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On Pure Reflection

A Reply to Dan Zahavi

In his reply to our article 'The validity of first-person descriptions as authenticity and coherence' (Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009), published in the special issue of JCS *10 years of Viewing from Within: the Legacy of Francisco Varela*, Dan Zahavi (2011, hereafter DZ) formulates interesting objections to our line of arguments on three crucial points: the definition of 'reflection' and 'reflective consciousness', the role of language in reports of first-person experience, and the canonical difference between phenomenology and introspection. We will address these issues in turn, yet concentrating on the first two points since the last objection is more specifically aimed at Pierre Vermersch's contribution 'Describing the practice of introspection'.

An important premise concerns the *negative* use of the term 'reflection' (non-reflective, pre-reflective). We fully agree with DZ about his delineation of prereflective experience: prereflective experience is unnoticed, but not unconscious. When we wrote that 'we are *unaware* of our (lived) experience', we only meant the following: in the process of experiencing, our attention is so narrowly focused, so quick in changing its focus from one relevant object to another, that it simply leaves aside a large amount of the overall experienced content (which is nevertheless retained in a form of 'passive memory', as opposed to the active memory of attended episodes). This *unattended* rather than unconscious status accounts for the relatively easy retrospective accessibility of the prereflective material of experience during the explicitation interviews (Vermersch, 1999), and it explains the feeling expressed by many interviewees of merely *realizing* the richness of

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what they had lived through. However, this remark about the adjective 'prereflective' has important consequences for our understanding of what reflection *is*. Reflection does not amount to perceiving consciously some unconscious event taken as an object (unlike Freud in his *Papers on Metapsychology*), but rather renewing contact with experience and defocusing/refocusing our attention. In other terms, DZ's cogent remarks about the meaning of 'prereflective' reinforces rather than challenges our immanent understanding of reflection. Conversely, his remarks tend to weaken rather than strenghen a transcendent understanding of reflection, in which the reflecting and the reflected are thought of as facing each other, thus rehearsing the subject-object divide within the field of experience.

But this is only a hint of what follows. To proceed, we must investigate further the issue of reflection by addressing three important concerns expressed by DZ: (i) are there other types of reflection beyond the one that fits our immanent characterization (close contact with experience and defocused unfolding of it), (ii) does this latter type of reflection in which there is no 'self-fission' between a reflecting and a reflected subject *really* exist, and (iii) if this kind of immanent reflection indeed exists, does it afford us *knowledge* (and, by the way does it deserve the name 'reflection')?

To start with, DZ is perfectly right when he notices that there is a mental operation by which we distantiate ourselves from our own judgments and actions, in such a way that we become able to critical assessment; and that this clearly departs from mere immanent immersion in experience and expanding the attentional field. Self-distantiation is indeed a condition for self-consciousness and self-criticism, which is the basis of moral life. But what exactly is the nature of this operation of self-distantiation? The fact that the adjective 'self-conscious' is used in this context instead of 'self-aware' is not innocent, and might be the best clue we have to disclose it. In standard English, 'self-consciousness' implies an excess of objective self-examination, a complete lack of coincidence of oneself with oneself, so much so that this imposes clumsiness on action and loss of confidence. Full distantiation from oneself yields not so much self-revelation as *alienation* in the most straightforward generally accepted sense: becoming an alien for oneself, judging oneself as if one were somebody else (or adopting the position and conceptions of somebody else). And this kind of alienation, in turn, is deeply connected to the social basis of morals: in order to judge myself I must have internalized the commonly accepted criteria and values that apply to anybody's deeds. Borrowing an expression from Paul Ricoeur (1990), distantiating

self-examination presupposes treating 'oneself as another'. In the preface of the book that bears this title, Ricoeur then insists on distinguishing two varieties of reflection, corresponding to the two classes of reflexive pronouns: the reflexive pronouns with objective or subjective grammatical function respectively. 'Myself' is a reflexive pronoun with objective function (used in the third person), whereas 'I' is a reflexive pronoun with subjective function (used in the first person). This becomes obvious in the proposition: 'I am criticizing myself'. With this distinction in mind, reflection can concern either (a) experience as it is lived in the first person, or (b) acts, thoughts and intentions as they are evaluated in the third person (irrespective of whether they concern oneself or another). To sum up, one species of reflection concerns the experience that *I* live, and the other species concerns *my*/*his* mental habits or behaviour. The self-distantiating type of reflection referred to by DZ is likely to belong to the second category, and looks therefore irrelevant to the project of exploration of one's own experience that we sketch in our article.

In his distinction between 'pure' and 'impure' reflection (which is evoked by DZ, and which we will discuss later on), Sartre develops this kind of distinction at length. Pure reflection is such that 'the reflecting *is* the reflected in full immanence'; in it, the reflecting can*not* be said to adopt a *point of view* on some distantiated object (Sartre, 1943, p. 194). Instead, impure reflection tends to the 'unveiling of the *object* that I am'; impure reflection is a (vain) effort 'to be *another* yet remaining oneself' (Sartre, 1943, p. 201). Here again, a distinction is made between first-person and third-person-like reflection, between reflective awareness of what I am living, and self-evaluation of myself. The problem is that in this case, the connection between the two types of reflection becomes quite elusive. We have captured both of them with a unique word ('reflection'), but this lexical convention might well express a mere Wittgensteinean 'family resemblance' rather than a true concept. 'Impure' (third-person) reflection fully deserves the mirror-like connotations of the verb 'to reflect', because it consists in seeing oneself with the help of a certain instrument or procedure as if one were adopting an external standpoint. On the contrary, the nature of 'pure' reflection remains incompletely decided at this stage of the discussion. There might still be room for a remnant of duality of reflecting and reflected in it; yet, as we will see, such duality raises serious doubts. In view of these doubts, is it reasonable to call it 'reflection' (as DZ rightly wonders), thus automatically triggering spurious images of light travelling from

oneself as an object to a mirror and back to the (mind's) eye? Shouldn't we invent a new word?

It might be too hasty and too destabilizing to change our vocabulary at this point. Let us then stick, for the time being, to the tradition by using expressions such as Sartre's 'pure reflection' (or 'phenomeno-logical reflection' as suggested by DZ); and let us see what has come out of the vast inquiry launched by Husserl's lineage on this central theme. Even more than the explicit conclusions drawn by these authors, what will prove instructive are the internal tensions of their thoughts, and the difficult compromises that yield such conclusions. Starting with Husserl, we find, in full agreement with DZ, that his clearest characterization of phenomenological reflection (a type of reflection in which the reflecting self suspends its 'natural beliefs') involves *self-fission* between a reflected self and a reflecting self; and that in this self-fission I become 'spectator of myself' (Husserl, 1959, pp. 92, 96). But Husserl's position on this issue of inner dualism is much more nuanced than what this paragraph and similar ones in other texts (Husserl, 2002, pp. 10–11) seem to indicate when taken in isolation. A few pages after he has made such a sharp statement about the duality of reflecting and reflected selves, Husserl adds an impor-tant qualification. It is not true, he writes, that, while reflecting on an act of perception, I become blind to the perceived object. In fact, dur-ing reflection '*I remain clearsighted for everything*' (Husserl, 1959, p. 111). While reflecting, my field of attention has broadened to the point where I can encompass both the object and the intentional directedness towards it, the first order and the higher-order conscious act. During the so-called self-fission, Husserl goes on, I am '*at the same time*' (not alternately) a perceiving subject and a self-knowing subject. Self-fission thus does not mean real separation, but increase of 'clearsightedness', ability of circulating across various aspects of experience, enhanced sensitivity to the 'sides' or margins of experi-ence (Husserl, 2002, p. 11). Self-fission is a process rather than a state; it is a functional dualization within a unique flux of experience rather than a duality. The spurious connotations of the metaphor of fis-sion must then be defused after it has served its purpose. This is done by Husserl in other texts, especially in *Ideen I*. There, Husserl first declares that any *cogitatio* can become the object of an 'inner percep-tion' and thereby of a reflective evaluation (Husserl, 1952, p. 67). But later on he undertakes a careful distinction between the usual version of reflection that concerns 'a fragment of nature' (taken as an *object*), and phenomenological reflection that opens up the *entire field* of 'pure consciousness' (Husserl, 1952, p. 95). In the latter case, the

dualist metaphor is soon attenuated, and what replaces it sounds remarkably different. In a central section of his master work, Husserl thus explains that reflection is a 'modification of consciousness', a '*transmutation of lived experience as a whole*' rather than a mere layer in a stratified series of partial experiences (Husserl, 1952, p. 148). We therefore agree with Natalie Depraz (2008, p. 103) that these internal tensions in Husserl's characterization of phenomenological reflection are preparing 'a radical questioning of the model of reflectivity in favor of the receptive observing openness of the subject to the given'. This radical move is illustrated e.g. by Merleau-Ponty (1960, p. 22), who notices that the proper attitude of a philosopher who practices his discipline in the spirit of phenomenology (or Bergsonian intuition) '… is not a head-on relation between the spectator and the show; it is rather like complicity, like an oblique and clandestine relation'.

   We may now wonder about the reason for this persistant use of the image of split, fission, or inner duality of reflection, despite so much discomfort and so many deviations of the phenomenological discourse with respect to it. Analysing some tensions of Sartre's concepts of reflection may help us to sort out the situation. To begin with, reflection arises from a very basic proto-reflective feature of consciousness. The crucial feature is that 'any positional consciousness of an object is simultaneously non-positional consciousness of itself' (Sartre, 1943, p. 19). Proto-reflectivity is *not* yet reflection *stricto sensu,* since 'non-positionality' means that the primary consciousness of an object is *not* in turn taken as a higher-order object. But it makes reflection possible, by exhibiting a domain of experience that could be objectified later. With such preliminary remarks in mind, it is tempting to anticipate that, by contrast with proto-reflection, any type of reflection should *by definition* involve subject-object duality. But Sartre's text does not exactly fulfill this expectation. When he develops his concept of 'pure reflection', we find him struggling between two antinomic characterizations.

   On the one hand 'pure reflection' is overtly said *not* to be tantamount to Spinoza's *idea ideae,* idea of an idea, new act of consciousness pointed towards the original act of consciousness.[1] For, if it were the case, one would lose the very motivation of the phenomenological method, which aims at coinciding so tightly and 'intuitively' with its domain of investigation that *certainty* can be reached. About a truly external object apprehended by way of its aspects or 'adumbrations',

[1]   'If a man knows anything, he, by that very fact, knows that he knows it' (Spinoza, 1985, II, p. 21, note).

doubt is always a possibility; but about *that for which* there are objects in the first place, and about *that with which* the reflecting consciousness coincides, there can be certainty. One must then accept '…that reflection is united to the reflected by a link of *Being*; that reflecting consciousness *is* reflected consciousness' (Sartre, 1943, p. 191). This statement of virtual identity is repeated many times by Sartre. The reflecting, he insists, is *not truly different* from the reflected; for the reflected is nothing else than what the reflecting *has to be*. Accordingly, the apprehension of the reflected by the reflecting is not progressive but rather immediate; it is a 'fulgurant and flat intuition' in which 'everything is given simultaneously in a sort of absolute proximity' (Sartre, 1943, p. 195). This description clearly resonates with the metaphor of decrease of distance, close contact, recovery of our own integrity, that we used when recovered awareness of pre-reflective experience was at stake.

On the other hand, Sartre thinks he has a good reason to correct his initial statement of immediacy and coincidence. Whereas the claim of apodicticity requires ontological identity of the reflecting and the reflected, the claim of *knowledge* requires that 'the reflected be an *object* for the reflection, which implies a separation of being'. To be certain is to coincide, but to know is to apprehend something different: an object. The paradoxical consequence of this twofold condition is that 'the reflecting must be *and* not be the reflected' (Sartre, 1943, p. 191). But how is this possible? In order to dispel this (apparent or real) contradiction, Sartre summons up the resources of his own ontology, especially the distinction between 'in-itself' and 'for-itself'. Whereas the in-itsef (a thing) is self-identical, substantial and passive, the for-itself (a conscious being) is divided from itself, or rather from what it *purports to be*, by a sort of gap of constantly renewed unaccomplisment. The characteristic of a being which is *present* to itself is to be 'not exactly itself'. For consciousness, to be is 'to exist at a distance of itself as *presence to itself*; and this null distance that being incorporates in its own being is *nothingness*' (Sartre, 1943, p. 116). The apparent or real contradiction that singularizes the for-itself (distance with respect to itself but *null* distance), is quite similar to what we described about pure reflection. In fact, according to Sartre, this similarity is by no means surprising because (pure) reflection is inherent to the mode of being of the for-itself (Sartre, 1943, p. 194). It has only to be realized that reflection is a special instance of the spontaneous operation of the for-itself: an intermediary between '… the mere existence of the pure for-itself and existence for another' (ibid.). In other terms, we could say that Sartre's pure reflection is an

intermediary between pre-reflective consciousness and 'impure' reflection, or reflection of oneself as another.

In this discussion, we have reached a maximum of tension in lexicon and representations. The standard dualist image of knowledge is simultaneously asserted and denied. The reflecting is and is not the reflected, there is distance between them but this distance is null, there is no object of pure reflection but only a 'quasi-object', pure reflection needs separation but 'fission is only realized in existence for another' (Sartre, 1943, p. 194) etc. Is the epistemological motivation of this tension incontrovertible? We have seen that Sartre assumes that '… if (reflection) is to be *knowledge*, the reflected must be object for the reflecting', for 'to know is to become *other*' (Sartre, 1943, pp. 191, 195). It is for this precise reason that he does not content himself with statements of identity, immediacy, or proximity. Even in this archetypal case of intermingling between the subject and object of inquiry, some sort of separation *must* be imposed in order to get knowledge. But a twofold doubt arises at this point.

Firstly, does Sartre really need to impose his traditional epistemological norm on pure reflection? After all, Sartre accepts that the elementary experience of reflection is *not* cognition but *re*cognition; he also declares (as noticed by DZ) that we *learn* nothing from pure reflection (Sartre, 1943, p. 195). There might be no knowledge gained by the mere act of pure reflection, after all.

Secondly, is this common epistemological statement rehearsed by Sartre incontrovertibly valid? Is it true that there is no possible knowledge without an immediate split between subject and object in the very act of production of a phenomenon? This latter question seems to be answered in the positive by DZ, when he suggests in his reply that a *scientific* exploration of consciousness must rely on a self-distancing form of reflection; and even more explicitly when he asks 'If no *knowledge* whatsoever is acquired (by pure reflection), what would be the cognitive value of the process?'. But we rather incline to think, on the basis of an alternative epistemological position, that knowledge can indeed be acquired this way, and this may explain our disagreement with DZ.

In fact, the debate between knowledge as intimacy and knowledge as separation is age-old. A long tradition, that can be traced (at least) back to the *Renaissance*, considers that knowledge requires close participation of the knower to the nature of the known. Goethe carried on this tradition in the wake of the romantic philosophy of nature, by developing a theory of lived and experienced color, as opposed to Newton's theory of objectified light (Zajonc, 1995). Later on, Henri

Bergson developed his entire philosophy as a reaction of 'intuitive' knowledge against the monopole of the analytical thought typical of physics. And Paul Claudel (1984) provided this idea with a poetical expression by displaying a phonetic kinship between the French word for 'knowing' ('connaître') and the French expression for 'being born together with' ('co-naître'). Against this entrenched belief, many reactions were formulated in the name of the scientific method, or in the name of a quest of alterity (as opposed to all-pervasive identity). Reacting to Bergson's dream of immediacy, Moritz Schlick (1932/2003) thus insisted that knowledge of something requires comparison with something else and therefore detachment from that thing. Having a thing, or *being* that thing, is a premise (or a foundation) of knowledge, but is by no means knowledge itself. Emmanuel Levinas concluded a similar criticism with a sharp sentence that was supposed to close the debate: 'Without separation, there would not have been *Truth* but only *Being*' (Levinas, 2003, p. 54).

However, a closer examination of this issue shows that the standard divide between participatory and detached knowledge is too sharp to be faithful to several crucial areas of science. One of these crucial areas is quantum mechanics, which may have very important lessons in store for 'pure reflection' of experience, and which narrowly combines the participative and objectifying steps of knowledge. Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 38) himself recognized the epistemological interest of quantum mechanics when he mentioned that, in this branch of modern physics, the original assumption of a detached spectator is undermined by the development of science itself; and that this reminds us the broader lesson according to which the subjective/objective divide, far from being a fact of the world, is precariously extracted from 'total experience'. A central feature of standard quantum mechanics, against which virtually all the attempts at finding a 'realist' interpretation have stumbled, is *contextuality*. For a phenomenon, to be contextual means that it is impossible to separate, in it, the contribution of the apparatus (a material extension of the knower) from the contribution of whatever is probed by it (the known). Does this highly participatory characteristic imply that knowledge is impossible in microphysics, or that quantum mechanics is not objective? By no means! Heisenberg (1942/1998, p. 268) gave a very clear statement of how one can elaborate objective knowledge out of highly intricate phenomena from which our participation cannot be disentangled: '… the fact that [phenomena are not objectified] can be objectified in turn and studied in its connection with other facts'. In other terms, what is objectified in quantum mechanics is not the

phenomenon itself, but the anticipative structure that enables one to connect a prior (experimental) phenomenon to possible future (experimental) phenomena (Bitbol, 1996, p. 227). What can be obtained out of the spatio-temporally located phenomena observed in laboratories is not direct objectification of a spatio-temporal continuant, but instead indirect objectification of a predictive symbol represented in a Hilbert space. This has afforded a tool of technological mastery whose universal efficacy is unprecedented, although the type of anticipation it allows is only probabilistic and contextual. Similarly, we argue that even though 'pure reflection' of, or contact with, one's lived experience does not constitute *by itself* anything like objective knowledge, it is possible to extract intersubjectively valid *structures* out of the reports that arise from this reflection or contact. Here, as in quantum mechanics, knowledge does not occur at the first level of phenomenal acquaintance with its so-called 'object', but at the second level of elaboration of a network of relations between the various expressions of this acquaintance. It is not immediate self-knowledge of the subject, but mediated knowledge for a community of researchers. The method of interviews of explicitation we use is precisely aimed at promoting this two-step process: firstly favouring exquisite intimacy of the subjects with their own experience, stripping themselves of the prejudices and mental structures that hinder their close contact with or dwelling in their experience; and secondly extracting structural information from the reports generated this way.

It is now time to come back to the problem of vocabulary raised by DZ: one wonders '… whether this phenomenon (of pure reflection) really qualifies as a form of *reflection*'. Is Sartre's 'pure reflection' a case of reflection at all? As we suggested earlier, the word 'reflection' indeed looks far-fetched when such a process of immersion in experience, broadening of the field of attention, and expression of it, is concerned. But it seems to us that the word 'reflection' is similarly unsuited to the alternative process of detached self-examination of habit and behavior combined with a narrative of ego-construction. For this latter process does not afford true ('reflected') knowledge of our own experience, but only rational reconstruction of our *persona* by way of socially accepted psychological categories. *In both cases*, the word 'reflection' appears as nothing more than a metaphor aimed at sketching a (suitable or unsuitable) *ideal* of self-knowledge rather than the real procedure carried out to obtain it. This is why, whenever possible, we prefer to use the expression 'becoming aware' (Depraz *et al.*, 2003) because it has the advantage of emphasizing the *dynamics* of an experiential process.

This brings us closer to the issue of the relation between language and first-person experience. Drawing from Bergson, DZ expresses a nuanced concern about the ability of language to 'convey or render the subtleties of our experiential life'. To answer this concern, we deliberately choose not to adduce any more theoretical considerations but rather to present a concrete report of first-person experience, and to comment on it.

I am in a *café*, absorbed in a lively philosophical discussion with my friend Paul. At the beginning of the conversation, my attention is completely focused on the content of the ideas. But as the discussion goes on, my mode of attention progressively changes and I start to become aware of other dimensions of my experience. I first realize that we also speak with our hands, and that I was initially unaware of our gestures. I then realize that I am feeling many emotions triggered by the ideas we are exchanging, that these emotions are experienced in several parts of my body (especially my chest and my throat), and that I was not clearly aware of this. Suddenly, I also become aware of a vague and diffuse, yet intense and specific feeling which is likely to have been within me from the very instant I was in Paul's presence: the energy, the rhythm, the special 'atmosphere' that emanates from him, his highly personal way of being present. At the moment I become aware of this feeling, I keep on participating in the conversation, but the field of my attention is now broader and defocused. I do not try to capture this feeling but it imposes itself on me. It is as if instead of trying to fetch it, I am allowing it to come to me, to pervade me. While I adopt this open and receptive form of attention, I am present and awake but lightly so, effortlessly and without tension.

We would now like to appeal to you, reader, and ask you: what was your experience while you were reading these lines? What happened to you? When you read these words, you may have recognized immediately a form of experience you lived in the past. Or may be these words evoked nothing in you. In either case (and in intermediate cases as well), the recognition or the absence of recognition occurred by due reference to *your own* experience. But in order to go beyond this, beyond a mere feeling of familiarity or unfamiliarity with the experience that has just been described, you should take a step further: bracket your preconceptions about intersubjectivity or about reflection, avoid referring to a class of experiences, and rather pay attention to a singular experience located in space and time. For one does not

live an experience 'in general'.[2] The more you call up a singular experience, the closer you come to the pre-reflective dimension of your experience and the more you will be able to appreciate our description and either specify or challenge it.

What happened exactly? I did not describe the content of my experience with all its details, since I said nothing, for instance, about what is precisely Paul's special quality of presence. However, my special way of apprehending my own experience and wording it encouraged you to relate yourself to your own experience. This twofold process — that goes from my experience to words and from words to your experience — is very specific. It would have been different if I had written a poem about my experience in this *café*. In our example, the functional relation between experience and words can be called a relation of *description*, whereas in the case of a poem, it would be a relation of *expression*. The effect of words on an interlocutor is different: whereas an expression gives rise to some experience in her (say a feeling, an emotion), describing a given experience gives rise to an active process of *recognition* of this experience. The linguistic tools used in both cases are also different. Expression uses an indirect, metaphorical (Findlay, 1948) and oblique[3] language that aims at giving rise to a certain experiential content, a 'world' of experience. Instead, description uses a direct language that aims at showing and *pointing towards* some given dimension of experience. The function of a description is not to portray a content of experience with all its nuances — words are indeed incapable of that — but to work out an intersubjective consensus about a term or a group of terms that will only play the role of 'pointers'. This occurs as soon as several subjects agree on using such terms to single out a special aspect of the flux of experience; and the agreement is obtained by establishing a stable feedback loop between the experience whose aknowledgment is caused by the chosen terms in one subject, and their circumstance of use by other subjects. The said terms, used during an explicitation interview or in other circumstances, may be first as vague as a 'direct reference' in Gendlin's sense (such as 'that thing', 'this') (Gendlin, 1962/1997). By themselves, such signs have a very broad and unspecific meaning (an 'indicative'

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[2] Even Husserl's 'intuition of essences' is no exception to this statement. Indeed, having the intuition of an essence is itself a singular experience.

[3] The concept of indirect or *oblique* communication has been developed by several Western philosophers, such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, and even the late Wittgenstein. But in China the use of this type of language is much older and widespread, and it has also been theorized. François Jullien (1997) has clearly analysed the subtle methods that ancient Chinese poets used to give rise to a certain experience by writing 'next to'.

meaning in Husserl's sense). But if used in a precise context of dia-
logue about what is lived, they have the power to flag here and now an
aspect of some singular, concrete and rich experience (such as Paul's
quality of presence). Whereas an expression gives rise to a world in
us, a description points towards a world, just as with the well-known
'finger pointing at the moon'.

In other terms, what is sought is not depiction or one-one corre-
spondence between an item of language and an item of experience, but
rather producing a *perlocutionary effect*. The aim of a description is to
trigger recognition of an aspect of experience in other subjects, and to
reach agreement with them on using simple and 'cheap' (Clark, 2008)
terms that have little or no expressive power yet 'label' this special
and complex moment of experience. For instance, oenologists have
agreed to call 'outline' the — diffuse or well-defined — feeling of
'form' aroused by the wine when it is still in the mouth (Courtier,
2007, p. 134). The Japanese agree to call '*mono no aware*' a certain
realization of the transient nature of things, an emotional sense of the
impermanence of life, that haikus are aimed at triggering (Colombetti,
2009, p. 19). Similarly, we may agree on a special label for flagging
the 'quality of presence' of somebody. But unlike those of a poem,
such a word does not adduce by itself the taste of the experience. It
only acquires its meaning by the act of recognition it elicits.

What do the words and sentences of phenomenology do to us? How
are they different from those of poetry? Since they help us to recog-
nize a dimension of our experience (if not, what would be their
worth?), what is exactly this process of recognition, and what are the
criteria by which we assess a description meant to arouse it? It seems
to us that these questions open a hitherto little explored direction of
research.

Reading the description of an experience gives rise to our recogni-
tion of this experience, provided we fuel this process (which is thus
more active than what is triggered by reading a poem) by referring to
some of our own singular experiences. Sometimes we immediately
recognize an aspect of our experience of which we were reflectively
conscious. Sometimes we must call up more precisely one or more
experiences before we recognize it. Sometimes again, we do not rec-
ognize anything, for many possible reasons. But in every case, refer-
ring to singular situated experiences, to 'what a given individual
might currently be experiencing' (DZ), is the proper ground of any
intersubjective agreement on the *structure* of experience. Far from
hindering access to experiential invariants, direct reference to a singu-
lar experience is our only reliable route towards them. The example

we developed was aimed at showing this: the concrete and situated description of 'a discussion with Paul' allowed us to recognize a structural dimension of the experience of encounter that we provisionally called 'the feeling of presence'. This example also enabled us to recognize 'an essential structure and condition of possibility' (DZ) of the process of becoming aware: the defocused, receptive, and non-intentional character of the attentional state that allows it. Referring to a single lived experience allowed us to start to create with you, reader, some agreement on these invariants. The agreement bear on the acts that allow us to recognize these invariants and on the words that allow us to point towards them, rather than on a content of experience.

After all, the reader of a phenomenological description that allegedly exposes an essence (or invariant) of experience cannot accept it on the basis of the authority of anybody, not even the authority of Husserl or Heidegger. The reader of a phenomenological description cannot save herself the necessity of reenacting the process that led to such description; she must do it again. A phenomenologist should not only invite the reader to implicit recognition or adhesion, but should rather allow the reader to probe into her own experience and assess the proposed description. This presupposes a higher-level description of the very process of becoming aware and describing. It is precisely this anchoring in singular experience that seems to us the true difference between an abstract hermeneutical work and an active, lively, and embodied phenomenological discourse.

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