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Describing the Experience of Describing?

The blindspot of introspection

Abstract: *My comments on this pioneering book by Russ Hurlburt and Eric Schwitzgebel do not focus on the descriptions of experiences that it includes, but on the very process of description, which seems to me insufficiently highlighted, described and called into question. First I will rely on a few indications given by Melanie herself, the subject interviewed by the authors, to highlight an essential difficulty which the authors only touch upon: the not immediately recognized character of lived experience. Then I will look for clues about what Melanie does to come into contact with her experience and recognize it. These clues — completed by elements of description of this act collected through explicitation interviews — provide criteria enabling a more precise evaluation of what the authors do to guide Melanie in the realization of this act, and therefore the accuracy of Melanie's descriptions. I will defend the idea that the description of the very process of becoming aware and describing is an essential condition for the understanding, refinement, teaching, and evaluation of introspection methods, as well as for the reproducibility of their results.*

Keywords: Description, explicitation, explicitation interview, Descriptive Experience Sampling, experience, becoming aware, awareness, consciousness, introspection

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Introduction

My comments on the book by Russ Hurlburt and Eric Schwitzgebel are technical comments, based on fifteen years of practising an interview method aimed to help a subject to describe one moment of lived experience, the explicitation method (Vermersch, 1994/2008; Petitmengin, 2006). I also had the opportunity, in the context of the ‘First Person Conference’ organized by Jack Petranker in 2007 and 2008, to attend interviews led by Russ, and to experience the Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) method myself. In other words, like Melanie, the central character of the book, I have worn — but for one day only — a device emitting a ‘beep’ at random intervals, taken notes on what I had been living just before the beep, and been interviewed by Russ about these experiences. This enabled me to begin to compare the two methods.

The fact that the authors’ discussions are anchored in their concrete work of explicitation with Melanie enables them, much more than abstract discussions would have done, to refine the central question of the book significantly: ‘To what extent is it possible to obtain accurate descriptions of inner experience?’ (p. 14). This is to my mind a pioneering work, and exactly the type of work we need if we want research in the field of consciousness studies to progress. The particular descriptions provided by Melanie enable the authors to raise questions of general interest at two levels, the content of a description and the process of description. The content level is the level of the structure of lived experience: for example, as the authors wonder, is the experience of emotion exhausted by bodily sensations? Does thinking always involve words or images, or does an unsymbolized way of thinking exist? Is experience rich or thin? The process level concerns the difficulties met during this work of description and the devices enabling the interviewer to help the subject to overcome them.

It is to the second level, the level of the description process, that I will devote this commentary, because it seems to me that this process is insufficiently highlighted, described and called into question in the book. *What does Melanie do, what does the subject do* to describe his or her lived experience? In fact, very surprisingly, this act (or set of acts) is seldom explicitly referred to, and even more rarely described in the book, but only glimpsed at, hinted at, from time to time, as if by mistake, by Melanie, Eric or Russ.

First I will rely on a few indications given by Melanie to highlight an essential difficulty which the two authors stress very little: the not immediately recognized character of lived experience. Then I will

look for clues about what Melanie does to come into contact with her experience and recognize it. The description of this act — completed by those that the explicitation method allowed me to collect — will enable me to evaluate the way the authors guide Melanie in the realization of this act, and therefore the accuracy of Melanie's descriptions. I will defend the idea that the description of the very process of description is an essential condition for understanding, refining, teaching, and evaluating introspection methods, as well as reproducing the descriptions produced.

Difficulties in accessing lived experience

The authors describe extensively the difficulties in accessing and describing the experience that is actually occurring at the moment of the beep: the fleeting and changeable character of experience, the tendency of the subject to shift from the description of the singular experience toward hasty generalizations, to infiltrate his/her theories, beliefs and presuppositions in the description of the experience, the absorption into exterior objects to the detriment of inner experience, the lack of adequate vocabulary to describe experience, the distorting effect of metaphors. Another difficulty, that seems to underlie all the previous ones, is pointed out repeatedly by Melanie without always being expressly raised by the authors: the not immediately recognized character of experience, the fact that it is not immediately accessible to awareness and therefore to description.

For example, from the first beep of the first day, Melanie notices that 'I couldn't feel myself smiling. I wasn't aware of myself smiling, but after the beep I was, you know, "Oh! I'm smiling right now"' (p. 67). Melanie confirms this lack of awareness in the next part of the interview: 'It wasn't until after the beep that I became much more aware of the fact that, Oh I am sitting with my legs tucked underneath me, and I have this smile on my face, and I am holding this piece of paper. That didn't come until after the beep kind of compelled me to examine what I'm doing' (p. 73).

Here Melanie testifies the surprise ('Oh!') that she feels just after the beep when discovering that she was smiling, without being really aware of it.

Later (beep 5.1, p. 179), Melanie makes a similar observation about a tension in her body:

Melanie: After the beep I noticed that I was a little bit tense, but not before.

Russ: And so at the beep was there in your awareness any...

Melanie: No.

Russ: So at the very precise moment of the beep is it true to say that really the only portion of the anxiety was the *knowledge* of the anxiety?

Melanie: Um hm.

Russ: So what's happening is that there is something in your body, which is experiencing anxiety, but you're not aware of that.

Melanie: Right.

What Melanie is clearly saying here is that she has a certain knowledge or awareness of being anxious, without being aware of the bodily sensations associated with this anxiety. As Russ reformulates it, the bodily process related to anxiety 'seems to be outside her awareness', or 'isn't in her awareness directly', while the recognition of anxiety 'is in her awareness in a not particularly articulated way'. It is the interruption created by the beep that allows her to become clearly aware of these bodily sensations (pp. 179–180).

Russ calls 'feeling fact of body' these emotional processes that seem to be ongoing in the body (e.g. fists clenching, face flushing, heart pounding) without being immediately noticed (p. 187). However, Melanie's interviews show that this unrecognized character is not limited to the bodily sensations associated with an emotion, and that it can affect other dimensions of experience. Melanie gives us a nice example of this in interview 3.3 (unfortunately unrecorded because of a technical malfunction): 'At the moment of the beep, before the sentence had been completed in her thoughts, she had the general sense of its entire meaning... Since the beep interrupts Melanie mid-speech as it were, we can observe (if the report is accurate) that the conscious thought is already formed before the speech is complete. It runs, half-articulated, somewhat ahead of the speech' (pp. 136–138). What Melanie is discovering here is the existence of a non-verbal meaning, prior to expression. Usually unnoticed, the 'what is about to be said' (Russ, p. 138) is disclosed here thanks to the interruption of the beep. As Russ notes, this interesting observation calls into question the theory according to which thought is of a verbal nature:¹ 'If the thought is complete before the inner speech is complete, inner speech can't be the medium of the thought, can it?' (p. 138).

[1] Gendlin has systematically explored this non-verbal dimension and the process enabling us to relate to it in the process of expression (1962, and <http://www.focusing.org>). I have helped subjects to describe this dimension in numerous interviews (Petitmengin, 2007).

In the three situations described, it seems that it is the absorption of Melanie in the object or objective of her activity which occults the unrecognized part of her experience. For example, at the time of beep 5.1, Melanie is absorbed in the activity of recounting what she has to do the following day, more exactly she is realizing that the time which is available between two appointments may not be sufficient to cross the city. The absorption in this thought masks the sensation of physical tension elicited by this thought. At the time of the beep 3.1, it is the absorption in words and the rapidity of expression that conceal the subtle preverbal meaning that precedes them.

I would like to suggest this interpretation on the basis of hundreds of interviews that I have led, observed, read or lived (including several with Russ as interviewer), and also on the basis of my experience of *vipashyana* meditation: the absorption into the object, and more generally in the ‘what’ of experience, seems to mask what is closer to us, the experience itself and ‘how’ it unfolds. This is what Eric expresses in the following sentence, while emphasizing the distinction between the (outer) object of experience and (inner) experience: ‘Things nearby and essential may nonetheless be only poorly seen and rarely reflected on — such as one’s eyeglasses. I may talk more coherently about, and reach more accurate judgments about, the road I’m driving on than the steering wheel I use to drive on it. (I know that the road curves 90 degrees, but can I say how far I need to rotate the steering wheel to make that turn?)... We normally observe, attend to, think about, and describe *outward* events, not inner ones’ (p. 236).

Which generic term should we use to qualify an experience which is lived through without the subject being aware of living it? Is it not a contradiction in terms to speak of ‘non conscious experience’? For example, in interview 5.1, Russ says: ‘So what’s happening is that there is something in your body, which is experiencing anxiety, but you’re not aware of that.’ But in box 8.4, he rectifies: ‘I shouldn’t have used the word “experiencing” here, since I’m trying to ask whether the body is undergoing anxiety without that fact being part of her inner experience’ (p. 179). On the other hand, using a word imbued with phenomenological history such as ‘pre-reflective’ — as it is the case in the explicitation method I usually use — gives rise to a risk of misinterpretation or overinterpretation, as Eric signals in box 6.1 (p. 133). For this reason in my commentary I prefer to term these features of experience ‘unrecognized’.

In the examples quoted above, it is difficult to contest that the recognition of previously unrecognized features of experience is triggered by the interruption of the beep, which makes Melanie reorient

her attention from the object of her experience toward her immediate experience. Russ insists very much on the fact that the beep facilitates the bracketing of presuppositions: by selecting specified moments of experience to be reflected upon and by avoiding retrospection (see for example ‘The beep as the first bracketing step’, p. 268). But it seems that it is also and mostly the reorientation of attention triggered by the beep which, by enabling the subject to become aware of what is there, stops for an instant her/his usual tendency to substitute theory to experience.

The interruption of the beep brings to mind the gong that in some Zen monasteries calls the monks back to their immediate experience (Hurlburt and Akhter, 2006, p. 296). It also reminds us of some of the protocols designed by the supporters of the method of genetic realization (Aktualgenese), consisting of interrupting or disrupting an activity (for example of visual perception or expression), in order to elicit the awareness and description of phases or characteristics of the activity which are usually concealed by the speed of the process and the absorption into the object (Werner, 1956).

But does the interruption of the beep make it possible to recognize *all* the unrecognized elements? As Eric remarks, it is ‘quite possible that Melanie is missing whole modalities of experience that are difficult to discern and report — such as perhaps imageless or “unsymbolised” thinking, if it exists, or unattended visual experience — focusing on and remembering, instead, only those aspects that happen to come to mind first or are easiest to parse’ (p. 246). Is not it the function of the interview to lead the subject to become aware of dimensions which are not directly accessible, and that the beep is not sufficient to bring into awareness? And then, how can we help the subject to recognize what is present but unrecognized in his/her experience? How can we elicit the required reorientation of attention?

Coming into contact with one’s experience

But how can we help someone to perform an action without knowing what it consists of? To accompany subjects in this act of recognition, it seems to me indispensable to acquire an acquaintance with this act and its variants, and with the different ways to manage or to fail to accomplish it. And therefore to be interested in what subjects *do* to describe their experience. Only a precise knowledge of what they do can allow the investigator to help them, through relevant questions and prompts, to refine, improve, in brief to learn to perform this act accurately.

In their interviews with Melanie as well as in their discussions, I have been struck by the lack of interest of Russ and Eric in what Melanie does to answer their questions. The authors agree on the fact that accurate introspection requires a degree of skill, which in most people is uncultivated. Russ greatly insists on the fact that this skill is acquired progressively, in an iterative way. But what does this know-how precisely consist of? What does the subject iteratively learn? To answer that he learns how to ‘bracket presuppositions’ seems very insufficient. Very concretely, what does Melanie do at the precise moment where Russ asks her ‘what was your experience at the moment of the beep?’ What does ‘*looking back* after the beep’ (Russ, p. 166) consist of? What does Melanie do ‘when beeped and called to look at [that bodily process which seemed to be outside her awareness]’ (Russ, p. 179)? Asked by Russ, a few hours after the beep, to describe the experience which was ongoing just before the beep, Melanie has to recall her experience. On two occasions, Eric leads her to describe how she goes about it. For example, just before beep 2.1, Melanie is reading a novel and forming ‘in her head’ the image of the scene corresponding to what she is reading. With the objective to ask Melanie to describe the variations of her attentional focus, Eric tries to make her describe what she does to describe the image (p. 100):

Eric: And were you recreating that image now when you were just reporting it?

Melanie: Yes

We note in passing that Eric’s question is very interpretative, a more neutral question would have been: ‘What were you doing now when you were just reporting this image?’ But the question is interesting because it enables him to collect a first indication about how Melanie goes about describing a past picture: she relies on a present picture.

It is also the case during the experience 1.3 (p. 89):

Russ: So when you’re thinking about this image now, it looks [...] like you’re reviewing this image again. Is that true?

Melanie: Yes.

Just before beep 4.1, Melanie is remembering the sensations she feels while scuba diving:

Eric: And are you generating [this description of a sensation of being ‘twisted’], do you think, on the basis of a *sharp memory* [my emphasis] of the emotional experience? Or are you kind of re-creating the emotional experience now and then kind of observing it now as you’re reporting? How would you describe that process?

Melanie: Remembering the way it feels like. Because the way I took my notes was to engage my memory to think about the experience...

Eric: Um hm.

Melanie: ...and I guess the way I'm trying to do that is to put myself... to remember the exact situation and exactly how it felt.

Although Eric's questions remain interpretative, they allow Melanie to provide interesting details: in order to be able to describe her past bodily sensations, she has to put herself back in the situation where she was feeling them, and to feel again how they felt. But instead of helping Melanie to deepen the description of what she actually does, Eric immediately introduces his own theories about memory. He distinguishes two ways of remembering: 'an abstract remembering' on which he does not give any other details and a 'reconstruction' which consists in 'imaginatively putting yourself back in the situation you were previously in' and 'then kind of provoking some of the old reactions' (p. 150), in other words in 'attempting to re-create the experience, then reporting on the recreated experience, with the expectation that what is true of it will be true of the original experience' (p. 151). Eric notes: 'this may seem perverse, but I think... that her claim here may be more reliable as a reconstruction than as simple recall' (p. 151).

If a 'simple recall' consists in an 'abstract remembering', how could such a memory provide Melanie with the smallest chance of giving any precision about the sensoriality concretely associated with the experience? How could the fact of remembering only in an abstract way having felt a sensation or an emotion, or imagining a scene, allow her to describe this experience in detail? On the other hand, what else is a 'sharp memory' of an experience, than a recall, a refreshment of the past experience, intense enough to allow the whole sensoriality associated with the experience to come back here and now? As Melanie explains very accurately, to describe her experience she has to refresh, to replay or re-enact it.

What does this process, which is indispensable for retrieving past information — even if we were aware of it in the past situation — consist of? To answer this question, the practitioners of the explicitation method have collected hundreds of descriptions of it and closely observed the subjects while in the act of accomplishing it. This process, which in the explicitation method is called 'evocation', does not consist of 'attempting to re-create the experience', as Eric explains, but is in fact involuntary.² Not only is the experience memorized

without any intention of memorization, but the *recalling* of the memory is also involuntary: it does not require any effort, but occurs spontaneously, usually through the intermediary of a sensorial trigger. It allows the recognition of elements of the experience — sensations, emotions, thoughts — which had not been memorized voluntarily, and sometimes even recognized, at the precise moment of the experience. For example, you did not voluntarily memorize the first thought you had when you woke up this morning. But this information is still available. You can turn yourself toward this moment, and make this information reappear. And to do that, it is quite probable that there would be no other way for you than returning in thought to your bed at the moment when you awoke, recalling what you were seeing at that moment, the birds singing or the alarm clock going off, and the position of your body. These sensorial triggers may then allow the emergence into awareness, by itself, of your first thought of the morning.

Precise clues indicate that the subject is in the process of evoking, and thus coming into contact with, his/her experience. For example, verbal indicators such as the use of the word ‘I’, the present tense, the specific context indicators of place and time, the concrete and detailed character (as opposed to conceptual and general) of the vocabulary used, the slowing down of speech: all these signs indicate that the subject is in touch with a particular situation, and that he is not in the process of reciting theoretical knowledge or reconstructing a false memory. Co-verbal gestures are another sign of evocation. These usually unconscious gestures (McNeill, 1992), which occur even when the interviewer cannot see them (Iverson and Goldin-Meadow, 1998), do not seem to be intended to transmit information to the interviewer. But rather, they occur because the subject is in contact — or attempting to make contact — with his distant past or recent past experience. All these objective clues enable the investigator to recognize an ‘embodied utterance position’, very different from an ‘abstract utterance position’ where the subject expresses himself on the basis of a vague memory of an experience, or his representations, beliefs or judgments about his experience. The closer the contact is, the less chance there is that presuppositions will infiltrate the process. In a similar way, the Focusing method has detected precise linguistic and somatic clues making it possible to evaluate precisely the ‘experiencing level’, that

The reader may refer to Vermersch (2004a; 2004b; 2006b; 2009) and Petitmengin (2006). Vermersch throws fresh light on this process based on the model of retention and awakening in Husserl’s theory of passive memory (1925/2001), and on the theory of ‘involuntary memory’ or ‘concrete memory’ (Gusdorf, 1951).

is the degree of contact of a person with his/her experience (Hendricks, 2009).

Even if the experience to be described has only just occurred, for example at the time just after the beep, a specific act is necessary to evoke it. I have been able to verify by myself while experimenting the DES method that the temporal proximity of the experience doesn't exempt me from accomplishing this act. On several occasions, the interruption created by the beep in the flux of my experience has even in a way 'erased' the immediately previous moment: 'Where was I? What was I doing?' It was only by unwinding again the 'thread' of my experience from a previous instant that had 'come back' to me more easily that I finally succeeded in remembering the instant just before the beep. The accurate accomplishment of the act of evoking is less related to the delay between the initial experience and its description, than to the awareness or 'training' of the subject with regard to entering into contact with his experience. Russ explains this clearly: 'My sense is that the length of the delay is more crucial early in the training of a DES subject, and that the interval can probably be relaxed somewhat with a subject who, because of DES experience, knows what is being asked and what is at stake' (p. 285). In fact, the length of time elapsed plays a very minor role: usually, we are not even in contact with our present experience.

Helping the subject to come into contact with his/her experience

The very specific act which makes it possible to come into contact with one's experience may be achieved in a more or less efficient way. Far from being 'innate', it has to be learnt and practised. In the context of an interview, it is the role of the investigator to help the subject to achieve it accurately. For example, in the explicitation method, it is very important for the interviewer to help the subject to rediscover precisely the spatio-temporal context of the experience (when, where, with whom?), and then with precision the visual, auditory, tactile and kinaesthetic, olfactory and possibly gustatory sensations associated with the experience, until the past situation is 're-enacted', to the point that it is more present than the interview situation. It is only when, thanks to the clues listed above, the interviewer observes that the evocation state is sufficiently intense and stabilized, that he can enable the interviewee, with the help of appropriate questioning, to turn his attention towards his inner experience and describe it. Because of the instability of his attention, and his tendency to move from the singular

to the general, it is, however, rare for the interviewee to remain in the evocation state throughout the interview. Sometimes an ill-advised question or reformulation on the interviewer's part, or an external noise, can be sufficient for the interviewee to lose contact with the past experience. When the interviewer observes that the interviewee is leaving the evocation state, one of the processes enabling the interviewer to bring the interviewee back into this state consists of reformulating the description of the sensorial context of the experience, or formulating questions about this context, to which the person cannot reply without referring to the past situation, without 'going back to it'.

However, evoking the experience is not sufficient to become aware of all its dimensions. This awareness requires other reorientations of attention, and other devices for eliciting them.³ In this commentary I am focusing on the act of evocation which, by allowing us to come into contact with our experience, is the very condition of possibility of this process of recognition.

The elements of description of this act we have collected provide criteria enabling a more precise evaluation of what Russ and Eric do to help Melanie to achieve it, and therefore the accuracy of her descriptions — whereas Eric is reduced to 'radical uncertainty about Melanie's reports. I have no idea where to doubt and where to believe, so I am left only doubting' (p. 249).

Interestingly, Melanie, by herself and apparently without being invited to do it, often starts by describing the context of the experience: my experience as an interviewer leads me to think that it is not only to enable Russ and Eric to understand her experience that she does this, but also to immerse herself in it again. Russ helps her to do this in different ways.

First, the 'contract of communication'⁴ that Russ has with Melanie is very important: 'You should know that you may stop sampling at any time, and decline to discuss any experience for any reason.' This is a necessary condition in order for Melanie to feel at ease in accomplishing this unusual task. Russ usually strongly encourages the careful focus on the single experience being described: when Melanie drifts away from a description of this experience to make comments or generalizations, he asks a question that brings her back to the

[3] The reader may refer to Petitmengin (2006), Vermersch (1994/2008), Vermersch (2009) and to numerous articles (in French) on www.expliciter.fr. An analysis of the effects of the investigator's prompts (or 'perlocutory effects') is provided in Vermersch (2006a; 2007). Examples are provided in Maurel (2009).

[4] Vermersch (1994/2008, chapter 6) provides a description of this contract and of its function in the context of the explicitation interview.

experience itself. Russ often reformulates Melanie's descriptions, which also has the effect of helping her to stabilize or refocus her attention on the experience being described.

In a very skilful way, by reformulating Melanie's descriptions in the present tense, Russ induces the present tense in Melanie's descriptions, which is a way to help Melanie to come into contact with her experience, here and now. For example (beep 1.3, pp. 81–82):

Melanie: I said 'Oh, I remember the shed now.' And right I finished speaking the beep came.

Russ: so you're saying 'Oh, I remember the shed now' aloud?

[...]

Russ: And in your awareness is...

Melanie: In my awareness is that I can feel my mouth close. And then also I have a mental image of the structure we're talking about, of the shed. [...] and I'm just remembering it from the view I saw that day.

But Eric systematically resumes the interview in the past tense, which induces the past tense in Melanie's report and probably makes her lose this contact a little, for example (p. 170):

Russ: So the apartments that you're talking about are on the street ahead of you?

Melanie: Yeah, they're the ones that are across the street, on the other corner.

Russ: Okay. Sorry, Eric.

Eric: Um hm, that's fine. So you said there were other cars that were in the image?

Melanie: Um, I couldn't tell you that.

In a very relevant way too, Russ draws Melanie's attention to her gestures, for example (beep 5.1, p. 177):

Russ: And the [feeling of anxiety] seems to be in the back of your mind, you said?

Melanie: Yeah.

Russ: And when you say 'back of your mind' your hands are going...

Melanie: Yeah, it actually felt like it was in the rear of my head.

Melanie's gestures are indications that she is already in touch with her experience, feeling again the sensations she was feeling just before the beep. The description (and maybe the reproduction) by Russ of her gestures enables Melanie to deepen the evocation of this moment, by

coming into even closer contact with the felt dimension of her experience. Moreover, as she is not fully aware of these gestures while making them,⁵ Russ's prompts have also the effect of helping her to become aware of them, and to draw Melanie's attention to the corresponding — maybe unrecognized — sensations. In another interesting passage of interview 2.2 (p. 115), where Melanie is describing an emotion of sadness and dread she felt while reading a book, Russ's drawing her attention to her gestures helps her to refine the awareness and description of the bodily feeling associated with this emotion:

Russ: And you've got your hand short on your chest. Is that where the pressing seems to be?

Melanie: Um hm, yeah.

Russ: And is it clearly there? Or does it seem like sort of all over with a center there? Or...

Melanie: I would say that probably all over with a definite center feeling right at that spot.

Russ. Okay. And when you indicate that spot, you have your hands sort of outstretched covering whatever... six or eight inches.

Melanie: Yeah.

Russ: So we're not talking about a small...

Melanie: It's not like a knot, but it's a more diffuse area.

In a passage of interview 4.1, Melanie is describing the sensation of 'twisting' she uses to feel while scuba diving. Once again, Russ draws her attention to her gestures: '...And you sort of twisted with your hands...'; 'And you're aiming forward with your hand...'; 'And you're indicating it from your chest, sort of...' (pp. 140 and 143). The presence of gestures shows that Melanie is retrieving this sensation. Through his questions, Russ keeps her in touch with this sensation, and enables her to refine her awareness and description of it. However, in this example, to answer Russ's questions precisely, Melanie does not seem to evoke the scene preceding the beep — Melanie was at the restaurant with her boyfriend, *evoking* her sensations while scuba diving — but directly her experience of scuba diving, which is in fact quite relevant here. The difficulty is that Melanie, who is not skilled in the act of evoking, does not seem to evoke a particular experience, but her experience of scuba diving 'in general'. To get a precise description of the sensation of 'twisting' that Melanie feels while

[5] As we have noticed it in the previous section, co-verbal gestures are usually unconscious (McNeill, 1992).

scuba diving, it would have been useful to ask her to choose a precise experience of scuba diving, situated in space and time. On the other hand, if Russ's goal as an investigator is to make Melanie describe her experience just before the beep, which was to *evoke* her sensations while diving, he would have to ask suitable questions. A better acquaintance with the evocation process would have enabled him to refine his questioning here.

A better knowledge of the process of becoming aware, and especially of evocation, would enable Russ to guide Melanie in an even more relevant way.

For example, the guidance of evocation, at the beginning of the interviews, seems non-existent. The first question is very brusque: 'What was in your awareness at the moment of the beep?' Russ doesn't ask any question — for example about the visual and auditory context of the experience — that would help Melanie to 'put herself back' in the experience preceding the beep. Melanie, who is far from being an expert, is not guided. I also noted, in my own interviews with Russ, that he let me do this work alone, sometimes without even leaving me the necessary time to do it. Indeed evoking a past situation is not immediate, it requires at least a few seconds. Moreover the interviews with Melanie are interspersed with abstract discussions with Eric. After these discussions, Russ as well as Eric resumes his questioning without helping Melanie at all to come into contact again with her experience. This is the main reason why, most of the time, like Eric, I am not convinced of the accuracy of Melanie's descriptions: she is seldom in contact ('in touch', as Russ says it p.120) with her experience, through lack of systematic guidance by Russ in the recalling of experience.

But obviously Russ is not interested in this process. For example, interview 1.3 contains the following exchange (p. 82):

Russ: Okay. And at the same time you also have an image of the shed.

Melanie: Right, as if you've opened the front door and you're standing just inside. I've only seen this building once, and I'm just remembering it from the view I saw that day.

Russ: And in your image, whether or not it's the same as anything that actually exists on the planet, what do you see in the image?

Melanie is describing a remembered scene. She describes her perceptual position — that is the viewpoint from which she is looking⁶ — in the remembered scene: 'as if you've opened the front door and you're

[6] See, for example, Andreas and Andreas (2009).

standing just inside', while specifying that it is the same as in the initial situation: 'I'm just remembering it from the view I saw that day.' Through this detail she is giving a precious indication about what she does to recall this scene, to 'put herself back' in it: in imagination, she takes exactly the same position as in the initial situation. Russ brings her back a little abruptly to the description of the content of the scene, missing this structural feature of this experience of Melanie, which is maybe characteristic of what Melanie usually does to recall a scene and maybe characteristic of the evocation act in general. This feature indeed emerges from the numerous descriptions we have collected: one of the essential conditions required to retrieve precisely the experience which has been lived, in other words to evoke a situation, is to adopt in imagination the same perceptual position. It is for this reason that, to guide interviewees toward the evocation of a past situation, we may use prompts such as: 'Take again the position you had', 'Look around you again at what you were seeing'.

On other occasions, his inadequate knowledge of the evocation process leads Russ to ask Melanie to carry out extremely difficult operations. For example, in interview 2.2 (p. 111) he asks her: 'And in what way is this experience the same or different from the experience of the previous beep? In both cases you're reading and watching an image...' What is Melanie supposed to do to answer? Russ asks her to compare two scenes she has evoked at different moments, which involves accomplishing a complex operation of double re-evocation, complemented by an operation of comparison, without helping her at all. In box 5.10, Russ states: 'this "same or different" question is one of the most non-leading questions possible. It focuses Melanie directly on the phenomenon without preferring one explanation to the other' (p. 112). This remark seems to me enlightening about a characteristic of the whole of the interviews: since Russ concentrates on how to *avoid* the infiltration of presuppositions, he is blind to the acts Melanie has to *perform* in order to answer his questions. It is as if his focus on a process of letting go prevented him from recognizing the positive acts — entering into contact with one's experience — which may prepare and elicit this process. And this lack of knowledge weakens his questioning.

Finally, in box 4 (p.76) Russ defends the need to focus on a single moment of the experience being described. My experience of the explicitation interview, as an investigator as well as a subject, has led me to notice on the contrary that the evocation of a single moment often requires retrieving the 'thread' of the preceding moments, and that focusing on a singular moment may even prevent the evocation.

Moreover, when the evocation of a singular moment is intense enough, appropriate guidance may enable the subject to describe the immediately following or previous moments, and instant after instant the whole unfolding of the experience. Such guidance may also enable him to recognize in this single moment an initially unrecognized dynamics. The subject, Russ says, is supposed to try ‘to “freeze” and remember whatever experience was ongoing at the last undisturbed moment before the beep began — whatever was “before the footlights of consciousness”’ (p. 58). It seems to me that the two metaphors included in this sentence are inadequate. To enter into contact with one’s experience, it is necessary to respect its fluid and dynamic character, and therefore not ‘to freeze’ it. And entering into contact with it on the contrary enables its unfolding. By ignoring the dynamics of experience, the DES method narrows its field of investigation considerably. Moreover, by focusing on what is ‘before the footlights of consciousness’, it limits itself to a minute part of experience, underestimating the immense part of what is unrecognized.

Describing the process of description

Why does Russ prevent himself from studying the experience of accessing and describing one’s experience? It is because he limits himself to the study of the ‘pristine experience’ which precedes a beep. As he often reiterates, Russ is not interested in the experience which follows the beep. Since the experience of accessing and describing one’s experience is triggered by the ‘beep’ and the questions of the interviewer, it is not a ‘pristine experience’, and therefore ignored. In a private communication, Russ has invoked two arguments against the reflexive study of the process of description. The first one is the argument of infinite regression: describing the act of description would be ‘the start of an infinitely required meta-reflection’. According to the second argument, the only place in this process where contact with lived experience takes place is the initial experience: ‘All the other reflections and meta-reflections and metaⁿ-reflections are delicately balanced on that single point’, and no matter how careful they are, that balance, according to Russ, will collapse. I think that both are abstract arguments which do not work in practice. Putting it into practice shows that describing the process of description is both possible and useful. The objective of this meta-description is a pragmatic one: it is to enable investigators to guide and reproduce the process of becoming aware and describing. In both cases, an additional level of meta-description is not required. The infinite regression argument is no

more relevant in this case than for the description of any other practice. For example, in scientific publications a researcher is required to describe not only his results, but also the method which enabled him to reach them, in order for them to be reproducible: this reproducibility does not require him to also describe the process which enabled him to design his method. In the same way, the description that a practitioner (for example a weaver) may provide of his know-how in order to facilitate its transfer to other practitioners does not require him to also describe how he went about producing this description. However, the difference is that unlike descriptions of most other skills, the description of the description process is auto-referential. But this does not imply that I leave lived experience for abstract levels, the only point of contact being the initial experience: the experiences of becoming aware of one's experience and describing it are also experiences, which do not belong to a different and more abstract level, but are as concretely and bodily lived as any other experiences. It may even be the case that understanding the process which enables us to become aware of our experience, as well as the process which blinds us to it, makes us enter into closer contact with our experience, and teaches us more about human experience, than the understanding of any other experience. But as it is the case for most skilled practitioners, the concentration on the object of the practice — producing descriptions of lived experience — may conceal the 'how' of this practice, namely the act of description. To deprive oneself of the awareness and of the description of this act is very limiting for several reasons.

First, this description enables the refinement and improvement of this process. In the same way as turning our attention from the content of our reading towards our process of reading would enable us to improve it, turning our attention from the content of our descriptions to the process of description would enable us to understand it better and refine it. For example we would be able to acquire a finer knowledge of the process of co-determination and mutual elicitation of the 'gestures' of bracketing presuppositions and coming into contact with one's experience.

Second, such a description enables us to elicit, guide and teach this process⁷ more efficiently. It also makes it possible to evaluate the degree of contact of a subject with his/her experience and thus the accuracy of a description.

[7] Even if one could accurately argue that describing a know-how is not enough to teach it, that an implicit part is always left, and that a direct contact with the expert is required in order for a person to appropriate his description, this description is nevertheless extremely useful.

Third, describing the process of becoming aware of one's experience and describing it enables us to compare what different methods do in order to elicit, guide and teach this process. For example, it could enable us to compare the techniques of the DES method and of the explicitation method. We could evaluate to what extent these methods are compatible and complementary, and which one is more adapted to the description of which type or dimension of experience. This would also allow the progressive creation of a more and more refined and shared vocabulary on first-person methods, an essential condition for constituting a research community in this domain.

Finally, the reproducibility of a result is the foundation of any scientific validation. In order to be considered as scientifically valid, a result must be verifiable, at least potentially, by any researcher. And in order to be verifiable, it has to be accompanied by a description of its own process of production. Now if the process of becoming aware and describing a lived experience is not a random event, but has a generic structure, its description makes it possible to reproduce the description of a given type of experience, and therefore to corroborate or invalidate a given description.⁸ This opens a path towards a rigorous and disciplined study, a science of lived experience.

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[8] This issue is developed in Petitmengin and Bitbol (2009).

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