

Review of "Explicitation et Phénoménologie" by Pierre Vermersch

Claire Petitmengin

Journal of Consciousness Studies 21, 11-12 (November-December 2014), pp. 196-201

Which would be the methods of a science of lived experience? The elicitation interview is a method of "assisted introspection" which helps the interviewer to collect a very fine-grained description of a given past experience. This method has been used in various contexts, ranging from the cognitive context to describe the emergence of an idea or a decision, to the clinical context to describe the emergence of an epileptic seizure or a painful episode, and to pedagogical, sporting, artistic, technological and managerial contexts. The purpose of Pierre Vermersch's book is not to describe these applications, or the techniques required to conduct an elicitation interview accurately, which are described elsewhere (Vermersch 1994, 2010). The purpose is to develop the theoretical foundations that explain why these techniques are effective, which constitute by themselves a response to the various criticisms that have been levelled at introspection. In other words, the aim is to build the foundations of a method providing access to subjectivity, that is to say a psychology of subjectivity, a psychology "in the first person", or a phenomenological psychology. Vermersch borrows most of these foundations from Husserl's phenomenology, which aims at describing phenomena as they appear to consciousness, while distinguishing his project from Husserl's, which was not to describe singular subjective (psychological) experiences, but to identify the essential and invariant structures of the acts of consciousness.

The book is organized into four parts, which can be read independently. In part I, the author shows that this method is the most recent expression of the immemorial need that human beings have to know their own experience, that is to say their subjectivity, as it appears to them in the first person. Throughout the history of Western thought, this need has been repeatedly denied, fought, discredited and repressed, but alternately, regularly brought up to date, because not taking it into account amounts to losing what makes us human. However for the first time, the methodological and institutional conditions for a science of subjectivity seem to be now satisfied. Among the former, an essential aspect is to consider the access to lived experience as an expert *act*, of which it is possible to describe the unfolding, and therefore possible to be taken as a research object, which opens a huge and largely unexplored field of investigation.

Part II, where Vermersch describes three phenomenological models borrowed from Husserl, that make the elicitation acts intelligible, is the keystone of the book. It is on this part that my commentary will focus.

Part III outlines a phenomenology of the perlocutory effects, that is to say, "what we do to the other with our words." After distinguishing three types of effects: inducing, convincing, and asking, the author examines the modes of production of these effects in the context of an elicitation interview: which questions and prompts are the most appropriate to guide the interviewee in achieving the introspective acts? How can we analyze in real-time the response from the interviewee, in order to determine the content of the question to come?

Part IV resumes the effects of elicitation from the standpoint of the process of creation of meaning or semiosis. Starting from the premise that there is a level of non-verbal experience, and that it is from this level that new meanings can form, the author proposes a model of the stages and transitions of the process of constitution of meaning, from this nonverbal level until the fulfillment of meaning. Then he proposes a model of the various types of reflexive activity which contribute to the creation of meaning: the "réflexion" on knowledge which is already reflexively conscious; the "réfléchissement" that allows the transition from prereflective consciousness to reflective consciousness, which is generated by the elicitation interview; and the "reflètement" as emergence of new meaning, as encountered in the Focusing method developed by Gendlin (Gendlin, 1962).

Let us come back to part II which, in order to develop the theoretical foundations of a phenomenological psychology, uses three models borrowed from Husserl. During any thorough elicitation interview, the subject is surprised to discover elements (acts, states, details of any kind) that he recognizes he has lived, but that he had not noticed when he was living them, and about which he did not know, when he was about to speak, that he would have something to say. To explain this fundamental discrepancy between what the subject thinks he has memorized about his experience and what he can actually remember, and therefore the paradox of a kind of "unconscious consciousness", Vermersch invokes Husserl's model of the three modes of consciousness. Beside an *unconscious* mode (the "field of predonation",), and a *reflective* mode, where consciousness takes itself as an object, Husserl identifies a third mode of consciousness: a direct, in action (terms borrowed by Vermersch from Piaget) or prereflective consciousness, which is characterized, as any consciousness for Husserl, by the intentional seizing of a content, but a content that is not itself seized as being conscious. Vermersch quotes a passage from *Ideen* (Husserl 1950), where Husserl takes the

personal example of a state of joy, first prereflectively lived since his consciousness is entirely absorbed into his unfolding thoughts. At one point in this unfolding, his consciousness "turns towards joy," that becomes reflectively conscious. And while discovering the current presence of joy, he discovers that it was already there, already present in a prereflective mode, before being seized by reflective consciousness. Husserl relies on this example to show that it is possible to access through recollection experiences that have been lived in the prereflective mode, and therefore to submit them to systematic study. However what does the act of "réfléchissement", through which the transition from the prereflective to the reflective mode is achieved, consist in? Husserl said almost nothing of this act. The assumption that Vermersch develops is that it is closely linked to the *presentification* of the past lived experience: "Becoming aware and presentification of the past are two sides of the same activity" (p. 159). And in order to explain the possibility of this presentification - the keystone of the criticism of introspection (see for example Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009) - he uses another model developed by Husserl, that of "passive memory". We are indeed continuously memorizing what we live, but mostly involuntarily, without being aware of memorizing. The memory traces or retentions which are passively constituted in this way gradually lose their vividness, but do not disappear. They can be awakened and come (back) to reflective consciousness, regardless of the time that has elapsed. This recalling mode, which is experienced as the revival of the past situation in all its detail and its sensoriality, allows the recollection of elements that had been memorized without awareness of being memorized and therefore the transition into reflective consciousness of elements which had been initially lived on the prereflective mode. This recalling can be achieved deliberately, a possibility which justifies the deliberate solicitation of this act in the elicitation interview under the name of "evocation". But this act being itself involuntary (how can I target a content that I do not even know I have memorized?), the interviewer's role consists in using devices that can trigger it indirectly, for example by asking questions about the sensorial context of the past experience, that it is impossible to answer without evoking the experience.

On the basis of this recalling in evocation, the elicitation interview then consists in suggesting to the listener, through specific questions, modulations of his attention within the evoked experience. Understanding the organization of the attentional field and the dynamics of attentional movements is then crucial for conducting an interview. The author presents the attentional field as structured according to three different topics: the first is organized into increasingly tight degrees of focusing: the theme, the direction, and the attentional object. The second one, supported by the analyses of Husserl and Gurwitsch (1957, 1985), is organized

into four concentric zones: focus, secondary objects, margins, and distant horizons. The third topic is organized according to the size of the possible spatial and temporal spans of the attentional target, that Vermersch calls "attentional windows". For example, he distinguishes five types of visual windows, in ascending order of spatial size: jewel, page, room, courtyard, and landscape. Three orders of attentional movements are also identified: seizing/retention/withdrawal; focusing/defocusing; reorientation of the attentional target. The elicitation interview relies on the principle that everything that was present in the attentional field in the initial experience, including what was not in the center of the attentional focus, is still accessible through evocation. The skill of the interviewer therefore consists, on the basis of his knowledge of what it is possible to access, in achieving deliberate perlocutary acts in order to trigger in the interviewed person, within the evoked experience, accurate attentional movements that will allow the transition into the reflective mode of elements of the experience which had initially been lived in the prereflective mode.

This book by Pierre Vermersch, as all his work, opens a huge field of research, which has been little explored by psychology and even phenomenology, that of the acts enabling access to the consciousness of lived experience, and of the perlocutionary devices likely to generate these acts. This is a very promising field of research, which is essential for the emerging science of consciousness, and crucial to our society on the educational, clinical, technological, and simply existential levels.

I would like to come back to a central idea of the book, which the author stresses repeatedly: "Becoming aware and presentification of the past are two sides of the same activity" (p. 159), or "It is through the act of recalling that consciousness enters the reflective mode" (p. 196). The argument is the following: the (awakening and therefore) recalling of elements which have been memorized without consciousness of being memorized *makes possible* the transition into reflective consciousness of those which had initially been lived in the prereflective mode. However while reading the book, it seemed to me that a subtle shift occurred from this *possibility* offered by the act of recalling, towards the *necessity* to recall in order to become aware. On the one hand, recalling past experience is not sufficient to trigger the transition to reflective consciousness. One simply has to live an episode of "attentional drift" leading to the intense evocation of past situations, without occurrence of any new awareness of past elements, to be convinced. To become aware of an initially prereflective element, one has to do something more: *coming into contact* with experience. On the other hand, it seems that evocation is not a necessary condition of this coming into contact. In Husserl's example, the "turning" from current thoughts towards a feeling of joy, which allows

this feeling to become reflectively conscious, does not occur in a state of evocation, but here and now. As Vermersch rightly underlines, Husserl does not describe precisely this inner gesture. However it is clear that in this example, evocation is not the condition for turning towards joy and becoming aware of it. On the contrary, it is the awareness of joy that triggers the recollection of past moments and the consciousness that joy was already present. Some meditation techniques such as *vipashyana* can in fact enable us to learn to come into contact with our experience and therefore become aware of it, here and now.

It seems to me that a too exclusive emphasis on the act of recalling / presentification might suggest that the prereflective reduces itself to a phenomenon of passive memorization. It would consist of elements which have been memorized passively without being in the attentional field, while becoming aware of them would amount to an act of recalling accompanied by a shift in focus within the recalled experience. However the elicitation of the process of *vipashyana* meditation (Petitmengin *et al*, in preparation), suggests a slightly different hypothesis: the pre-reflective would be the part of experience that is occulted by the *tension* towards objects or objectives (and may be memorized passively), while becoming aware of it would require releasing this tension, within a possible (but not necessary) act of recalling. Assimilating becoming aware and recalling might have the effect of hindering the detection and description of the subtle microactivity, itself deeply prereflective, which cuts us off from moment to moment from the awareness of our experience, and of the loosening process that allows us to come into contact with experience and thus to become fully aware of it.

Separating the process of coming into contact with one's experience from evocation brings together new questions: what differentiates this act when it is achieved in evocation and in the present? To which strata of prereflective experience does it allow access in each case? For example, evocation seems to give privileged access to deeply prereflective – notably sensorial - strata that are difficult to access in real time, and whose consciousness endows experience with "a new value of enchantment and liberation" (Gusdorf 1950, p. 133). Which properties of evocation can explain that, far from betraying experience - as it has been suspected - it arouses contact with these deep dimensions of experience more easily than present experience does? What could explain this mystery?

By suggesting such nuances in the acts of becoming aware of one's experience, these remarks have no other purpose than showing that it is now possible to take them as objects of research.

In other words, they aim at demonstrating that the project of phenomenological psychology to which Pierre Vermersch is devoting his life is now underway.

References

- Gendlin E. (1962/1997). *Experiencing and the creation of meaning*. Northwestern University Press
- Gusdorf G. (1950). *Mémoire et personne*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Petitmengin, C. & Bitbol, M. (2009). The validity of first-person descriptions as authenticity and coherence. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 16 (10–12), 363–404.
- Petitmengin C., Van Beek M., Bitbol M. *Eliciting the dynamics of meditative experience*. In preparation.
- Vermersch P. (1994/2010). *L'entretien d'explicitation*. Paris: ESF.