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*Coming into Contact with
Experience*

A Reply to Jesse Butler

We fully agree with the main idea developed by Jesse Butler in his response to our article ‘The Validity of First-Person Descriptions as Authenticity and Coherence’: since we *are* our lived experience, experience cannot be considered as a knowable *object*. There is no distinction, in our knowledge of experience, between a knowing subject and a known object. We also agree that the metaphors of proximity and contact, because of the dichotomy they introduce between a touching subject and a touched object, are not well suited to describing this identity. However, Jesse Butler (hereafter JB) seems to have misunderstood the way we used this metaphor in our article: we did not use it to try to characterise an epistemic property of our first person knowledge or *consciousness* of experience. We used it instead to draw the reader’s attention to the process of *becoming aware* of one’s experience.

What first-person methods practitioners usually discover with great surprise is in fact that a large part of their experience eludes them, that they often live it without recognizing it.¹ Living an experience does not necessarily amount to knowing it, being fully aware of it. Therefore we cannot simply say that ‘the knowledge and the experience are one and the same thing’ (JB).

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[1] In this reply we will avoid the words ‘pre-reflective’ and ‘reflective’, which are imbued with the visual metaphor.

Let us admit with JB that when I am sneezing, I usually know that I am sneezing. In this case, knowing what it is like to sneeze is nothing else than undergoing the experience of sneezing, and conversely undergoing the (conscious) experience of sneezing amounts to knowing it. But do I always know that I am smiling? Am I always fully conscious of my emotions, inner discourse and imagery? I may experience an inner feeling without being aware of experiencing it. In this case, I cannot say that undergoing the experience of this feeling amounts to knowing it. This knowledge is not immediate, it is rather the result of a specific process, for which the metaphor of coming into contact is not irrelevant.

For example, let us imagine that I go for a walk in the countryside, and at some point decide to stop in a glade and contemplate the landscape. First I am so absorbed into thoughts related to the article I am currently writing, that I forget to look at the landscape and in fact do not even see it. After a few minutes I realise that I have ‘drifted away’, and I come back to the glade. I also realise that for the whole of this time, I was distracted but was not aware of being distracted. This is an example of the widespread phenomenon of ‘mind wandering’, which has just been confirmed by a large-scale study showing that people are thinking about what is not happening almost as often as they are thinking about what is (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010).² When my mind is wandering, I do not only ‘leave’ the situation I am living here and now, but I am not even conscious of leaving it. I am therefore ‘far away’ from it in the second degree (Petitmengin, 2006, p. 233). A re-focusing of my attention may enable me to ‘come back’ here and now.

Let us return to the glade. Now I begin to look around me. First, I immediately recognize elements — a range of poplars, a stream — in which my attention becomes absorbed. It is as if my gaze stretched out, projected itself towards the objects, over there. I stray away from my immediate experience. But I may also divert my attention from these objects to direct it towards ‘what it is like to look at this landscape, what this landscape does to me’. Then I contemplate the landscape in a global, panoramic, unfocused way, without concentrating on specific details. I do not go in search of elements of the landscape, but I make myself receptive to it, letting the colours, the sounds, the smells come to me, impregnate me, letting myself be ‘touched’ by them. I may then recognize feelings that I had been unaware of — such as the bodily resonance of the sounds and the colours. In the course of this process, my attention has diverted itself from its

[2] The second important result of this study is that doing so makes people unhappy.

absorption in the exterior objects towards something more evanescent, more intimate, somehow ‘closer’ to me³ — my experience of the landscape.

It is to qualify these attentional ‘gestures’, enabling us to become aware of more and more unrecognized dimensions of our experience, that we use the terms ‘coming into contact’ and ‘getting in touch’ with experience. The tactile metaphor seems to us more relevant than the visual one not only because it suggests proximity instead of distancing, but also because it suggests progressivity, while vision implies immediacy.

Are these ‘gestures’ the metaphorical transposition in our inner experience of sensori-motor schemata related to the structure of our body and external space? According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), to whom JB refers, such metaphorical transpositions have the power to deeply structure not only the way we talk about our experience, but the way we live it; we must therefore use them with caution. However we are exploring a different hypothesis, according to which the very distinction between an ‘inner’ subjective space and an ‘outer’ objective space would be the result of subtle micro-gestures of separation, opposition and appropriation, of which sensori-motor schemata would only be the amplification and stiffening (Petitmengin, 2007). These micro-gestures occur in a dimension of experience endowed with a kind of spatiality which does not stem from metaphorical transposition, and whose characteristics are very different from those of objective space. The difficulty is nevertheless to create a vocabulary referring to this ‘lived space’ without projecting on it the structure of objective space.

Once my experience is recognized and fully conscious, there is not the slightest shadow of a difference between me, my experience and my knowledge of that experience. Moreover, I realize that I had always been living with this unrecognized part, that I had always been it. We agree that in this case, ‘first-person experiential knowledge of conscious experience simply consists of the conscious experience itself, as a lived state undergone by a conscious subject’ (JB). The metaphor of contact loses its *raison d’être*. It is nevertheless true, as we noticed previously, that we may undergo our experience without recognizing it. Experience is sometimes somewhat opaque to itself. In this sense we may deceive ourselves about it, and in this sense first-person knowledge is fallible. It is thus undeniable that we may

[3] Even if, as we have noted, this reorientation of attention from the ‘outer’ to the ‘inner’ world results in the vanishing of the very distinction between these two worlds (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2009).

also be mistaken in *describing* our experience. But we have no means to compare directly an experience with its description. Therefore a description cannot be considered ‘true’ or ‘false’ depending on whether it represents or reflects the initial experience more or less adequately. All we have is the process of coming into contact with one’s experience, and the other acts enabling us to produce a first-person description. All we can do is assess the accuracy of these acts. In other words, we can say both (1) that first-person descriptions are not *about* something completely different from them, and (2) that nevertheless the process that leads to them can be appropriate or inappropriate. Unlike Dennett (2002), we must then accept that reports of experience are not infallible (Schwitzgebel, 2007); for they are subject to criticism in view of the accuracy or inaccuracy of the acts that led to them. This is why describing these acts and identifying their subjective and objective evaluation criteria seems to us a very promising research avenue for the science of consciousness.

References

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