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On Life Beneath the Subject/Object Duality

A Reply to Pierre Steiner

Pierre Steiner (hereafter PS) asks us a precise question in his reply to our article ‘The validity of first-person descriptions as authenticity and coherence’ (Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009). He wonders whether we might endorse a pragmatist conception of experience that avoids characterizing it as ‘subjective’ in opposition to an ‘objective’ domain. Our answer is threefold:

1. We strongly sympathize with the non-dualist view of experience that is carefully developed and advocated in PS’s paper. For us as for PS, ‘lived experience is neither subjective nor objective but merely *in situ*’. The motivations of this approval can be seen in our previous writings. To begin with, the epistemological position of one of us (named ‘transcendental pragmatism’) implies a systematic inquiry into how the various aspects of subject/object duality are elaborated by way of stabilization of certain norms of research practice, rather than pre-existent (Bitbol *et al.*, 2009). Even more importantly, the work of another of us has brought out the possibility of complete loss (or at least increased ‘permeability’) of the archetypal inner/outer boundary, at the deepest level of pre-reflective experience (Petitmengin, 2006 and 2007). The availability of this type of experience strongly suggests that the subject/object divide is a secondary byproduct of mental activity, rather than a primary *given*.

As PS rightly assumes, we then reject every single presupposition of the objectivist account of introspection. Introspection notoriously

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fails when it is construed this way. Introspecting (if this word is still appropriate in our alternative epistemological context) should not amount to departing from the immediacy of experience and striving forwards to reach one of its stable extracts considered as an inner object. Rather, it should imply relaxing any objectifying tension and undoing its conceptual outcomes in such a way that little of experience remains unattended. If properly carried out, 'introspecting' should first give us renewed contact with the dense and still undifferentiated continuum of experience from which the subject/object polarity is ready to reemerge at any moment. Later on, after this contact has been recovered, and verbal reports that fully express such intimacy with/in experience have been collected, it is time for researchers to start an objectifying procedure, and elaborate a new type of invariant drawn from this material.

2. Yet, most of our past writings bear the mark of the subject/object divide in their lexicon. We often spoke of *inner* gestures, *subjective* experience, or even *private* access to experienced contents. This still makes sense (in a language game of standard oppositions and archetypal debates), despite the conviction we share with PS that the subject/object duality lacks credentials from both a phenomenological and epistemological standpoint. Indeed, our aim is not so much to theorize about a neutral (pre-objective and pre-subjective) field as to open ways for *accessing* it in practice. A certain type of gesture must be performed to that effect, and since these gestures are obviously neither public nor external, the most economical way to guide readers towards reenacting them is to rely on pre-philosophical language and call them 'private' and 'inner'. In other terms, this lexicon is by no means descriptive, but rather performative.

Besides, we can provide it with a philosophical justification by noticing that there are two ways of using (and thereby ascribing meaning to) the adjective 'subjective'. In its familiar use 'subjective' means 'a restrictively personal and local view on objects'. But in Kant's transcendental use, 'subjective' refers to 'the universal background condition for anything like an objective world to make sense'. Kant thus referred to space and time as 'subjective' *forms of intuition* that are nevertheless a condition of possibility of any experience *of objects*. 'Subjective' means *less* than objects in the first case, and *more* than objects in the second case. In our own use of the adjectives 'subjective', 'private', 'inner', the second type of acceptation has usually been favoured, since its performative role was to trigger expansion of the attentional field beyond or beneath its usual narrow focusing on particular objects.

3. We however part company with PS when he attempts to merge the criticisms of the subject/object duality formulated by pragmatism on the one hand and phenomenology on the other hand. True, these criticisms are *isomorphic*, and they both point towards a neutral realm out of which the two poles of the duality may arise. However, they completely diverge as to the nature of this neutral realm. In apparent contradiction with its own aim, pragmatism tends to objectify the neutral realm by identifying it to the ongoing *actions of an organism in its environment*. Accordingly, pragmatism offers definitions in which first-person experience appears secondary to something else (action). Dewey's short statement according to which '... experience *is* all that we *do*' clearly displays this order or priorities in which action comes before experience and helps defining it. By contrast, phenomenology arises from an experiential procedure (called *epochè*) which consists in stepping back from any belief in the existence of a domain of objects, and disclosing reflectively the very fabric of this belief. Here, experience is primary, and no definition is therefore to be given of it.

References

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