

Claire Petitmengin

## *Editorial Introduction*

This special issue commemorates the tenth anniversary of the publication of *The View from Within* (Varela & Shear, 1999), where Francisco Varela in collaboration with Jonathan Shear designed the foundations of a research program on lived experienced.

In the Editors' Introduction: 'First-person methodologies: What, Why, How?' (Varela & Shear, 1999a), they demonstrated that it was essential to lift the ban which had until then excluded lived experience from the field of scientific research, and to design rigorous methods enabling researchers to collect 'first person' descriptions of the 'lived experience associated with cognitive and mental events' (p. 1), that is descriptions provided by the subject living them. They also introduced the idea that the process which enables us to become reflectively conscious of one's experience and to describe it has a specific structure, and that it is possible and important to study it.

The objective of this commemorative issue is to examine and refine this research program on first person methods, through contributions based on empirical research. We have tried to keep close to the spirit of the original by gathering contributions of researchers who do not only propose first person descriptions, but who also try to describe the very process of description, in order to make this process reproducible — a necessary condition for any scientific understanding.

### **The 'Pre-Reflective' and Implicit Character of Lived Experience**

But why should we need methods to study our lived experience? Our lived experience being the most immediate and intimate thing about us, is it not directly accessible? However it is a fact that the individuals

Correspondence:  
C. Petitmengin, Centre de Recherche en Épistémologie Appliquée, 32 boulevard Victor, 75015 Paris, France. Email: [claire.petitmengin@polytechnique.edu](mailto:claire.petitmengin@polytechnique.edu)

who genuinely and concretely tried to describe their lived experience, as well as the researchers who tried to collect such descriptions, met serious difficulties and usually only gathered rather poor descriptions.

Who amongst us would be able to describe spontaneously and precisely the lived experience associated with his recollection, decision, reading or emotional processes? Very fortunately, all of us are used to living the experiences of remembering, taking a decision, reading, and feeling emotions. But usually, we have only a very partial awareness of the way we proceed. And when we have to describe these experiences, it is much easier for us to express what we know, what we have heard or read about them, than the way we have really lived them. This is clearly shown by the well-known experimentations of Nisbett and Wilson (1977), which are amongst the most quoted in the domain of consciousness studies.

Moreover, strangely, we are not aware of this deficit of awareness. Usually, we do not imagine that a particular process is necessary to enable us to become aware of our lived experience, which is the first and main obstacle to individual awareness as well as to the development of a science of lived experience: why, as an individual, should I set myself the task of acquiring an awareness which I am not aware that I lack? Why, as a researcher, should I give myself the project of designing methods enabling the development of such an awareness?

The main reason for our lack of awareness seems to be our usual absorption in the content, the object, the ‘what’ of our activity, to the detriment of the ‘how’. We are a little like a blind person exploring objects with the tip of his cane, whose attention is entirely directed toward the object, and who ignores the contact and variations of pressure of the cane in the palm of his hand. Like the blind person, we use this information in action, but usually it remains largely unnoticed. This unnoticed character concerns even our most ordinary perceptive activities. For example, if we look at a landscape, or a painting, we immediately recognize elements on which our attention focuses and in which it becomes absorbed. At the same time, it is as if our gaze directed itself, projected itself toward the object, over there. Our attention is absorbed into the object, we lose contact with the immediate visual sensation. ‘In seeing, I attend to features of what there is to see. But I can also attend to how seeing feels, to what the activity of seeing is like for me, and to the ways it feels different from freely imagining and from remembering. In attending to experience in this way, I can become aware of features I do not normally notice (attend to), precisely because they usually remain implicit and pre-reflective’ (Thompson, 2007, p. 286). Whether we are touching, seeing,

listening, imagining, remembering, understanding or deciding, whether we are performing a concrete or an abstract activity, a large part of our experience, although ‘lived through’ subjectively, is not immediately accessible to reflective consciousness and verbal description. We experience it, but in a ‘pre-reflective’<sup>1</sup> way. While the term ‘implicit’ emphasizes its unformulated character, the term ‘pre-reflective’ thus emphasizes its unnoticed character.

By ‘reflective’ experience we mean an experience which is lived while being fully aware of itself or self-aware. By ‘pre-reflective’ experience, we mean an experience (for example of pain) which is lived without being fully aware of itself or self-aware. We use the word ‘pre-reflective’ with the meaning ‘which does not recognize itself’. However, the underlying metaphor of the mirror implies a distancing which is not relevant here, and some authors of this issue prefer to use the term ‘pre-reflexive’ only to emphasize the absence of auto-reference. It is also important to note that in our view, reflective experience does not imply a particular mental state which would take the initial experience (of pain) as its object; neither does it involve a self, an ego, an ‘I’ or a subject, while pre-reflective experience would be I-less or ego-less.

However in this introduction and in this whole issue, the aim is not to give a definitive and conceptually completely satisfying definition of the term ‘pre-reflective’. We do not even claim that ‘pre-reflective’ is the right word to designate this aspect of our experience, not only because of the connotations mentioned above, but also because the ‘pre’ seems to imply that pre-reflective experience should always be followed by reflective experience. Our lack of awareness of what is most intimate to us — our own experience — is a great mystery, which consciousness studies are only just beginning to investigate. Our goal is only to pinpoint this little-explored dimension, and ideally to induce the reader to refer to it and recognize it in his or her own experience. We also wish to suggest that it constitutes an immense potential research field, which could usefully be explored in detail. ‘Exploring the pre-reflexive represents a rich and largely unexplored source of information and data with dramatic consequences’ (Varela and Shear, 1999a, p. 4).

Now we would like to propose a map of the different dimensions of this exploration, which will then enable us to present the organization of the different articles of this issue.

[1] To use the vocabulary of Husserl (1913), later adopted by Sartre (1936 and 1938) and Ricœur (1950). Piaget (1974) speaks of ‘consciousness in action’. ‘Pre-reflective’ translates the French word ‘pré-réfléchi’ and sometimes ‘pré-réflexif’.

### The Process of Becoming Aware

All the articles in this issue indeed show that a specific process may enable us to become reflectively aware of the pre-reflective part of our experience. ‘There are numerous instances where we perceive phenomena pre-reflexively without being consciously aware of them, but where a “gesture” or method of examination will clarify or even bring these pre-reflexive phenomena to the fore’ (Varela and Shear, 1999a, p. 4). For example, specific gestures may enable us to learn how to stabilize our attention, which is usually extremely capricious, on the particular experience that we are exploring; or to identify and abandon (‘bracket’) the beliefs and representations which surreptitiously substitute for the description of the experience itself; or to redirect our attention from the content of the experience, the ‘what’, which usually entirely occupies us, towards the modes of appearance of this content, the ‘how’; or to produce a verbal description of this ‘how’ and evaluate the relevance of this description.

This process of becoming aware and describing may unfold at two different levels: *the level of experience, and the level of the experience of becoming aware of one’s experience*. Let me take an example. While writing the present article, my attention is completely absorbed in the ideas that I am trying to express. On the one hand, thanks to specific gestures, I may become aware of the pre-reflective part of this experience: the rapid succession of inner images, inner comments, slight emotions, that usually accompanies my activity of writing in a pre-reflective way. On the other hand, this very process of becoming aware and describing is also an experience, which is usually performed in a pre-reflective way. And for this particular experience, I can also turn my attention from the ‘what’ or content of this experience (i.e. the rapid succession of inner images, inner comments, slight emotions I am becoming aware of), towards the ‘how’, the gestures which enable me to become aware of this content. How do I proceed in order to stabilize my attention on the experience to be described (i.e. my experience of writing)? How do I proceed in order to pass from the verbalization of my representations, commentaries and beliefs about this experience, towards the description of the experience itself? How do I reorient my attention from the ‘what’ to the ‘how’ of my experience of writing?

These *gestures* enabling us to become aware and describe our experience must in turn be clearly distinguished from the (mostly linguistic) *devices* enabling an interviewer or a therapist to induce them in the context of a research or therapeutic session.

## The Structured Character of Experience

The articles in this issue also converge towards the conclusion that our experience is not just a ‘draft’, but has a precise *structure*. Analysing and comparing descriptions of the same type of experience has enabled the authors to detect features presenting a striking regularity from one experience to another and from one subject to another. On the basis of these recurrent characteristics, each author (or group of authors) has identified generic experiential categories which are independent of the experiential content, in other words the structure of the corresponding experiences.

Amongst the experiential structures which are in the process of being explored, one is particularly interesting for us as researchers in the domain of consciousness studies: the structure of the very process of becoming aware of our experience and describing it. What the contributors to this volume seem to be discovering, while describing this process, is that it is composed of a definite succession of precise acts and stances. This finding confirms the possibility of ‘a unified description of the structural dynamics of the act of becoming aware in its procedural dimension’ (Depraz *et al.*, 2003), which had been hypothesized by Varela and his colleagues. Becoming aware of one’s lived experience is not a random event, but the result of precise acts, of which a first ‘sketch of a common structure’ (Varela and Shear, 1999a, p. 7) is emerging. This structure shows two specially striking features. First, the process of becoming aware of one’s pre-reflective experience does not seem to be a process of distancing and objectification, or to entail ‘a kind of doubling or fracture or self-fission’ (Zahavi, 2008, p. 90) between an observer and an observed, a reflecting and a reflected subject. On the contrary, this process seems to consist of coming into closer contact with one’s experience. Second, the gestures involved in this process do not consist of accumulating new knowledge, but rather of stripping ourselves of the knowledge that prevents us from entering into contact with our experience. They are gestures of letting go and reduction rather than accumulation and enrichment.

The very existence of this structure has two important epistemological consequences. The first is that it makes the description of lived experience *reproducible*. Reproducibility is the foundation of any scientific validation. To be considered as scientifically valid, an observation must be verifiable or falsifiable, at least potentially, by any other researcher. And in order to be verifiable or falsifiable, it must be reproducible, that is it must be accompanied by a generic description

of its very process of production.<sup>2</sup> In the domain of consciousness studies, this requirement of reproducibility means that a first person description should not only be the result of a definite process of becoming aware and describing, but also be accompanied by a precise generic description of this very process. And it is the structured character of this process that makes it possible to provide a generic description enabling its reproduction, and therefore a disciplined and rigorous study of lived experience.

The second consequence of the structured character of lived experience — one however which will not be developed further in this special issue which focuses on first person methodologies — is that it enables a mastered and explicit ‘circulation’ between first and third person analyses (Varela and Shear, 1999a, p. 2). Experiential categories may indeed be used as criteria for neuro-physiological analyses, enabling the detection of unnoticed structures on this level, and the ascription of meaning to them. Conversely, the detection of new neuro-physiological structures may help us to refine the reflective consciousness of the corresponding experience and to discover new structures on the experiential level. The detection of experiential structures is thus the kingpin of the neuro-phenomenological project initiated by Francisco Varela (1996).

### **Viewing From Within?**

A refinement of the methods for studying pre-reflective experience would probably entail a renewal of the main issues of consciousness studies. For example these methods highlight the importance of the ‘felt’ and intermodal dimension of experience, termed ‘felt senses’ by Eugene Gendlin and ‘dynamic forms of vitality’ by Daniel Stern, two researchers whom Francisco Varela considered as pioneers. These subtle rhythms and movements, although usually unnoticed, seem to play a fundamental role in the constitution of a ‘self’ and in our interpersonal relationships as well in the process of emergence, understanding and expression of meaning.

The exploration of the pre-reflective micro-dynamics of lived experience also enables us to access a dimension where the separation which is usually felt between the objects, the other people, which are over there ‘outside’, and my own perceptions, emotions and thoughts which seem to be localised ‘inside’, is less rigid than in the experience which we are usually reflectively aware of. Strangely, the more

---

[2] The description of the very process of production seems to be a necessary condition of reproducibility, however we do not pretend that it is a sufficient one.

attention is detached from its absorption in objects to enter into contact with experience, the more reduced becomes the corresponding distinction between and ‘exterior’ and ‘interior’. Far from presupposing this distinction and considering it as ‘given’, our exploration of pre-reflective experience instead leads us to be interested in the way it is constituted. Therefore we do not consider ourselves as ‘introspectionists’, in the sense that we turn our gaze exclusively ‘inwards’. We have nevertheless chosen to keep the expression ‘from within’ in the title of this issue, not only to pay homage to Francisco Varela, but also to refer to a particular mode of relationship with one’s experience, consisting in coming into close contact with it or ‘dwelling in’ it.

### Content of this Issue

For this special issue, I chose to invite researchers who use a concrete and disciplined practical method for becoming aware of and describing lived experience, while also trying to describe their method. But instead of classifying the articles according to their methods, I found it more insightful to articulate them around the different axes of exploration of lived experience that we have just defined.

The first group of articles focuses on the structure of the very process of becoming aware of one’s lived experience and describing it, and (for some of them) on the devices enabling interviewers to induce this process and overcome its difficulties.

In the opening article, **Pierre Vermersch** draws on his practice of the *explication*<sup>3</sup> interview method to provide a description of the very process of introspecting. He focuses on two aspects of the introspective practice: introspection as becoming reflectively aware and introspection as recollecting, by throwing fresh light on them based on Husserlian theories of consciousness modes and of retention. He also describes the use of generic experiential categories as a guide for a skilled practice of introspection in research.

Thanks to excerpts from interviews, **Maryse Maurel** illustrates some of the techniques used by the explication interview method to guide a subject from a pre-reflective to a reflective consciousness of his experience. She also provides a brief insight into the applications of the explication interview, notably in the fields of sport, health, training and artistic creation.

---

[3] The French word ‘explication’ means ‘to make explicit’. In this introduction, I chose to use this French word instead of ‘elicitation’, whose meaning is more ambiguous in English.

The article by **Natalie Depraz** is an original work of self-explicitation of a singular personal experience of emergence of meaning into consciousness — or more exactly an experience of loss of meaning. After a brief account of the methodological devices used for achieving this work of explicitation, the author disentangles and unfolds three interwoven chronological threads: the successive moments of the explicitation process which enabled her to become aware of more and more deeply pre-reflective dimensions of the initial experience; the various difficulties, resistances and emotional shocks faced during this process, the awareness of which followed its own dynamics; and as a result of this explicitation process, the chronology of the initial experience.

In the following article, **Charles Genoud** deals with the cultivation of presence in *vipassana* meditation. He describes the redirection of the mind which is required to be present to experience, which means to be conscious of being conscious of something, instead of being absorbed into the object that is being perceived or thought of. He examines a few of the concepts that we usually impose upon our experiences when we are absorbed in the exploration of objects: inner character, temporality, intentionality, personality, duality of a subject facing an object, whereas being present means suspending these concepts.

Relying on her practice of the ‘Focusing’ method, **Mary Hendricks** highlights a generic experiential category termed ‘Experiencing Level’, which does not concern the content of experience but the manner in which what a person says relates to felt experience. This experiential category is a variable whose specificity is that it can be evaluated according to precise linguistic and somatic — i.e. ‘third person’ — criteria. Through transcript material taken from psychotherapy sessions, Mary Hendricks illustrates low, middle and high experiencing levels, and how the subject’s experiencing level can be increased or hindered by the therapist’s prompts. She also shows that having defined this variable in terms of observable indicators makes it possible to formulate exact steps for teaching high experiencing.

In the next article, **Russ Hurlburt** focuses on the learning process enabling someone to apprehend their experience and especially to ‘bracket presuppositions’, highlighting its iterative structure. Through the transcription of a single first interview with the Descriptive Experience Sampling method (DES), he shows the difficulties of this process, its different stages and the devices which may enable the interviewer to facilitate it.

As it has both methodological and substantive purposes, the article by **Jane Mathison** and **Paul Tosey** provides a transition between the

first and the second group of articles. In the first part, they illustrate through excerpts from two explicitation interviews the tools provided by neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) for collecting first person accounts. In the second part, they show the application of these tools to the explicitation of two insights or 'moments of knowing', while highlighting the common features of these moments.

The second group of articles gives examples of generic experiential structures identified from samples of first person descriptions, and provides some insights into the process of identifying these structures. All of them focus on the structure of perception.

**Connirae Andreas** and **Tamara Andreas** describe and refine a generic experiential structure of perception termed 'perceptual position' in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). Through a concrete example of an interview, they show that this structure does not only concern visual perceptions, but also auditory and kinaesthetic perceptions. They further show that our visual, auditory and kinaesthetic perceptions may be split in different perceptual positions at the same time, or on the contrary be 'aligned'. Through perceptual positions, the article also gives a striking example of the pre-reflective dimension of lived experience, and illustrates the explicitation techniques used in NLP.

The analysis of hundreds of interviews led **Russ Hurlburt** and **Chris Heavey** to identify a specific mode of sensory or perceptual experiencing, which they subsume under the experiential category 'sensory awareness'. This phenomenon involves the subject being immersed in the experience of a particular sensory aspect of his or her external or internal environment without particular regard for the instrumental aim or perceptually complete-objectness. Although highly frequent in all the sensorial modalities, this phenomenon is usually unnoticed and particularly difficult to recognize.

**Claire Petitmengin** and her colleagues focus on the specific experience associated with listening to a sound. On the basis of a set of descriptions of this experience, they identify a threefold generic structure depending on whether the attention of the subject is directed towards the event which is at the source of the sound, the sound in itself, considered independently from its source, or the felt sound — three dimensions which are increasingly pre-reflective and difficult to detect. The authors describe this structure, as well as the method they used to gather descriptions of auditory experience and identify experiential categories from these descriptions.

The articles of the third group throw a fresh light on the issue of the transition from pre-reflective to reflective consciousness from

developmental and psychotherapeutic perspectives, or use descriptions of this transition to draw epistemological consequences from them.

The article by **Pierre Philippot** and **Zindel Segal** presents and discusses the psychological interventions based on the development of mindful awareness as a psychotherapeutic tool, in particular mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT). They examine their effectiveness in improving psychological and physical well-being, and speculate about the cognitive processes that might account for these effects, notably emotion regulation and self-awareness. They also examine how using first person methods to collect descriptions of the experience associated with these therapies might refine this understanding. Through this presentation, the authors deal with the important question of the effects of the process of becoming aware, in other words: what does reflective consciousness do to experience?

The article by **Daniel Stern** (who prefers to use the term ‘pre-reflexive’) deals with the question of the passage from non verbal pre-reflexive experience to verbal reflexive experience from a developmental perspective. After a description of the structure of pre-reflexive experience, where the ‘dynamic forms of vitality’ play an essential role, the article focuses on the following questions: is there an intermediary stage of non verbal reflexive consciousness between non verbal reflexive and verbal reflexive experience? In other words, can reflexive experience be non verbal? And what is special about the passage into the verbal reflexive domain?

**Eugene Gendlin** concentrates on the ‘explication’ process through which new concepts form from implicit and bodily felt understanding. In the first part of the article, he uses a description of this bodily knowledge, which is body–environment interaction, to question the usual distinction between ‘third person’ and ‘first person’ or ‘from outside’ and ‘from within’ perspectives, and to understand how this distinction originates. In the second part, Gendlin shows that although implicit understanding is used by everyone all the time, referring directly to it and speaking directly from it is a skill which can be learned. He gives us elements of his method (Thinking at the Edge) designed to facilitate the explication process and the emergence of new concepts, notably in the research field. He also explains how the explication model affects the theory of language.

**Claire Petitmengin** and **Michel Bitbol**, after an inventory of the criticisms of introspection, answer them by providing a description of the introspective process, description which is grounded in their

practice of the explicitation interview technique as well as *vipassana* meditation. Far from consisting in observing one's experience, this process consists in coming into contact with one's experience, in becoming fully present to it. This description of introspection leads the authors towards a new conception of the validity of introspective reports, conceived as authenticity and performative consistency instead of correspondence, a conception which turns out to be the same as that which underlies the experimental sciences.

### Conclusion

After ten years of viewing from within, our objective in this issue is to show that the very conditions of possibility of a 'first person' discipline are in the process of being established. A discipline requires methods:

- '(1) providing a clear *procedure* for accessing some phenomenal domain,
- '(2) providing a clear means for an *expression and validation* within a community of observers who have familiarity with procedures as in (1)' (Varela and Shear, 1999a, p. 6).

We have a specific domain of study: human lived experience. Increasingly refined and disciplined methods for studying this domain, associated with an increasingly precise language, become available. These methods and language give any researcher — provided that he has reached a sufficient level of mastery, as it is the case in any other discipline — the means of verifying the findings of another. They enable a research community to be progressively strengthened.

To develop this emerging research program and community, we do not require expensive machines. However we need financial, human and institutional resources (1) to compare and refine our different methodologies and harmonize their vocabulary, not on a conceptual basis but on the basis of a common lived referential; (2) to train other researchers who want to use these methods, notably young researchers; (3) to design and carry out projects to explore the different dimensions of human lived experience, whether it is identifying experiential structures or articulating experiential and neuro-physiological structures.

The potential applications are innumerable and sometimes urgent. In the pedagogical domain, could not a better understanding of the pre-reflective micro-dynamics of the process of emergence and understanding of meaning enable us to refine our teaching methods

and ‘re-enchant’ school? In the technological domain, could not a finer understanding of our cognitive processes make it possible to improve the design and evaluation of technologies supporting these processes? Could not this understanding enable a better knowledge of the way these technologies transform our lived experience, in order to accompany this evolution in a relevant way, and identify the possible risks? In the medical domain, do we not lack a better understanding of the lived experience associated with pain, with the different stages of illnesses, and with pharmacological and surgical treatments? Could not the prevention, diagnostic and treatment of pathologies be facilitated by a better knowledge of this experience? Could not such a bodily consciousness be learned?

Finally, is not the loss of contact with our experiencing the chief malaise of our society? ‘In the years to come’, wrote Francisco Varela, ‘the taking into account of human experience and of its potential of transformation will become not only necessary, but really essential’ (2000, p. 122). Rediscovering the contact with our lived experience could transform considerably not only our understanding of what consciousness is, but also our lives. We want to pay homage to Francisco Varela for the clear insight he had of this crucial issue and for having initiated this research programme.

### **Call for Responses**

Other researchers are invited to participate in this debate by commenting on the articles in this issue. If a substantial number of responses are proposed, they will be published with replies from the authors — as was the case in *The View from Within* — in a special issue of *JCS* early in 2011. If only a few responses are received, they will be published individually in regular issues of *JCS*. In all cases publication will be at the editors’ discretion; longer commentaries may themselves be subject to external review. Comments may target one article in the issue, or a theme which is referred to in several articles. We ask commentators to inform Claire Petitmengin or Anthony Freeman of their intention to contribute, if possible naming the article(s) they intend to target, before March 31st 2010 and to submit the full text of their proposed commentary by June 30th 2010.

### *Acknowledgments*

I would like to thank Jack Petranker and Michel Bitbol for their help in editing this issue.

## References

- Depraz, N., Varela, F. & Vermersch, P. (2003), *On Becoming Aware: The Pragmatics of Experiencing* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin).
- Husserl, E. (1913/1990), *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (Boston. MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers).
- Nisbett, R.E. & Wilson, T.D. (1977), 'Telling more than we know: Verbal reports on mental processes', *Psychological Review*, **84**, pp. 231–59.
- Piaget, J. (1974), *La prise de conscience* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France).
- Ricœur P. (1950), *Philosophie de la volonté* (Paris: Aubier).
- Sartre J.P. (1936), *L'imagination* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France).
- Sartre J.P. (1938), *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* (Paris: Hermann).
- Thompson E. (2007), *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press)
- Varela, F.J. (1996), 'Neurophenomenology: A methodological remedy for the hard problem', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **3**, pp. 330–35.
- Varela, F.J. (2000), 'Le corps et l'expérience vécue', in *Les chemins du corps*, ed. Tardan-Masquellier (Paris: Albin Michel).
- Varela F. J. & Shear J. (ed. 1999), *The View from Within: First-person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness*; A special issue of *The Journal of Consciousness Studies* (Exeter: Imprint Academic).
- Varela F.J. & Shear J. (1999a), 'First-person methodologies: What, Why, How?', in Varela and Shear (1999), pp. 1–14.
- Zahavi, D. (2008), *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).