, or the standard Buddhist teaching according to which awakening does not have to be *obtained* since it is and has always been our native condition. “Every ‘path’, writes a commentator of Michel Henry, is a dream made by the still life”⁸².

Finally let’s consider the *ontological reduction*. This variety of phenomenological reduction was proposed by Martin Heidegger, as a radicalization or overturn of Husserl’s transcendental reduction. According to Heidegger, “... the phenomenological reduction amounts to bringing back the phenomenological gaze from the grabbing of the entity to the understanding of the Being of this entity”⁸³. The phenomenological reduction is then the fundamental act by which one realizes what Heidegger called the

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 71

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 193

⁸¹ M. Henry, *De la phénoménologie*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2003, p. 187

⁸² R. Vaschalde, *À l’orient de Michel Henry*, Orizons, 2014, p. 16

⁸³ M. Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, Vittorio Klostermann, 1975, p. 29

“ontological difference”⁸⁴ between entities (or beings) and their Being. But what do we call “Being” apart from *what there is*, namely apart from beings or entities ? And what does it mean, accordingly, to notice the ontological difference ?

These questions open up a field of perplexity, due to the huge amount of reflections which philosophy has accumulated on the issue of “being” in the course of its history. Even the two indo-european root verbs for “being”, namely BHÛ and AS in Sanskrit, generate puzzlement, as documented by Heidegger himself⁸⁵. BHÛ (the same root as the English verb “to be”) refers to growth, generative power, becoming, blossoming. In Greek, the former root gives rise to the verb *φύω, φύειν* (to grow, to generate), wherefrom the substantive *φύσις* (nature) and the English substantive “Physics” are derived. This stem root might be the inspiration of a dynamical conception in Plato’s *Sophist*, according to which being consists in a *power to act*. On the other hand, the verb BHÛ is cognate with *Bhu*, earth, which is at the same time the support of growth and the paradigm of stability, thus orienting attention towards permanence rather than change. This is even truer of the verbal root AS, similar to the Latin verb *Esse* and the English verbal form *Is*. AS gathers the meanings of “to live” and “to stay, to dwell”. Its connotations are then at least as much concerned with constancy as with becoming, and it may accordingly be the inspiration of Aristotle’s conception of being as eminently associated to the category of *substance*.

But when Heidegger equated the phenomenological reduction with the realization of *being*, did he mean anything like the realization of the generativity of things, or their (substance-like) stability ? It looks like he had a very different idea in mind : coming back to the Greek verb *φύειν*, he made a disputable connection with the verb *φαίνω* whose stem-root *φα-* means “to illuminate”, and wherefrom the substantive *φαινόμενον* (phenomenon) is derived. The teaching Heidegger drew from his linguistic analysis has already been stated: according to him “Appearing does not mean something derivative, which from time to time meets up with Being. *Being essentially unfolds as*

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 452 ; see G. Nicholson, “The ontological difference”, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 33, 357-374, 1996

⁸⁵ M. Heidegger, *Introduction à la métaphysique*, Gallimard, 1967, p. 80

appearing”⁸⁶. Notwithstanding its dubious etymological adequacy, this definition is perfectly adequate to the essence of phenomenology, whose task is to allow appearing to appear without restricting it to a *mere* appearance (of something hidden). The task of phenomenology is also to reveal the living process by which the very idea of frozen entities hidden behind appearances arises. This process includes: the sense of the opacity and limitation of what presently appears, the sense of a horizon of future completion by an unfolding of appearances, and the sense of partial or total unpredictability of this unfolding.

Realizing the ontological difference thus means letting appearing/being appear by relaxing the exclusive focus on what it is said to make appear (i.e. the alleged entity). Here, a problem of vocabulary arises, which can only be solved by a compromise. Using the word “being” in isolation would be misleading because it conveys an excessive sense of substantial durability borrowed from our aristotelian inheritance; conversely, using the verb “appearing” alone would also be misleading because it conveys the connotation of “just appearances”. It is only by imposing a connection between the two terms “being” and “appearing”, as in phenomenological ontology, that the right balance is achieved. The entanglement of being and appearing corrects both the eternalist acceptance of “being” and the fleeting connotation of “appearing”. The two spurious connotations then dissolve at once, in a way that was indicated by Parmenides himself: “(It) was not at one time, nor will (it) be, since (it) is now, all (of it) together, one, continuous”⁸⁷. “It” here refers to τὸ εἶναι, the being. Neither eternal (was and will be), nor fleeting, it is plainly now, *fully present*. This is exactly the temporal (or rather atemporal) characteristic that should be ascribed to appearing: it is not permanent, or lasting, since its content changes; it is not fleeting either since it is still there when its content has changed; it is just *present*.

This idea of a phenomenological ontology is probably closer to the horizon of contemplative inquiry than any other aspect of phenomenology. There are many witnesses of this proximity, from Dôgen to classical Tibetan Dzogchen masters. According to

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 109-110

⁸⁷ Parmenides, *Poem*, VIII, 5-6, in : P. Aubenque, *Etudes sur Parménide*, Vrin, 1987, p. 35

Dôgen's Zen vision, "This entire universe has nothing hidden behind phenomena"⁸⁸. As for Tibetan Dzogchen masters, they claim that "all apparent phenomena are not other than the ground of being, but are of one taste with that ground itself, like the reflections of all planets and stars in the ocean that are not other than the ocean but of one taste with the water itself"⁸⁹. These quotations are quite rich in content, but, from them, we retain that in both Zen and Dzogchen, appearances are identified with appearing, and appearing is identified with "the ground of being".

5. Ontological phenomenology or phenomenology of life? A question for mindfulness

Can we characterize the way in which appearing appears? Can we clarify further the conditions under which Being uniquely shines throughout the variety of things? In phenomenology, there might be two quite different strategies towards such realization: (i) generate an ultimate transcendence, or (ii) fully taste the immanence by dwelling in it. The first strategy was advocated by Heidegger, whereas the second one was promoted by the French lineage of Merleau-Ponty.

In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger criticizes the standard version of the metaphysical question "why is there an entity at all?". For, he argues, in this form, the question sounds like one is searching for some fundamental entity able to account for the existence of the manifest entities. Indeed, the question "why?" is itself predetermined by our unquestioned acceptance of the fact that some entity is there; and it can thus only mean (as in science) that we are looking for the necessary connection between two or more entities. Then, the full depth of the question is missed, and the only way for us to restore it consists in contrasting being with the *possibility* of non-being; it consists in contrasting entities with the *possibility* of there being none of them⁹⁰. But even this reference to our ability of thinking the mere possibility of non-being is insufficient. Firstly, according to Heidegger, the contrast between being and the possibility of non-

⁸⁸ Dôgen, *Shôbôgenzô 3* (trad. Y. Orimo), Sully, 2007, p. 38

⁸⁹ Dudjom Lingpa, *Buddhahood without Meditation*, Padma Publishing, 1994, p. 27-29

⁹⁰ M. Heidegger, *Introduction à la métaphysique*, op. cit. p. 40

being can have no basis in us, since *we* are also *manifest*, and therefore *we* are also encompassed within the field of what there is⁹¹. Secondly, for Heidegger, the virtual presence of nothingness is no intellectual abstraction; it rather blossoms in the very manifestation of the entity⁹². Indeed, manifesting is itself tantamount to glowing in contrast with the possibility of non-manifestation; at least when, and if, manifesting is accepted *as such* (suchness: *Tathatā*, in Sanskrit, *Nyoze* in Japanese) rather than through the filter of intellectual categorization.

Heidegger's nothingness thus looks akin to the Buddhist emptiness as interpreted by the French phenomenologist Henri Maldiney: it has the character of a "receptivity which does not anticipate the event it will have to collect"; and a receptivity which is still present in the actual manifestation of the event, in so far as "the appearing is the revelation of not-being"⁹³.

This reflection points towards what we can call "radical transcendence": not the transcendence of some entity with respect to another entity (say the transcendence of the moon with respect to human beings), but the transcendence of the entity in general with respect to the non-entity, namely the *self-transcendence of the entity*.

This Heideggerian conception was acknowledged, thoroughly commented, and criticized by the philosophical current that stems from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the flesh. One of the most detailed criticisms was formulated by Michel Henry, but with a overtly moral undertone. If abstracted from any differentiation between classes, Michel Henry writes, the being-appearing of entities is dreadfully *indifferent*. "In the same way as the light evoked by the scripture, the appearing of the world illuminates everything without caring about things or persons, in a terrifying neutrality"⁹⁴. The gate is then wide open to unbounded anxiety⁹⁵. But this is an existential diagnosis, not an objection; it might be the case that we have to cope with such indifference and that this is an inescapable component of our

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² M. Heidegger, *Introduction à la métaphysique*, op. cit. p. 41

⁹³ H. Maldiney, *L'art, l'éclair de l'être*, Editions du Cerf, 2012, Introduction

⁹⁴ M. Henry, *Incarnation*, Seuil, 2000, p. 60

⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 275

condition. A more convincing objection was adduced by other heirs of Merleau-Ponty. They reproach Heidegger of having pushed the model of objectivism to its uttermost limit, in so far as he has ascribed the entity as a whole the status of an ultimate transcendent item. True, that with respect to which the global entity is transcendent is neither an empirical human subject nor a transcendental *ego* (as in Husserl), but Heidegger's conception nevertheless remains under the regime of transcendence.

By contrast, the experience of immanence in the self-affection of the world-flesh delineates an alternative option: that of an ontology which *does not retain anything of objectivism*⁹⁶. Instead of a standard ontology, what is adumbrated by Merleau-Ponty and Henry is an "indirect ontology", an ontology of immersion, an "intra-ontology"⁹⁷. It is a discipline of *what it is like to be*, rather than a discipline of the contemplation, or self-revelation, of being. It purports to dwell into the experience of the self-splitting of the "flesh" by which appearing appears, rather than considering the byproduct of this split as fundamental.

The best contemplative testimonies remain ambiguous as to which one of these levels of phenomenal analysis should be taken as the highest achievement. When Dôgen declares that he does not write about enlightenment but rather enlightenment is writing through him, one is tempted to detect in this beautiful remark the sketch of an "intra-ontology" similar to Merleau-Ponty's. And when Dzogchen teachings say that "the essential nature of intrinsic awareness extends and pervades to the horizons of space, yet does not exist objectively"⁹⁸, one may be tempted to read a criticism of any remnant of objectivist-like transcendence. Other sentences from the same sources sound more ambiguous, however. Let's consider this one, from Dzogchen teachings once again: "emptiness does not constitute an inert void, but is subtly lucid, free of sullyng factors, like a polished mirror in which anything else can arise"⁹⁹.

The first part of the sentence evokes a sort of pervasive and contentless self-affection (the lack of inertia, the subtle lucidity),

⁹⁶ E. De Saint-Aubert, *Vers une ontologie indirecte : Sources et enjeux critiques de l'appel à l'ontologie chez Merleau-Ponty*, Vrin, 2006, p. 201

⁹⁷ R. Barbaras, *De l'être du phénomène*, Jérôme Millon, 1993

⁹⁸ Dudjom Lingpa, *Buddhahood without Meditation*, op. cit. p. 91

⁹⁹ Ibid.

which is in tune with Merleau-Ponty's and Henry's phenomenology of the flesh. Francisco Varela further emphasized the lived quality of *śūnyatā*, or emptiness, in his paper "Pour une phénoménologie de la *śūnyatā*" ("For a phenomenology of *śūnyatā*")¹⁰⁰. According to Varela, *śūnyatā* is no mere neutral receptor of affections ; it has an affective tone of its own ; it is experienced as a dimension of opening suffused by a feeling of healing and deliverance. This description conveys a typically intra-ontological expression of *śūnyatā*, similar to what is evoked by the first part of the former sentence from Dzogchen.

But the second part of the former sentence seems to tell a different tale. It compares *śūnyatā* with a mirror-like neutral medium that is ready to let anything arise, but remains unaffected by it. This metaphor of the mirror, applied to the empty mind, or to the emptiness that underpins the turmoil of mental activity, is widespread in Buddhist literature, including Ch'an and Zen writings¹⁰¹. It is meant to describe two features of the mind : (i) its neutrality with respect to any phenomenon it may reflect, and (ii) its capability to collect "dust" on its surface, thus clouding reflections. The neutrality is what must be rediscovered by careful, mindful, attention ; and the dust is what must be wiped out by stabilization of this attention. The neutral mirror-surface has something in common with the "dreadful" indifference of the Heideggerian light of being ; and the difference between the reflecting mirror and the reflections in it strongly resembles the ontological difference between Being and beings (or entities).

So, we are left with several different characterizations of the outcome of meditative experience. Which one should be favored? Which phenomenology is more appropriate to describe the outcome of meditative experience? Is it Husserl's phenomenology of transcendental consciousness, Heidegger's ontological phenomenology, or Henry's embodied phenomenology of the self-affecting flesh?

¹⁰⁰ F. Varela, "Pour une phénoménologie de la *śūnyatā* (I)", In : N. Depraz et J.-F. Marquet (dir.), *La Gnose, une question philosophique. Pour une phénoménologie de l'invisible*, Editions du Cerf, 2000; reprinted and commented in : F. Varela, *Le cercle créateur*, Editions du Seuil, 2017

¹⁰¹ S.W. Laycock, *Mind as Mirror and the Mirroring of Mind: Buddhist Reflections on Western Phenomenology*, SUNY press, 1994

Since Husserl's phenomenology has more often been compared with Brahmanic philosophies than with Buddhist meditation and mindfulness¹⁰², let me concentrate on the last two phenomenologies, namely Heidegger's ontological phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty's & Henry's embodied phenomenology. Which one of them is the most appropriate to take the deep epochè of mindfulness and Buddhist meditation into account?

Some may think that Merleau-Ponty's intra-ontology, which begins with a focus on the own-body, and extends the concept of flesh to the manifest world as a whole, has a limited scope. The suspicion is that Merleau-Ponty's intra-ontology expresses an incomplete *epochè*, since it apparently relies on the ordinary experience of embodiment and proprioception. Aren't there other (rare but not exceptional) types of experiences that, by weakening the link of embodiment, would make Heidegger's phenomenological ontology more plausible? Aren't there other situations that would create conditions where we can experience the transcendence, instead of immanence, of our own-body? In the latter cases, it would seem that the right framework for understanding these alternative situations is Heidegger's conception of an integral entity (including our body) that reveals itself under the neutral light of Being, namely under the neutral light of pure appearing. By contrast, it would seem that Merleau-Ponty's thesis of a world-flesh torn from within itself by a split enabling it to appear to itself, does not account for these alternative situations.

A few experiments indeed seem to support Heidegger's position:

- The phantom limb illusion¹⁰³;
- Our capacity to identify ourselves, partly or entirely, to manufactured objects (such as a rubber hand)¹⁰⁴;

¹⁰² E. Husserl, *The Paris Lectures*, Springer-Verlag, 1964, Introduction p. XLVI

¹⁰³ V.S. Ramachandran, *Phantoms in the Brain*, Fourth Estate, 1999., Vrin, 1990, p. 100

¹⁰⁴ M. Costantini & P. Haggard, "The rubber hand illusion : sensitivity and reference frame for body ownership", *Consciousness and Cognition*, 16, 229-240, 2007 ; C. Valenzuela Moguillansky, J.K. O'Regan, & C. Petitmengin, "Exploring the subjective experience of the 'rubber hand' illusion", *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 7, 659, 2013.

- The out-of-body experiences sometimes triggered by meditation, near-death states, epileptic seizure, or certain drugs like Ketamine¹⁰⁵.

Each one of these experiments seems to challenge the belief that experience is necessarily centered on our own body. They suggest that identifying to part or all of this body we normally call “ours” cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, the listed experiments seem to distort the spatial link between what we experience and our cenesthetic body, either by driving the said cenesthetic body to the background (in the illusion of the rubber hand), or by pushing it to the front of the attention field and making it a quasi-visual object (in the out-of-body experience). However, this interpretation remains highly questionable. Is the proprioceptive immanent experience *really* replaced by a quasi-transcendent experience of the own-body in these cases?

This question can now be addressed by putting it to the test bench. Two kinds of experiments have recently been used for this test. The first method is an artificial reproduction of the out-of-body experience by means of a “virtual reality” device that allows a subject to see her own body filmed by a camera behind her back¹⁰⁶. The second method consists in inviting subjects to practice sitting meditation, during which their sensory and motor activity is deliberately reduced, and then subjecting them to an interview about the alterations of their sense of spatial boundaries¹⁰⁷. These two tests lead to similar conclusions, and they both favor a positive valuation of Merleau-Ponty’s and Henry’s phenomenologies of embodiment.

Firstly, although a subject who undergoes artificial out-of-body experiences tends to shift her emotional reactions and proprioceptions away from her “real” body to her “virtual” body, these emotions and proprioceptions remain situated and centered; they remain situated even if their alleged center is in a place

¹⁰⁵ L.K. Wikins, T.A. Girard & J.A. Cheyne, “Ketamine as a primary predictor of out-of-body experiences associated with multiple substance use”, *Consciousness and Cognition*, 20, 943-950, 2011

¹⁰⁶ H.H. Ehrsson, “The experimental induction of out-of-body experiences”, *Science*, 317, 1048, 2007

¹⁰⁷ Y. Ataria, “Where do we end, and where does the world begin? The case of insight meditation”, *Philosophical Psychology*, Doi : 10.1080/09515089.2014.969801, 2014

objectively held to be “erroneous”. Embodied self-location persists after being shifted into a system of altered visual coordinates. Only the coordination between proprioception and vision is altered, whereas proprioception remains virtually unaffected.

Secondly, the verbal reports of practitioners of meditation lead to nuanced conclusions about the perception of the own-body in space. They do not impose, at any rate, the conclusion that certain meditative experiences yield a complete loss of the sense of embodiment. While it is true that many advanced meditators report an attenuation of the boundaries between their body and their environment, or a loss of the sense of ownership of this body, they retain a vague sense of incarnation, a dumb cenesthesia, which is still associated with the physical body¹⁰⁸. This persistent sense of situatedness and embodiment is sufficient to lend some credit to Merleau-Ponty’s intra-ontology, and to dissociate it from its objectified anchoring.

So, the case of the phenomenology of the flesh and life can still be defended in the light of these situations of apparent disembodiment that sometimes arise from a sustained practice of meditation. Even more convincing, to me, is the fact that the French lineage of the phenomenology of the flesh and life has unintentionally clarified in its own terms the two-way process of alienation and liberation which is central to the Buddhist path. Its phenomenological analysis of the deepest ground of our existential condition and alienation immediately lends itself to being translated into Buddhist terms, provided it is turned upside down.

Let me consider to that effect a remarkable reflection of Renaud Barbaras, in his book *Métaphysique du sentiment*¹⁰⁹. Renaud Barbaras is widely considered as one of the last heirs of the lineage of French phenomenologists that started with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Henry, although he has also been influenced by Jan Patočka. Barbaras’ first book is also probably his masterpiece. It is entitled *De l’être du phénomène*

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ R. Barbaras, *Métaphysique du sentiment*, Editions du Cerf, 2016

(English translation: *The being of the phenomenon*¹¹⁰), and it associates a crystal-clear commentary of Merleau-Ponty's *Visible and Invisible*, with a convincing completion of this unfinished work. Later on, Barbaras went even further, trying to implement and surpass the phenomenology of the flesh and life he inherited from his predecessors. He inquired into the very essence of a lived life, as opposed to a biological life. And he found that the essence of a lived life is made of *movement and desire*. This movement must not be mixed up with some objectified displacement of a phenomenon in space. Instead, it "makes appear that towards which it advances, and it illuminates its way while going through it"¹¹¹. As for the essential desire, it is more than a desire of something, for "obtaining its object does not alleviate it but revives it". In other terms, "What desire truly seeks reveals itself in its own lack"¹¹². Indeed, what desire truly seeks is a permanent *excess* with respect to the finitude of appearance, rather than filling its gap hastily and provisionally.

This diagnosis of our condition bears some analogy with the diagnosis of the Buddhist therapist. Firstly, "movement" is another name of the self-alienation generated by impermanence. For undergoing the incessant movement of the living means "not being what we are"¹¹³: as soon as we think we have grasped ourselves as a permanent self, we are no longer what we have allegedly grasped. Secondly, "desire" *qua* unquenchable thirst, precisely corresponds to the central links of the twelve-fold chain of dependent arising¹¹⁴, namely contact, feeling and especially *craving*.

But the analogy between Barbaras' phenomenology of lived life and the Buddhist description of the problem of existence can be pushed much further. According to Barbaras, the entire process of escaping from oneself through desire is precisely what generates the sense of being a subject facing a world in the

¹¹⁰ R. Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon : Merleau-Ponty's ontology*, Indiana University Press, 2004

¹¹¹ R. Barbaras, *Métaphysique du sentiment*, op. cit. p. 20

¹¹² Ibid. p. 22

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 18

¹¹⁴ The complete twelve-fold chain of dependent arising is contained in this list : 1. Ignorance ; 2. Mental formations/volitions ; 3. Consciousness ; 4. Name and Form ; 5. The six senses ; 6. Contact ; 7. Feelings ; 8. Craving ; 9. Clinging to ; 10. Generation of factors for rebirth ; 11. Birth ; 12. Sufferings and death

making. Indeed, desire as a lack, desire as an ongoing effort to fill the gap, is bound to project itself in the form of a transcendent world, namely a world that permanently exceeds its present appearance, a world that continuously promises something new to the permanent thirst. Conversely, writes Barbaras, “A world which tears off being from mere presence can be presented only to a mode of existence which tears the subject out of itself”¹¹⁵. In other terms, a transcendent world implies a self-transcendent subject. The world *qua* unceasing process and *qua* transcendence co-arises with a life equated with desire and craving.

Similarly, in the Buddhist twelve-fold chain of dependent arising, craving yields attachment to stabilized phenomena and these stabilized phenomena are then ascribed the name and form of (external) bodily entities. The ceaseless turmoil of *samsāra* arises thus.

But both the phenomenological and the Buddhist description of this process of enacting a worldly process by desire suggest (implicitly for phenomenology and explicitly for Buddhism) the means for its *reversal*: not necessarily suspending desire, but becoming *mindful* of it, and realizing thanks to this mindfulness the mechanism of generation of an apparent transcendence by craving. When craving is seen as such, and when the effort towards transcendence is realized as such, namely as immanence hollowed out by desire, they no longer arouse delusion.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 23