On life beneath the subject/object duality

Michel Bitbol[a] & Claire Petitmengin [a,b]

[a] CNRS, Paris, France
[b] Télécom et Management SudParis, Institut Télécom, Paris, France

Pierre Steiner (hereafter PS) asks us a precise question in his reply to our article "The validity of first-person descriptions as authenticity and coherence", published in the special issue of JCS *10 years of Viewing from Within, the Legacy of Francisco Varela*. He wonders whether we might endorse a pragmatist conception of experience that does *not* characterize it as "subjective" in opposition to an "objective" domain. Our answer is threefold :

(1)   We strongly sympathize with the non-dualist view of experience that is carefully developed and advocated in PS's paper. After all, the work of one of us (CP) has brought out the possibility of complete loss (or at least increased "permeability") of the archetypal inner/outer boundary, at the deepest level of pre-reflective experience (Petitmengin, 2007). The availability of this type of experience strongly suggests that the subject/object divide is a secondary byproduct of mental activity, rather than a primary *given*. In addition, the epistemological position (named "transcendental pragmatism") of another one of us (MB) implies a systematic inquiry into how the various aspects of subject/object duality are elaborated by way of stabilization of certain norms of research practice, rather than pre-existent (Bitbol et al. 2009). Accordingly, we also agree with PS that Francisco Varela's slogan ("There is life beyond the objective/subjective duality") deserves careful analysis and true implementation in consciousness studies.

(2)   In spite of this, most of our writings bear the mark of the subject/object divide in their lexicon. We keep on speaking of *inner* gestures, *subjective* experience, or even *private* access to experienced contents. We then have to explain why and how this still makes sense (in a game of standard

oppositions and archetypal debates), despite the conviction we share with PS that the subject/object duality lacks credentials from both a phenomenological and an epistemological standpoint.

(3)   We however part company with PS when he attempts to merge the criticisms of the subject/object duality formulated by pragmatism and phenomenology. True, these criticisms are *isomorphic*, and they both point towards a neutral realm out of which the two poles of the duality may arise. However, they completely diverge as to the nature of this neutral realm. Pragmatism tends to objectify it (in apparent contradiction with its own aim), whereas phenomenology arises from an experiential procedure (called *epochè*) which consists in stepping back from any belief in the existence of a domain of objects, and disclosing reflectively the very fabric of this belief in *intentional directedness*.

Let us then begin with stating our full agreement with several formulations of PS, which pertain to what might be called a *methodological neutral monism*. A shortened version of one of his formulations is especially representative : "Lived experience is neither subjective nor objective but merely *in situ*". Situatedness and finiteness are two features of lived experience out of which the subject/object duality cristallizes, but nothing in it can be said *a priori* to fall under the categories of subjectivity or objectivity.

Situatedness is recognized by way of comparison of two or more experiences that can be unified only if it is accepted that they afford two or more standpoints and angles of action on *something* constant. As soon as this procedure of unification between successive phases of experience is carried out, the standard dichotomy between appearance and reality is ready to arise. An appearance is what shows up from a certain standpoint (from a certain situation) ; whereas reality is defined as the constant something that has been posited as a common focus for a manifold of experiences, and more generally as the set of constant somethings that can be constantly classified by means of concepts. In history, the rise of a systematic understanding of situatedness,

2

standpoints, and subjectivity is likely to date back to the well-known debate between Protagoras and Socrates about relativism. Not surprisingly, it occurred shortly after the discovery of the concept of a real nature by the various schools of ionian "*physiologoi*" (Schrödinger 1954, 51).

Besides, finiteness is the realization that not everything can be mastered by situated activity ; something imposes itself and resists interventions ; something moreover permanently exceeds whatever has already been apprehended of it. The stubborn resistance and excess being naturally ascribed to the invariant of various situated standpoints, this invariant has now been endowed with a crucial feature that justifies more than ever granting it the status of "real object". Such kind of epistemic development that goes from drawing the consequences of finiteness to positing real objects, has been described by many authors of the philosophical and psychological tradition, especially Kant, Husserl, and Piaget, not to mention PS's central author (John Dewey). What is very interesting in it is that it offers a sort of common genealogy of subject and object. Here, far from being taken for autonomous entities, subject and object are seen as coarising terms within a unique process. This process has two correlative aspects, that are conveniently referred to as subjectifying and objectifying. Objectifying is a quest for (or tension towards) unity and constancy beyond the fleeting character of experiences, whereas subjectifying is an attempt at reflecting on what is left when this quest has been achieved. What is left can be particular contents beyond universal structures, immediacy beyond mediated constitution of objects, variety of what is lived beyond the unity of the objectified world, and also a mode of ordering experiences that is so to speak orthogonal to the law-like mode of the objective realm : the biographical or historical ordering. This being accepted, we also understand why subjectivity so often has a pejorative connotation. As Paul Natorp (a neo-kantian philosopher of the beginning of the twentieth century) cogently noticed, in their process of mutual delineation, "subjectivity is the negative reverse of objectivity" (Natorp 1912/2007, 93) ; it is the byproduct of a *subtraction* of invariants from lived experience. The main thrust of experience is forwards, in the direction of objectification, and

subjectivity is what remains unattended (but all-pervasive) backwards.

This is one reason why, as PS rightly assumes, we reject every single presupposition of the objectivist account of introspection. Introspection notoriously fails when it is construed this way. Introspecting (if this word is still appropriate in our alternative epistemological context) should not amount to departing once again from the immediacy of experience and striving towards one more of its elaborated stable extracts (a supposedly inner object), but rather relaxing any objectifying tension and undoing its conceptual outcomes in such a way that nothing of experience remains "backwards". If properly carried out, "introspecting" should first give us renewed contact with the dense and still undifferenciated continuum of experience from which the subject/objet polarity is ready to reemerge at any moment. After this contact has been recovered, and verbal reports that fully express such intimaty with/in experience have been collected, it is time for researchers to start another objectifying procedure, and elaborate a new type of invariant drawn from this material.

Yet, any variety of neutral monism stumbles on a major difficulty which apparently bears on vocabulary but might reveal a deeper epistemological problem. The difficulty is in finding a proper denomination for the neutral domain out of which dualities are supposed to arise. In fact, virtually all such denominations are themselves caught into the dualistic polarity they purport to avoid. Some names given to the neutral domain lean towards the subject-pole, and other names lean towards the object-pole (or more generally the world-pole) ; even after names that look noncommittal had been proposed, critical remarks about their dualistic flavor were soon formulated.

Let us start with Husserl. His method of *phenomenological reduction* was designed to avoid any commitment in intentional directedness, and thereby give access to a neutral field in which any region of knowledge, be it natural or psychological, is rooted. One outcome of this method or attitude was a renewed characterization of reality as a non-object, simultaneously proto-subjective and proto-objective. However, when this neutral field

had to be named, Husserl felt bound to use the word "consciousness". "*Pure*" or "*transcendental*" consciousness, not to be mixed up with psychological consciousness, but *consciousness* at any rate. What Husserl (1952, 141) indeed considered as the true realm of "'absolute' Being" was "transcendental consciousness" : the very transcendental consciousness that is revealed by the operation of reduction, upstream of the constituted empirical objects and empirical subjects.

All the same, the word "consciousness" is both too specific and too narrow. It is too specific because *in our standard system of oppositions*, it irresistibly suggests, by its familiar connotations, kinship with the subject-pole of the dualistic divide. It is also too narrow, because it somehow implies reflective awareness which has no reason of being necessarily associated to the sought neutral domain. Accordingly, the phenomenological tradition has struggled continuously against the alleged "subjectivist" or "idealist" undertones of its founder. When he looked for a proper denomination of the point of balance Heidegger used the word *Dasein*, which conveys the crucial idea of situatedness, but which, when characterized as a particular sort of being (*seiende*) and articulated with all the dimension of human existence, looks remarkably close (notwithstanding Heidegger's nuanced denial) to the world-pole of the archetypal duality. No wonder Husserl accused Heidegger of "anthropologism" at the same time he was himself accused of idealism. Later authors, especially the French phenomenologists Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Henry, and Renaud Barbaras, then proposed to use a carefully selected neutral term to qualify the neutral realm that they were all looking for. Merleau-Ponty used "flesh", whereas Henry and Barbaras adopted "life". Undoubtedly, these words have the remarkable feature of being intrinsically bipolar. My flesh is *experienced* as mine, as feeling, as enjoying or suffering ; and at the same time the flesh of an animal can be treated as an object and sold. Life is what I "live through" in the first person, and at the same time it is the property of certain objects of nature, studied by biology. The problem is that the very bipolarity that makes these terms good candidates for referring to the pre-polar neutral realm, also justifies the reproach of crypto-dualism against the authors who use them. Moreover, the

fact that these terms may refer to substances or things (according to one of their meaning-components) invites the criticism of metaphysical hypostasizing. Barbaras thus criticized Merleau-Ponty, accusing his concept of *flesh* of aggregating idealism and naturalism rather than overcoming it. And he also suspected that using it was a step towards reifing methodological monism into ontological monism (Barbaras 2008, 81).

Philosophers outside the phenomenological lineage were not immune of this difficulty. Neutral monists of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century agreed to avoid "consciousness" as the central term, because they considered that consciousness is necessarily associated with reflectivity, whereas there may be experience without reflectivity (Russell 1921, 288). But they diverged as to which term should be used instead. Ernst Mach had proposed "sensations" and then retreated to "elements" to avoid any "subjectivist" connotation. William James (1976, 21) had some sound reasons to prefer "pure experience". And Russell (1921, 25-26) adopted the prudent expression "neutral stuff" before he reverted to Mach's *sensations*. Here again, we see some words (sensations, experience) inclining towards the subject-pole of the dualistic divide, whereas other terms (stuff) evoke a reified conception of the neutral domain.

The pragmatist conception of the neutral domain advocated by PS does not avoid this pitfall. According to PS's delineation of Dewey's view of experience, "… experience is all that we *do*". What can we gather from such definition ?

Firstly that, here as in many areas of phenomenology, an intrinsically bipolar term has been priviledged. "Action" (or the verb to do) is indeed double-faced, just as "flesh" or "life" are. It denotes a behavior decided and experienced *by* somebody yet exerted *on* something.

Secondly, and more importantly, that although the domain of experience is supposed to be "beyond the inner/outer separation", it appears to be characterized by way of a crypto-*objective* description. PS posits the *interaction between an organism and an environment* as the source of experience, thus making experience (at least initially, see below) secondary to what is experienced. As

6

for Dewey, quoted by PS, he defines experience as a "close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing". This kind of abstract attempt at circumscribing the meaning of "experience", by deriving it from a natural process instead of taking experience as a radical departure point of interest for nature, triggers the suspicion that the neutral domain is here located on the *object/world*-pole of the dualistic divide. An activity of exploration is interfacial between the organism that pratices it and its environment (or rather its *umwelt,* in Von Uexküll's sense) ; but the whole chain organism-gestures-environment is likely to be treated as a natural object among others.

After having expounded his definition of experience by the organism-environment interaction (point 1 below), PS realizes this, and he tries to compensate for the bias by adding feedback (point 2 below) :

(1) "Experience denotes all that is actively and concretely involved in some interaction between an organism and its environment" [derivation of experience from performance] ;

(2) "…these two relata (organism and environment) being functionally individuated from the primary level of experience !". [derivation of the two-term analysis of performance from experience].

To recapitulate PS's thought process, experience arises from the organism/environment interaction, but the organism/environment distinction arises from discriminative experience. This clearly shows that no pragmatist definition of experience *taken in isolation* can be said to overcome the all-pervasive oscillation of the quest for a neutral realm between the two poles of the standard dualist divide. As long as it is not complemented by phenomenology, pragmatism can at most afford a naturalized fake of the resorption of subject-nature dualities in a neutral domain. Instead of providing us with a truly neutral starting point, pragmatism restricts our attention to an objectified projection of it.

This arduousness in capturing the neutral basis of the subject-object duality is easily explained. In fact, there is no neutral domain to be captured in the absolute. Neutral domains are

identified in the course of the manifold polarization between subjects and objects, just as, conversely, types of subjects and types of objects can be said to arise from a corresponding type of neutral domain. The neutral domain "action" thus co-arises with the polarization actor/target ; the neutral domain "life" co-arises with the polarization lived experience /living organism ; the neutral domain "pure experience" co-arises with the polarization experiencer/experienced ; etc. This lack of a "substantial" definition of the neutral domain, and the correlative necessity to consider its "functional" development instead, is certainly not averse to the spirit of pragmatism. But ackowledging it brings us closer to Wittgenstein's stance than to Dewey's, in so far as we no longer theorize *about* action as a concept, but rather try to show how immersion *in* action moulds our concepts.

This alternative stance gives us renewed freedom in the vocabulary we use. If our aim were to refer to a intrinsically existent neutral domain, we should indeed be extremely careful about the choice of adjectives that qualify experience. "Subjective", "private" and "inner" should be banned, and other virtually non-commital adjectives such as "pure" or "lived" should be used instead. Even the term "experience" could be questioned and replaced (say) with "pour-soi (for-itself)" or "in-der-welt-sein (being-in-the-world)", to borrow from Sartre and Heidegger. But, in our methodological articles about first-person methodologies, our project was very different. It was not so much to theorize about a neutral (pre-objective and pre-subjective) field as to describe ways one can access it in practice. A certain type of gestures must be performed to that effect, and since these gestures are obviously neither public nor external, the most economical way to help readers to reenact them was to rely on pre-philosophical language and call them "private" and "inner".

Such apparently careless use of language can be given further philosophical justifications by simple considerations on two ways of using (and thereby ascribing meaning to) the adjective "subjective". The word "subjective" can in fact be used either as a restriction or as an amplification with respect to the so-called "natural attitude" (an objectifying attitude focused on third-person descriptions). The restrictive use of "subjective" occurs in

8

sentences such as "this esthetical judgment is only subjective". Here, the word "subjective" indicates that the judgment is not valid for anybody, but rather restricted to one or several particular subjects. But there is also an amplifying use of "subjective", inaugurated by Kant (1781/1999) in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant indeed referred to space and time as "subjective" *forms of intuition* that are nevertheless a condition of possibility of any experience *of objects*. By doing so, Kant was far from pointing towards a restrictive status of space and time ; he was rather trying to expand our field of attention from focused interest for certain objects to defocused interest for the *universal* condition of possibility of objectification. Whereas in its familiar use "subjective" means "only a parochial view on objects", in Kant's use "subjective" means "the background condition for anything like an objective world to make sense". *Less* than objects in one case, but *not only* objects in the second case. In the same way, "private" can mean either "only accessible to some empirical subject", or "not-publicly but *universally* accessible by performing a certain operation (such as the phenomenological *epochè*)" ; here again the adjective "private" can either restrict or broaden. In our own use of the adjectives "subjective", "private", "inner", we think that the second type of acceptation (expansion of the attention field) was usually favored ; but the restrictive acceptation was also retained when we concretely referred to the description afforded by our subjects during the explicitation interviews.

References

Barbaras, R. (2008), *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie,* Paris: Vrin

Bitbol, M., Kerszberg, P., & Petitot J. (eds.), (2009), *Constituting Objectivity: Transcendental Perspectives on Modern Physics,* Berlin : Springer

Husserl, E. (1952), *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Drittes Buch: Die Phänomenologie und die Fundamente der Wissenschaften,* Husserliana V, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff

James, W. (1976), *Essays in Radical Empiricism,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Kant, I. (1781), *Critique of Pure Reason*, Edited by Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood, in: H. Allison, R. Brandt, P. Guyer, R. Meerbote, C. D. Parsons, H. Robinson, J. B. Schneewind, A. W. Wood (eds.), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Natorp P. (1912/2007), *Allgemeine Psychologie nach kritischer Methode,* French translation : *Psychologie générale selon la méthode critique,* Paris : Vrin

Petitmengin, C. (2007), ''Towards the source of thoughts: The gestural and transmodal dimension of lived experience'', *Journal of Consciousness Studies,* 14, 54-82

Russell, B. (1921), *The Analysis of Mind,* London: George Allen &Unwin

Schrödinger, E. (1954), *Nature and the Greeks*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press