

Phenoneurology

On the true radicality of neurophenomenology

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Upshot: Claire Petitmengin’s strategy of dissolution of the “hard problem” of consciousness is shown to rely on some radical phenomenological premises that are listed and analyzed. It presupposes a starting point of research in a state of *epoché* (or suspension of judgment); it unfolds into a participatory conception of truth; and it ends in a quest for non-dual pristine experience. Each one of these moves is endorsed and amplified.

1. In this paper, Claire Petitmengin has packed a whole life of research and collaboration (including with myself, see Bitbol & Petitmengin 2017) into a single line of argument whose clarity and internal consistency are impressive.
2. She addresses a threefold challenge to the standard formulation of the mind-body problem (especially the “hard problem”, §29), to the standard appraisal of the (in)validity of introspective knowledge (§16), and more generally to standard representationalism in epistemology.
3. Being enthusiastic about, rather than scared by, such an overturn, my commentary will consist in intensifying Claire’s non-dualist construal of being and knowledge. This is made all the easier since her non-dualism is neither simply one theory of mind among others nor a nostalgic yearning for the lost wisdom. It is developed into a full-blown paradigm based on reproducible experiential facts, and on its ability to make sense of both scientific knowledge and its limitations.
4. My intensification will bear on three points: (i) further “deepening” neurophenomenology; (ii) recasting the concept of truth so that it

relies on bodily commitment rather than on objectifying detachment; (iii) tracking down the genesis of the dualist prejudice. In every case, I'll adopt a consistently phenomenological standpoint, namely one from which even neurobiological processes are construed as phenomena unfolding in coordinated experiences. From that standpoint, neurophenomenology would be more appropriately renamed as "phenoneurology".

Lived experience first and foremost

5. In the conclusion of his pioneering paper (Varela, 1996), Francisco Varela declared that the true "hardness" of the "hard problem" consists in changing the basic stance and direction of research of those who wrongly think that there is such a problem in the first place. As a matter of fact, the "hard problem" of the physical origin of phenomenal consciousness only arises under two assumptions that make sense within what Husserl (1913/2012) called the "natural" stance: (1) the world ultimately consists of physical elements, say particles and interactions (Searle, 1997); (2) there is a property of brains or living bodies called "phenomenal consciousness", whose origin needs to be accounted for in terms of this physicalist ontology. However, far from being an appropriate standard for addressing the issue of phenomenal consciousness, the "natural" stance systematically dodges the brunt of the problem.

6. The "natural" stance represents a self-imposed distortion of one's own field of experience for the sake of practical efficiency and bodily survival. According to Husserl (1893/1993), this distortion consists of a "*tense interest*" intentionally directed towards a few phenomena that can be organized in stable, reproducible and usable complexes referred to as "objects of our environment".

7. When such tense interest is consistently cultivated, and exclusively valued under the name of "objectivity", the embodied experience wherein it originates is overlooked or lost from sight. The only way to restore this experiential source in thought and discourse is then either to objectify it in turn (as in *substance dualism*) or to identify it with some natural object or property (as in *physicalist monism*).

8. But in both doctrinal extremes (dualism and physicalism), this kind of restoration in objective terms amounts to epistemological betrayal. No tribute is paid to the exceptional status of lived experience, which is the presence of everything without itself being a thing

present, an atmosphere without being an object, a realm that is inhabited without being perceived, an appearance that is all the more real since it cannot be objectified.

9. By hyperfocusing attention on the objects, the very ability to recognize what surrounds and preconditions these targets is thus lost. And what the “hard problem” is truly about (the phenomenal consciousness whose origin is sought) thereby becomes misconstrued or forgotten.

10. Consequently, the problem dissolves as soon as one relaxes the tense interest directed towards objects (including brains and neurons) and realizes that it originates in phenomenal consciousness.

11. True, dissolving the “hard problem” instead of solving it, is a strategy that can also be pursued in physicalist terms. Some physicalist researchers (Hardcastle, 1996) consider that, to overcome the “hard problem”, we should just learn to *see* neurobiological knowledge *as* an explanation of consciousness. *Identifying* consciousness with a recursive neural process (Lamme, 2006) is a natural move in that direction.

12. But such physicalist denial of the “hard problem” relies on a restrictive epistemological argument. Phenomenal consciousness, which allegedly cries out for explanation, is here found to be “outside the scope of science”; only cognitive functions are considered as proper objects of scientific research (Cohen & Dennett, 2011). This amounts to ratifying the blindspot of objective knowledge, instead of overcoming it by coming back upstream of it as phenomenology does.

13. Varela’s deep neurophenomenological dissolution of the “hard problem” is diametrically opposed to the narrowing strategy outlined above. Instead, it aims at widening the field of attention and making room for the whole span of human attitudes (Bitbol, 2012; Vörös, 2014; Bitbol & Antonova, 2016). It advocates the adoption of the attitude of phenomenological reflection both as a starting point and an end point of the inquiry (§23). And, in the meantime, it consists in a phenomenologically informed practical knowledge that articulates the two basic attitudes and directions of research (objectifying and reflective) without ontologizing one at the expense of the other. In view of this all-pervasive role of phenomenology in Varela’s discipline, the name “phenoneurology” better captures its initial motivation than “neurophenomenology”.

14. This paves the way towards a purely phenomenological approach of the neuro-experiential correlation. To start with, Merleau-Ponty (1942) pointed out that the strong isomorphism between contents of experience and neural processes is itself a fact of experience. After all, neural processes only manifest as focused “logical meanings” of the experience of neuroscientists; they are one among the many focal targets of tense interest that living and sentient neuroscientists aim at. Therefore, they cannot be taken as a basis of the *reality* of experience, and the neuro-experiential isomorphism cannot be accounted for in purely neuroscientific terms. However, experience and brain, perception and perceived body semantically converge towards a two-pronged third term that Merleau-Ponty (1964) called “the flesh”. The flesh is defined accordingly as what is both seen and seeing, touched and touching, felt and feeling, yet cannot be reduced either to a thing seen or a pure seeing subject.

15. The flesh is also what is both acted upon and acting. It then seems absurd to study this two-faced integrated process as if one could stand outside of it, adopting the role of a neutral undisturbed eye. Instead, one should be prepared (i) to amplify one’s concepts of science and nature to make room for the flesh, (ii) to be changed by the act of studying it (say, by practicing the phenomenological *epoché*), and (iii) to find in one’s own experience the living testimony of its non-duality. Phenoneurology is precisely that: not some unattainable scientific explanation of the neuro-experiential correlation, but a dynamics of redefinition of science under the pressure of this correlation, and a dynamics of expansion of oneself beyond a purely scientific mode of self-understanding.

Truth from within

16. The celebrated slogan of phenomenology, “back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1901), can be best understood as “back to experience”. But then, what can we do next? How can we integrate this recovered experience into a process of knowledge acquisition?

17. The common temptation is to construe such an epistemic process involving a self-aware experience on the model of objective knowledge, namely as knowledge *of* experience. The hope is that descriptions are faithful to what is lived through in experience, and that verbal reports *correspond* to the reported experience. However, as Claire noticed (§16), the possibility of verifying such correspondence is out of reach not only for other subjects, but also for the subject

herself, because her report is unavoidably posterior to her reported experience.

18. Reenacting the reported experience and bringing it to the present is a standard procedure in microphenomenological research; but, admittedly, reenaction is an experience in its own right, an experience which is embedded in the very process of reporting. What should be sought, then, is a performative coherence within this process rather than an elusive correspondence with something that does not belong to it (Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2013, 2015).

19. In *performative coherence*, the word “performative” is central. Here, knowledge is unambiguously seen as an action that cannot be subtracted from its outcome. Thus, instead of being flatly *about* experience, verbal reports have the ability of changing our relation with experience by providing us with an improved leverage on it.

20. A good example is Claire’s challenge to Nisbett & Wilson’s well-known anti-introspectionist thesis (Petitmengin et al., 2013). Nisbett & Wilson’s protocol consists in asking subjects to choose quickly between two items, and later presenting them the wrong item while asking to explain *why* they chose *this one*. The upshot is that most subjects do not detect they were duped, and give fancy explanations for what they feel was their genuine decision. According to Nisbett & Wilson, this justifies a strong diffidence towards introspection. Now, in Claire’s study, just before the wrong item is presented to them, the subjects are asked to verbalize *how* they made their choice. In this case (unlike in the original experiment), most subjects detect that they were being duped. Of course, this remarkable success is not sufficient to prove that the verbal reports of subjects strictly *correspond* to their original experience of choosing an item. But what it demonstrates is arguably more important. It shows that striving towards knowledge and description of experience stabilizes it and improves the familiarity of subjects with it. Although experiencing is (*pace* Dennett) not reducible to reporting, reporting is strongly intertwined with experiencing. Here, no one can ignore that knowledge is inseparable from the act of knowing.

21. Does this participatory conception of knowledge lead us to something that can be called *truth*? More so than in any other case! From a phenomenological standpoint, a proposition is true if an exemplification of its predicate is *presented* in experience. Now, if a particular truth is dependent on its manifestation, then “the fact of

manifesting ... is the very essence of truth” (Henry, 1996). A form of knowledge such as microphenomenology that promotes strong self-awareness and increased familiarity with one’s own experience, may well lack warrant as to whether reports strictly “correspond” to originally experienced items; it may then lack a grip on the narrowest conception of truth; but it brings those who practice it in close contact with the very source (or “essence”) of truth. Any particular truth presupposes this universal truth because, to be justified, it requires a minimum of acquaintance with the experience that makes it evident.

22. Is it then appropriate to say that we can *describe* experience with language? In agreement with the Husserlian tradition, Claire endorses the idea that verbal reports obtained by a microphenomenological interview are indeed “descriptions” of the experience of some subject (§16). But according to the standard use of the word, description evokes depiction, and depiction is evaluated on the grounds of the accuracy of its correspondence to some object. Doesn’t this contradict the former criticism of the correspondence theory of truth in the case of microphenomenological knowledge? Not necessarily, if one follows the main point of the criticism closely. In this case, one should avoid using words such as “description” and “correspondence” in a *locutionary* speech act purporting to depict some epistemic process. But nothing prevents one to use the same words in a *perlocutionary* speech act during (say) a microphenomenological interview, for the sake of encouraging the subject to reenact her experience and make sure she is satisfied with the fairness of her report. This performative use of words like “description” makes sense even if we accept that the only criteria of validity of a report are what Claire calls “objective traces” of authentic contact with one’s own experience during the verbalization (§16), and self-assessment of “micro-acts to which the subject has a present access” (§28).

23. If, in line with Husserl’s phenomenology, we are not interested primarily in reports about particular experiences but rather in their eidetic invariants, the word “description” still retains some of its relevance. Indeed, the phenomenological report offered by a philosopher can still be called “descriptive” not because it depicts faithfully all the qualities of a class of experiences, but to the extent that readers recognize in it a type of experience they had, or they could have. More generally, as Michel Henry (1996) declared, a phenomenological text does not give us the direct access to truth; instead, it is only if someone already knows this truth that she can recognize it by reading the text.

Non-duality

24. At the root of Claire's "deep" neurophenomenological dissolution of the "hard problem", there is a replacement of (i) a correlation between pre-given subjective and objective domains with (ii) an inquiry into the "process of co-constitution" of these domains (§22). This view was also stated most clearly (yet from a purely theoretical standpoint) by the Neo-Kantian philosopher Paul Natorp (1912) who declared that the subject-object duality is an ephemeral byproduct of a symmetrical process of subjectivation and objectivation. But Claire goes beyond mere speculation about the primacy of a pre-objective and pre-subjective realm; in support of her view she adduces a careful microphenomenological inquiry into the moments of vanishing of the subject-object boundary, and the re-emergence of this boundary (§32). It turns out that the succession of vanishing and re-emergence of a subject-object duality is by no means exceptional. In fact, it occurs over and over again in our everyday lives, and we just need to be attentive to perceive it; the phenomenological *epoché* and the systematical redirection of attention in the context of the microphenomenological interview both favor such awareness.

25. In some cases, however, the process of co-constitution of subject and object is, so to speak, frozen for a few seconds, and its unfolding can then be observed easily. These are cases of extreme surprise, which are often compared to a clap of thunder in a calm sky (Bitbol, 2017). At the beginning, we are just startled; we are dumbfounded by the pure experience of an unclassified novelty. This sudden experience is undifferentiated, stunning, and omnipresent; it feels like a percussion. It is so massive that we don't even make a distinction between what is happening to us and what happens in the world; we are in a non-dual state that does not allow the use of personal pronouns such as "we". But then, things settle and the noise recedes in the past. We become aware of this new situation, we analyze it, and try to classify it. *This* was a loud clap of thunder and *I* heard it. In other words, we start reflecting on the initial experience. We ascribe it to an entity of the world (the thunder) and, since we can posit ourselves in front of it, we are no longer drowned in it. We have become self-aware subjects of our experience.

26. This little narrative of an extreme surprise also clarifies the workings of the co-constitution of subject and object. This co-constitution is inextricably connected with time. The primordial unity unfolds in an all-pervasive present; but the detachment of an object

from this lived unity is tantamount to letting a fraction of it slip in the past. We can summarize these remarks by saying that “time” is a name given to the process of self-externalization by which the duality between the inner life and the outer world arises (Henry, 1996).

27. This being granted, it looks just absurd to seek the origin of the pure non-dual experience in some residue of it left in the past (such as neurobiological objects). The “hard problem” is thus seen as the name of an archetypal misunderstanding.

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