

WHAT DWELLS ON THE FRINGE OF AWARENESS

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ABSTRACT

Researchers in the field of empirical phenomenology often base their understanding on the theories of philosophical phenomenology, particularly favouring Husserl in their discussions and explaining obtained results in terms of pre-reflective and reflective experience. In this article we first outline various authors' intuitions on the phenomenological tradition, before going on to examine certain assumptions of the empirical phenomenological tradition. In the second part we present preliminary results of our empirical phenomenological research in the attempt to point to the enormous phenomenological richness of pre-reflective awareness. To an extent we attempt to contribute to the understanding of the techniques of modern empirical phenomenological research by discussing the presuppositions of its relevant authors.

KEY WORDS

experience, phenomenological inquiry, first-person perspective, elicitation interview, pre-reflective consciousness

CLASSIFICATION

JEL: D83, D84, Z19

INTRODUCTION

*Whether you can observe a thing or not depends on the theory which you use.
It is the theory which decides what can be observed.*

Albert Einstein

In the discussion about the possibilities of first-person research, Froese, Gould and Seth [1] distinguish between two conceptions of consciousness¹, referring to them as *shallow* and *deep*. They say that in some research traditions (such as the higher-order thought theories of consciousness; e. g. Rosenthal [2]), the term *conscious* refers to phenomena that have been directly experienced by a subject and can also be reported verbally (reflective phenomena), “while everything else is referred to as unconscious” [1; p.51]. They refer to this conceptualisation of consciousness as a shallow view.

In contrast, the deep conceptualisations of consciousness are much more inclusive. They contain the phenomena falling into the shallow conception (experiences which are reflectively lived through and thus can be verbally articulated) as well as pre-reflective² experiences, which are “experiences that are lived but without the person being focally or thematically aware of them” [1; p.52]. Pre-reflective experiences can be reflected on and become reflected experiences. The deep conception of consciousness looks on the phenomena of interest to the shallow conception as merely a particular way of experiencing: an explicit awareness of lived experience.

Researchers in the field of empirical phenomenology (e.g. [3, 4]), often base their understanding of experience on theories of philosophical phenomenology, which usually employ a deep conceptualisation of consciousness (in the sense that pre-reflective experience can be reflected). For this reason, we begin by turning towards some of the basic assumptions and intuitions of the phenomenological lineage. We start with William James, then delve into phenomenological philosophy, where we will briefly consider the views of Edmund Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre. Following that, our main focus will be on empirical phenomenological researchers and their presuppositions about experience and the pre-reflective dimension of consciousness. Lastly, we turn to an illustration of one such phenomenon which resides on the fringe of awareness.

This article is not a comprehensive examination of the above mentioned points, but solely a preliminary outline with the aim to further inspire considerations and research in this direction.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL LINEAGE

According to William James [5], consciousness consists of more than the experiences we are currently focusing on. Every conscious experience also has various transitional experiences on the fringe of awareness, which he characterizes as having a fleeting or transient quality. James describes these experiences on the fringe as vague feelings of context which is consciously experienced and important for the content we are attending at a given moment. Nonetheless, it is not an experience that can be consciously available [5].

Similarly, Edmund Husserl [6] argues that every experience is initially lived through and is not an object of consciousness. Thus, according to Husserl, the consciousness that is present at the moment we experience something must not be understood in terms of reflection or introspection. Rather, an act of reflection is the direction of attention towards something that has already been experienced without being taken into view: “When I say ‘I,’ I grasp myself in a simple reflection. But this self-experience [Selbsterfahrung] is like every experience [Erfahrung], and in particular every perception, a mere directing myself towards something

that was already there for me, that was already conscious, but not thematically experienced, not noticed.” ([7], quoting [8; pp.492-493]).

Our everyday experiences are always available to us, always conscious (pre-reflective or reflective). Only by the act of turning towards (the act of reflection) something that has already been there for us, we come to perceive and know its subject matter. This reflective experience is by itself a new type of experience, or as Husserl puts it, the reflective experience “is not merely added to the previous life, to the respective experience or experiential thinking, rather it transforms it in a specific manner” ([9; p.184], quoting [10; p.89]).

In line with the aforementioned deep conceptualisation of consciousness, Jean-Paul Sartre [11] divides consciousness into reflective and pre-reflective, stressing that any consciousness of something is always pre-reflective, and that pre-reflective consciousness is a necessary precondition for reflective consciousness. Sartre’s division is also widely used in modern phenomenological philosophy, especially in the works of Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi [7].

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF EMPIRICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Pierre Vermersch distinguishes between three dimensions of consciousness: an active unconscious mode³, a lived (pre-reflective) consciousness and a reflective consciousness mode of lived experience [3]. He suggests that becoming reflectively aware of an experience requires a “transition from a pre-reflective consciousness of the lived experience to a reflective consciousness of the same lived experience” [3; p.13]. This transition is the activity of reflection, which “enables the perception of lived experiences, and particularly of lived experiences which were not ‘viewed’ and which can [be] viewed after the fact” [3, p.16].

In his view, experiences we are not aware of at a particular moment always continue to be available. These lived experiences inhabit the mode of non-reflective consciousness and retain the possibility of being reflected upon. In Vermersch’s own words “I am fully conscious of it without at the same time being conscious of the way in which I do it. I perceive or I do *x*, without necessarily keeping in the view of my consciousness the way in which I organise my perceptive activity” [3; p.17]. Such lived experiences can be awakened using different introspective techniques, such as the elicitation interview. This interview method helps the trained practitioner to become aware of her lived subjective experience, leading to accurate and careful articulation.

Complementary considerations can also be found in the works of Claire Petitmengin and Michel Bitbol [12], who propose that we are not aware of most of our current lived experience, because, in the process of experiencing, our attention is very narrowly focused and fast changing the focus from one relevant object to another. They explain that a lot of experienced content is left aside, but this content nevertheless remains in the background in the form of a passive memory. Referring to Vermersch [13], who says that the content we are not aware of (pre-reflective experience) can be retrospectively accessed during elicitation interviews, they claim that pre-reflective experience is important for our understanding of reflection, emphasizing that they understand reflection not as a signifier of a conscious perception of a previously unconscious event, but rather a renewal of contact with experience, an experiencing and a redirection of attention.

EMPIRICAL PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE EXPLORATION OF EXPERIENCE

The elicitation interview⁴ is in line with the phenomenological work of Husserl. It is a technique used for the examination of conscious experience, particularly for becoming aware of pre-reflective experiences, which are considered to be hidden on the fringe of awareness [4].

In the process of carrying out the elicitation interview, the trained researcher guides the attention of the interviewee and extends her focus from the explicitly reflective, to the implicit, pre-reflective dimension of experience. The goal of this type of interview is to “help subjects redirect their attention from the content of the experience towards the mode and dynamics of appearance of this content, and to describe it precisely” [14; p.30].

To achieve this, an *evocation* of experience is required, enabling contact with the experience. The moment set forth to examine in the interview is *evoked* when the interviewee’s “past situation becomes more present for her than the present situation is” [14; p.30]. This process of evocation of experience is described as “the capacity of the subjects to enrich progressively their exploration and their description of experience, each re-enactment calling forth new elements and generating new descriptemes” [15; p.276].

What is intriguing in this approach is that this method enables the examination of both currently present and long past, forgotten experiences. Froese, Gould and Barrett [16] summarize the assumptions of this claim, saying that a shift in attention enables some parts of a previously pre-reflective experience to enter consciousness. By recalling this past experience, the elicitation interview technique helps evoke the just past pre-reflective experience in the present experience. Whereas the claim that a long past pre-reflective experience could be re-lived and made into a present experience is in their view more controversial.

But does the accessibility of the pre-reflective dimension of experience apply to all kinds of experience? Can any type of experiencing become reflective and therefore available to verbal report?

It is our view that the retrospective intervention of taking into view a chosen part of experience does something significantly different in certain types of phenomena. These are the phenomena that normally reside on the fringe of awareness and cannot be transformed from the pre-reflective to reflective conscious experience. This would be contrary to the presuppositions of the elicitation interview, that it is possible to observe any present or past experience by a (guided) shift and expansion of attention. In the following chapter, we demonstrate some aspects of such an elusive phenomenological quality with the help of an example.

THE EXPERIENTIAL ASPECT: AN EXAMPLE OF GIST

Some examples of experiential dynamics that change when reflected on are the sense of agency [17], existential feelings [18] and the experience of gist [19]. Kordeš and Demšar [20] define gist as the feeling that we have knowledge of a particular thing/concept available or the feeling of an essence of the answer that follows the question, but this answer is not yet clearly defined in consciousness. If we try to reflect upon gist, it changes, expanding into content. The original, pre-reflective feeling (i.e. gist) is thereby replaced by another phenomenological quality altogether. Furthermore, Kordeš and Demšar [20] compare the experience of gist with descriptions of Tichener’s analyses related to imageless thought, the “vague and elusive processes, which carry as if in a nutshell the entire meaning of a situation” ([20], quoting [21, p.188]).

Below we present an excerpt from an interview, where the co-researcher⁵ reports his feeling of gist unfolding into content throughout the process of the interview. In this part of the interview, the co-researcher attempts to remember the names of the seven characters from a book, but has difficulty naming the seventh character. During the interview, the researcher (R) guides and facilitates the opening of space for the co-researchers’ (CO-R) observation of his experience.

CO-R: *The visual presentation has disappeared in between.*

R: *But the content was still there?*

CO-R: *Yes. But I could not, for example, look and see under each number each specific character.*

R: *You said you knew what he was like. You knew his characteristics. In what way?*

CO-R: *As if I was once again playing a movie of these scenes, at the time they were all there. And then there was a scene, when he was gone.*

R: *So you were looking for something? In a way, you went back trying to remember scenes from a movie. Well, try to recall this visual part of your experiencing, what do you remember here?*

CO-R: *Most of all, I remember that he had a big hammer.*

R: *But how did the knowledge that he is the bastard son of the previous king come to you?*

CO-R: *His hammer, a face, a place he was in, his face again... and with this the whole story about what happened to him before manifests. As in one package, as a whole package, as if this just opens ...*

R: *Yes, how? Try to remember. You were browsing through the scenes...*

CO-R: *It was not quite a visual scene, but somehow from the ideas, approximations of the scene ... somehow it became visible out of this space, the hammer kind of shone through.*

R: *What do you mean by “approximations of the scene”?*

CO-R: *That it was not a clear reconstruction, but just an outline of someone with a huge hammer.*

R: *So there was something visual? Would it be possible that this was just knowledge? Was there knowledge of who is already in the package? But only this new one with the hammer was visual?*

CO-R: *Yes, yes.*

R: *So, here we have gist, that past knowing was the gist, but when you went back, if you thought of someone else, he would again show himself visually. So, somehow you looked at these scenes, found this hammer and when you saw the hammer, you already knew who it was?*

CO-R: *Yes. Then I got the face and with this face it went into almost like approximations of scenes and through this the story where he was.*

R: *All the places where this bastard son has been?*

CO-R: *I mean, there were a lot of different scenes and a lot of different places. And it happened all at once.*

R: *Let us look at this. So, you suddenly and all at once feel a lot of information, memories of the events.*

CO-R: *Although, there is more of a felt potentiality of these memories and information. I know that they are there to be able to look at and if I looked at them they would develop into something more.*

R: *So that is gist. What you have just described is a typical gist. So, some kind of a felt potentiality of these scenes and you only looked at things which were relevant for what you needed?*

CO-R: *I mean, gist was only the result of seeing someone with a hammer and then it all came.*

R: *Yes, the gist of who he is.*

CO-R: *Yes.*

R: *Right. Well, my question is ... was the knowledge that he's the bastard son of the king already there at that time, or did you call it out/probe it out here and now? But the question is what was recalled then and what was in the felt potentiality then. If you remember? I am aware that this is very hard to remember ...*

CO-R: *Yes, I don't think it was recalled then ... it was mostly just some ... the visual image was recalled, but the rest of it was just something I vaguely knew about.*

R: *You cannot remember that any of these ... So you saw the hammer ... can you remember if any of his characteristics have been articulated in the moment when you also put him in your package?*

CO-R: *No, it was only visual.*

R: *Okay. Now try to remember that feeling of gist. The feeling of that, I am going to say cloud, where there were many packets of these events associated with him. Can you remember this feeling?*

CO-R: *No, because now when I try to remember, I open ... it only opens this package and there are only scenes there.*

R: *So you have already been doing this before, just that before you did not know how to describe this feeling? So you kept opening it and said it was at the castle and he did that and so on?*

CO-R: *Yes, yes.*

During the interview, the co-researcher attempts to probe and describe his feeling of gist many times, which leads to content creation and the explication of the experience of gist. This example shows that the attempt to reflect the gist, transforms it into content – the primary, pre-reflective experience of gist is transformed into a different phenomenological quality. The co-researcher compares the experience of gist of the answer to the felt potentiality of a certain kind of content (i.e. the answer to the question, or rather the task he has set for himself), which he feels resides in a certain kind of area, which is not entirely clear and can be clarified by more probing. In his own words: “although, there is more of a felt potentiality of these memories and information. I know that they are there to be able to look at and if I looked at them they would develop into something more”.

The co-researcher observes the possibility of being able to look at a certain kind of area of consciousness more sharply; he notices the ability to sharpen and clarify a chosen part of experience, which he feels is holding the answer. But his inquiring into this felt space does not show him anything more of it. The felt space rather moulds itself into content and visual presentations. Reflection “opens this package”, the experience changes and illustrates itself as it becomes the focus of reflective attention.

CONCLUSION

Gist presents a problem for the idea that it is possible to reflect upon any type of pre-reflective experience. It indicates that the transition from pre-reflective to reflective consciousness significantly changes certain phenomena. In other words, the reflection of a particular lived experience does not enable the perception of a pre-reflective consciousness of the same experience, but rather creates an entirely new experience.

So what does this tell us about consciousness and the pre-reflective experience empirical phenomenology is set out to explore? And more importantly, how do we study these experiences on the periphery of our awareness?

One hint to help us think in this direction could be found in quantum mechanics. It is our intuition that empirical phenomenology employs a similar hermeneutic to that found in some other sciences, particularly physics, where research results themselves pose doubt and put the presuppositions of the research method, on which they have been obtained, into question. Further deliberation on these phenomena will in part challenge us to think outside the box and go beyond the theories we have been using in order to better understand consciousness and the world of experience.

The theories and presuppositions of the elicitation interview we rely on determine and create what we later observe and interpret, but studying phenomena which dwell on the periphery of awareness put the assumptions we build upon into question, calling for a re-evaluation of our understanding and techniques.

REMARKS

¹Throughout this article we use the terms consciousness, awareness and self-consciousness interchangeably.

²The concept of pre-reflective self-consciousness originally comes from the work of Jean-Paul Sartre [11]. The more recent interpretation that reflective self-consciousness is dependent on a more fundamental, primary consciousness is often used in current phenomenological thought. Similar understanding of the notion of reflective consciousness can also be found in leading phenomenological figures such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (for more details see [22]).

³He describes this mode of consciousness as a phenomenological unconscious, pointing out that it should not be confused or equated with unconsciousness as the description of processes not being available to introspective report. The existence of the active unconscious mode “does not presuppose a censorship mechanism, which could be termed the ‘normal’ or ‘usual’ unconscious, and which can only be studied by inference through a third-person viewpoint” [3; p.15].

⁴At first the term *entretient’explicitation* was translated into English as *explicitation interview*, which was several years later changed to *elicitation interview*. More recently, the word *microphenomenology* is employed by Claire Petitmengin to denote the same method of empirical phenomenological research of helping people become aware of the hidden, implicit parts of experience.

⁵In our research we use the term co-researcher to denote a participant who is genuinely interested in the research question and the study of his or her own experience to such an extent that the research question becomes their own research question [23].

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