

Journal of Consciousness Studies

Volume 18, No.2 (2011)



10 Years' Viewing from Within:
Further Debate

Journal of Consciousness Studies

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controversies in science & the humanities

Vol. 18, No. 2, February 2011

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edited by Claire Petitmengin

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ISSN 1355 8250

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Pierre Vermersch, born in 1944, studied psychology at the University of Aix en Provence before joining CNRS in Paris in 1971, where his research focused on Piaget's theory for understanding adult cognition. Since 1988 he has developed the 'explicitation interview', an interview technique designed to produce a detailed verbalization of lived experience, and led the GREX Research Group on Explicitation.

Dan Zahavi is professor at and Director of the Danish National Research Foundation: *Center for Subjectivity Research*, University of Copenhagen. He has published widely in phenomenology and philosophy of mind, and is the author or editor of more than 15 books, including *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (2006).

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References to other sources

Book with an editor

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Chapter in a book

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Newspaper articles

Cumming, F. (1999) Tax-free savings push, *Daily Mail*, 4 April, pp. 1–2.

Internet resource

Young, C. (2001) *English Heritage Position Statement on the Valletta Convention*, [Online], <http://www.archaeol.freeuk.com/EHPositionStatement.htm> [24 Aug 2001].

(where the final date is the date the webpage was accessed).

Claire Petitmengin

Editorial Introduction

This special issue is the sequel to the issue entitled *Ten Years of Viewing from Within* (Petitmengin, 2009), commemorating the tenth anniversary of the publication of *The View from Within* (Varela & Shear, 1999), where Francisco Varela in collaboration with Jonathan Shear designed the foundations of a research program on lived experience. The objective of the commemorative issue was to examine and refine this research program on first person methods, through contributions based on empirical research. At the end of the Editorial Introduction, I invited other researchers to participate in this debate by commenting on the articles in the issue, comments which would be published with replies from the authors — as was the case in *The View from Within*.

In response to this invitation, I received six commentaries targeting either one or two specific articles, or a question which was referred to in several articles. Four of these commentaries received one or several replies. The first four commentaries (by Dan Zahavi, Tom Froese and colleagues, Pierre Steiner and Jesse Butler) and their replies (by Russ Hurlburt, Pierre Vermersch, Michel Bitbol and myself) focus on the epistemological and methodological foundations of introspection. The fifth commentary, by Natalie Depraz, is devoted to the experience associated with listening to a sound. Finally, the article by Jean-Philippe Lachaux is an outstanding article showing the need to integrate first-person reports in neurosciences.

We hope that these two issues make a contribution to establishing possibility of a first-person discipline and to strengthening the emerging research community in this field. We also hope that the reader will take as much interest and pleasure in reading these contributions as we took in writing them.

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- Petitmengin, C. (ed.) (2009) *Ten Years of Viewing from Within: The Legacy of Francisco Varela, Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **16** (10–12), pp. 1–404, also published as a book (Exeter: Imprint Academic).
- Varela, F.J. & Shear, J. (eds.) (1999) *The View from Within: First-Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness, Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **6** (2–3), pp. 1–313, also published as a book (Exeter: Imprint Academic).

Dan Zahavi

Varieties of Reflection

In her editorial introduction to the special issue *10 years of Viewing from Within: the Legacy of Francisco Varela* (Petitmengin, 2009) as well as in her co-authored contribution 'The validity of first-person descriptions as authenticity and coherence' (Petitmengin and Bitbol, 2009), Claire Petitmengin expresses some reservations about the way I have been characterizing reflection in some of my earlier writings. In replying to the criticism, I will use the occasion to amplify some of my previous remarks, pinpoint what I take to be some ambiguities in Petitmengin and Bitbol's own positive proposal, make some additional points that relate directly to the important questions that they raise in their joint paper, and finish off with a few remarks regarding one of the central claims made by Vermersch in his contribution to the special issue.

1. Reflection and self-division

The central aim of Petitmengin and Bitbol's contribution is to address the question of whether and to what extent we can become aware of our pre-reflective experiences. One initial ambiguity that needs to be cleared up from the very start concerns the notion of awareness being used. We need to avoid the misunderstanding that the pre-reflective experiences are initially unconscious, that they are initially like nothing for us, and that they only enter the realm of phenomenality when subjected to a reflective process that allows us to become aware of them. In short, for an experience to be pre-reflective is not for the experience to be unconscious, it is for it to be unnoticed. But it can be unnoticed and still be lived through subjectively. The only reason I want to stress this from the outset is that a few formulations found in the contributions in question might suggest otherwise. For instance

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when the authors write that 'we are unaware of our [lived] experience' (p. 372),¹ and also when Varela and Shear is quoted in support of the view that we in many instances perceive phenomena pre-reflectively without being consciously aware of them (p.10).

In short, it is important to make it clear that when asking whether we can become aware of our pre-reflective experiences, the question asked is really whether we can become attentively aware of our pre-reflective experiences. I don't think Petitmengin and Bitbol would disagree with me on this. If they did, they would at least be endorsing a view that would be totally out of tune with the established view in phenomenology (cf. Zahavi, 1999; 2005).

Petitmengin and Bitbol now deny — thereby criticizing what they take to be my own proposal — that the process of becoming reflectively aware of one's pre-reflective experience entails a kind of doubling or fracture or self-fission between a reflecting and reflected subject (p. 9). The reflective thematization of subjective life does on their view not involve a self-division or self-distantiation (p. 377). It is not a question of distantiating oneself from the experience in question in order to observe it. Rather, on Petitmengin and Bitbol's view, what reflection really brings about is a decrease of distance. Reflection is what allows us to come into closer contact with our experience (p. 378). Rather than dividing us, reflection 'gives us back our entirety, our integrity' (p. 381).

I have some worries about this proposal. First of all, and perhaps most fundamentally, I don't think one should talk as if there is only one type of reflection. Even if there is a type of reflection that fits Petitmengin and Bitbol's definition — and whether there is, is a question I will return to in a moment — there most definitely are types of reflection that do not. Consider that human beings can become self-conscious in a very particular way, namely in so far as we are able to subject our beliefs and actions (and emotional reactions) to critical assessment. This might even be considered the distinguishing mark of rationality. Korsgaard has recently argued that the result of this

form of self-consciousness is liberation from the control of instincts. Instincts still operate within us, in the sense that they are the sources of many of our incentives — in fact, arguably, though by various routes, of all of them. But instincts no longer *determine* how we respond to those incentives, what we do in the face of them. They *propose* responses, but we may or may not act in the way they propose. Self-consciousness opens up a space between the incentive and the response, a space of what I will call reflective distance. It is within the space of reflective

[1] All subsequent unmarked page references in the text are to the special issue in question, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 16 (10–12).

distance that the question whether our incentives give us reasons arises (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 116).

Korsgaard even talks of this reflective self-consciousness as involving a self-division, in that it separates your perceptions from their automatic normative force (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 213).

Reflection is a precondition for self-critical deliberation. If we are to subject our different beliefs and desires to a critical, normative evaluation, it is not sufficient simply to have immediate first-personal access to the states in question. Rather, when we reflect, we step back from our ongoing mental activities and, as Moran has pointed out, this stepping back is a metaphor of distancing and separation, but also one of observation and confrontation. The reflective distancing is what allows us to relate critically to our mental states and put them into question (Moran, 2001, pp. 142–143).

It might be problematic to simply identify reflection with the process that Korsgaard and Moran are discussing — we should, as already mentioned, recognize that there are different types of reflection. But to insist, as Petitmengin and Bitbol do, that reflection involves no amount of self-distancing and self-division is basically to dismiss and ignore a crucially important type of reflection.

Perhaps Petitmengin and Bitbol would reply that they are specifically targeting the phenomenological reflection, the kind of reflection that is employed and discussed by phenomenologists, and that this notion is simply different from the one Moran and Korsgaard are referring to. I think this reply would be too hasty, however. Not only do phenomenologists distinguish various notions of reflection, including various objectifying and alienating forms (cf. Zahavi, 1999), but in addition Husserl himself emphasized the importance of critical self-assessment, linked it to his own very notion of phenomenology and spoke of the evidence-based self-responsible life that phenomenology makes possible (Husserl, 1959, p. 167). The following quote outlines how this view, according to Husserl, has its roots in the Socratic ideal:

Socrates' ethical reform of life is characterized by its interpreting the truly satisfying life as a life of pure reason. This means a life in which the human being exercises in unremitting self-reflection and radical accountability a critique — an ultimately evaluating critique — of his life-aims and then naturally, and mediated through them, his life-paths and his current means. Such accountability and critique is performed as a process of cognition, and indeed, according to Socrates, as a methodical return to the original source of all legitimacy and its cognition — expressed in our terminology, by going back to complete clarity, 'insight,' 'evidence' (Husserl, 1956, p. 9).

Moreover, if the question is one of exegetical accuracy, it is just undeniable that Husserl on many occasions writes that reflection is a relation between two different experiences (Husserl, 1976, p. 78), and that it involves a kind of doubling or fracture or *self-fission* (Husserl, 1959, pp. 89–90, 92–93, 111).

But back to the central question, is there a form of reflection that fits Petitmengin and Bitbol's definition? Or to rephrase the question, is there a form of self-consciousness that rather than involving a relation between two distinct experiences (a reflecting and a reflected) amounts to an intensification, amplification or illumination of the primary experience? Is it possible, through practice, say, to acquire a higher level of 'wakefulness', or 'mindfulness', one that provides us with a stronger and richer and fully immersed self-familiarity with our experiential life? I am open to this proposal, and in fact, it might even fit Sartre's description of what he calls *pure* reflection. As Sartre writes in *L'être et le néant*, in pure reflection, reflected consciousness does not appear as an object and is not given perspectively as a transcendent entity existing *outside* reflecting consciousness. In pure reflection everything is given at once in a sort of absolute proximity (Sartre, 1943, p. 195). Quite in keeping with this, Sartre claims that pure reflection never learns or discovers anything new; it simply discloses and thematizes that which it was already familiar with (Sartre, 1943, p. 197). But even if there is indeed something fitting this description, one question would be whether this phenomenon really qualifies as a form of reflection. Another question would be whether we could and should make do with this form of 'reflection' or whether any scientific and/or philosophical exploration of consciousness wouldn't necessarily have to also rely on and employ a more self-distancing form of reflection. I think the latter holds true, and I don't think Petitmengin and Bitbol are sufficiently attentive to this issue. As for the first question, they seem to reach the same conclusion. As they write, given that the emergence into reflective consciousness involves no copying or mirroring of a primary experience by a secondary one, it might be best to simply avoid using the term 'reflection' given its traditional connotations (p. 379). But in that case, it becomes increasingly unclear why precisely Petitmengin and Bitbol oppose my suggestion that reflection (in the proper sense of the term) does involve a certain self-division and self-distantiation.

Let me conclude this part of my response by pointing to what I take to be a slightly puzzling feature of Petitmengin and Bitbol's own proposal. In their contribution, they repeatedly emphasize that the reflective process brings us closer to the experience, makes us come into contact

with it (p. 378). The obvious question to ask, though, is whether these metaphors are really apt. They suggest that we pre-reflectively live at a distance from our experiences, but I find it quite unclear what precisely that is supposed to mean. What is the distance supposed to be between? I think it would have been wiser to stick to the pair 'unnoticed'/'noticed', rather than opting for the pair 'distance'/'contact'.

2. Experience and language

In her introduction, Petitmengin writes that the process of becoming (attentively) aware of one's pre-reflective experience does not amount to the accumulation of new knowledge; rather it is a question of stripping ourselves of the knowledge that prevents us from entering into contact with our experience. It is a question of letting go, rather than of enrichment (p. 11). Although this characterization once again matches Sartre's description of the pure reflection, it must still give us pause. If no knowledge whatsoever is acquired, what would be the cognitive value of the process? In their joint contribution, Petitmengin and Bitbol return to the same issue and now write that the process in question effects a significant transformation of the pre-reflective experience (p. 380). This observation is followed up some pages later by the following question: 'What do words do to experience?' (p. 388). As Petitmengin and Bitbol point out in their answer, describing an experience is not simply a question of putting words on a pre-existing experience that would remain unaltered by them. Nor is it a question of dissecting and distorting the experience in question. No, describing an experience can (in the best of circumstances, one might add) unfold and enrich it with new nuances (p. 388. Cf. Colombetti, 2009).

I agree with this appraisal, although I think it puts some pressure on Petitmengin's initial non-cognitive characterization of the reflective process. Let me in the following add a more historical perspective, by briefly comparing Bergson's view on this question with Husserl's. A central tenet in Bergson's doctoral dissertation *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* is that only to a superficial inspection does consciousness consist of a sequence of distinct conscious states. To a more profound investigation, consciousness reveals itself as a continuity of mutually permeating states that form an organic whole (Bergson, 1910, p. 128). Bergson now claims that reason might isolate and immobilize the flow of lived experiences and thereby make them accessible to verbal description and analytic reflection. But, as he insists, the true life of consciousness cannot be caught in our conceptual network. It will always overflow our artificial demarcations and

distinctions. Indeed, as soon as we try to describe our conscious states, as soon as we try to analyse and express them in words, the conscious states that by nature are deeply personal will change character. They will be transformed into impersonal elements that are externally related to one another (*ibid.*, p. 163). This problem is not merely due to the fact that language employs general concepts, denoting, and thereby missing, the delicate shades of the ever fluctuating states with simple uniform words (*ibid.*, p. 164). The problem is also that language as a whole makes us operate with sharp and precise distinctions thereby imposing the same kind of discontinuities between our experiential episodes as exist between material objects (*ibid.*, p. xix). As soon as we introduce clear-cut distinctions, as soon as we isolate and identify a conscious state, we distort the processual character of our experiential life (*ibid.*, p. 132). Indeed, as Bergson writes, all that language is able to capture are lifeless shadows (*ibid.*, p. 132–133). At one point, Bergson considers the possibility that a novelist or poet, by employing a far richer and nuanced language, might be able to demonstrate that each and every conscious thought or feeling rather than being adequately expressed by simple terms do indeed harbour ‘an infinite permeation of a thousand different impressions’. But by naming and expressing this richness in words, the novelist or poet will in turn only offer us an impoverished substitute (*ibid.*, p. 134). Language is simply not able to convey or render the subtleties of our experiential life (*ibid.*, p. 13), and ultimately Bergson denies that there is any common measure between mind and language (*ibid.*, p. 165).

Needless to say, Bergson’s approach is faced with one obvious methodological dilemma. Throughout the book, Bergson does precisely what he warns us against. He uses language and concepts in order to articulate and describe a dimension of consciousness that on his own account is inexpressible. He even admits to the problem himself (*ibid.*, p. 122).

It is informative to compare Bergson’s suspicion of language, his conviction that the distinctions it sets up are misleading, with the rather different attitude that is expressed by Husserl in the very first paragraph of his introduction to the second part of *Logische Untersuchungen*. This is admittedly not Husserl’s final word on the relation between language and phenomenology, but that does not diminish its poignancy. Husserl writes,

Linguistic discussions are certainly among the philosophically indispensable preparations for the building of pure logic; only by their aid can the true *objects* of logical research — and, following thereon, the essential species and differentiae of such objects — be refined to a