

Pierre Vermersch

# *Husserl the Great Unrecognized Psychologist!*

*A Reply to Zahavi*

Suggesting that introspection and reflection are in fact the same act, and that Husserl actually used introspection while practising reflection, was a provocation, I admit.

## 1

But this was only intended to highlight a more general problem: how can we name the act (or the family of acts) by which we become aware of our thoughts, memories, images, judgments, motivations, feelings, and everything we live?

The term ‘introspection’ has always provoked controversy. Brentano prefers to speak of ‘immanent perception’, James of ‘retrospection’, Peirce refuses to use the term but does not replace it, Sartre vehemently rejects it, Merleau-Ponty accepted it as equivalent to ‘inner perception’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 70) before later rejecting it. Husserl mainly uses the term ‘reflection’ in the §77 of *Ideen I* (Husserl, 1950) but throughout this paragraph and further on, he multiplies equivalents such as ‘view’, ‘immanent view’, ‘immediate intuition’, ‘immanent grasping’, ‘what appears to us’, what we become conscious of’. The English translators of *Ideen* preferred to use the neutral term ‘self-observation’, where in French Ricœur used the word ‘introspection’. If one reads chapter 2 of *Ideen I* carefully, synonyms and equivalences are numerous, all of which focus on the metaphor of ‘view’ or ‘spection’ (intro, intero, retro, perception, view, clarity, etc.), and constitute no improvement on the term

Correspondence:

Pierre Vermersch, GREX, place de la Bergerie, 43300 Saint Eble, France.

Email: [p.vermersch@gmail.com](mailto:p.vermersch@gmail.com)

‘introspection’, which is also a metaphor. There remains the term ‘reflection’, which has several disadvantages. First, it suggests a division of the subject between an observer and a reflection, which gave rise to the foolish criticism of Comte on the difficulty of being at the same time in the street and on the balcony. Second, it merges under one name two quite different activities: the gesture of becoming conscious of what was not yet conscious (reflecting lived experience), and the activity which consists in taking as an object what has already become conscious (reflecting on lived experience).

The generic problem is that nobody knows how to name adequately this non-perceptive act which is central to our subjective activity, without resorting to a metaphor or sidestepping the issue. If the term ‘perception’ is actually related to any activity that involves the mobilization of sensors — eyes, ears, nose, mouth, labyrinth, Golgi receptor, etc. — whether oriented towards the extra corporeal or the intra corporeal, then any activity which does not rely on the activity of these sensors cannot be called ‘perceptual’, nor described as a ‘view’ or a ‘grasping’, except metaphorically. Moreover, adding the qualifier ‘immanent’, as in ‘immanent perception’, makes things even more obscure. The word ‘immanent’ can only be defined in a negative way: it refers to anything which is not transcendent, thus is not the object of a perceptive grasping, and like all privative denominations, it does not inform us about the nature of what is named. In conclusion, whatever the term chosen, it must be consistent with real research into the nature of this act which enables the knowledge of one’s lived experience. We are not there yet, in any discipline.

## 2

The idea remains that the nature of introspection (I still use this term for want of anything better) changes when the presuppositions which are associated with it change. Let us take an analogy with visual perception. Let us imagine that we support the idea that a painter’s vision is different from that of a non-painter. It would be intuitively true, since the painter distinguishes and pays attention to aspects of his model that a non-painter does not even know exist; but it would be false, in that visual perceptual mechanisms, the sensory organ of vision, and the physiology of vision are not different. If one focuses on the nature of vision, there is no difference between a painter and a non-painter. If one focuses on the cognitive activity that underlies visual perception, then the two modes of visual perception are very different.

While saying that Husserl practises introspection, I put the emphasis on the hypothesis of an identity of nature of the introspective act, whatever the cognitive organization that underlies it. Phenomenologists reject the term introspection by implicitly putting the emphasis on the organization of the activity of the 'inner sense' and take the opportunity to differentiate themselves from any possible assimilation with psychology. Meanwhile the real problem is still to determine the nature of this act whether we call it introspection or reflection or whatever.

### 3

In the case of Husserl, we can hypothesize that his rejection of 'introspection', which he transmitted like a virus to his students, is based on his relationship with the psychology of his time, or even more deeply on his acute concern that he should no longer be accused of psychologism. Frege's criticism (Frege, 1971) of *Philosophy of Arithmetic* (Husserl, 1972) and especially his charge of 'psychologism', seems to have stopped Husserl's writing for almost ten years (1891–1901). And the first book he then wrote was a criticism of psychologism that went far beyond Frege, assuring him great fame. From this point onwards, he will constantly deny that psychology is of any value, and carefully guard against any possible confusion between phenomenology and psychology. My hypothesis is that he is so afraid of being accused of psychologism, on the grounds that he has expressed an interest in psychology, that he not only denies any psychologism, but he also denies anything that could allow anyone to make the connection. However, over the course of a few paragraphs he notices the proximity of the questions he is raising with that of psychology, he will even speak of 'incestuous relationship' between the two (Husserl, 1976). It is difficult to deal with attention, perception, memory, or images, without making a bridge with the discipline which deals with these objects! Piaget hypothesized that Husserl was a 'repressed psychologist' (Piaget, 1968).

For me, he has been a source of inspiration for the study of lived experiences, their description, their categorization, and the construction of a psychology of subjective experience; I found it there while I could not find any inspiration in the work of psychologists. In this sense I recognize him (against his will and that of phenomenologists, of course) as a great unrecognized psychologist.

## 4

The debate which is initiated by Dan Zahavi is largely based on the impossible relationship between psychology and philosophy (especially phenomenological philosophy). Impossible for most psychologists, who for a century have not wanted to hear of introspection or first-person approaches in any form, and who associate these things with phenomenology to such a degree that they have no interest in it. Impossible too for most philosophers, who are permanently struggling with institutional psychology. At the university level, psychology has only recently separated from philosophy, but the next stage — encounter, dialogue or reconciliation — seems a long way off!

**References**

- Frege, G. (1971) *Ecrits logiques et philosophiques*. Paris: Seuil.  
Husserl, E. (1950) *Idées directrices pour une phénoménologie*. Paris: Gallimard.  
Husserl, E. (1972) *Philosophie de l'arithmétique*. Paris: PUF.  
Husserl, E. (1976) *La crise des sciences européennes*. Paris: Gallimard.  
Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945) *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.  
Piaget, J. (1968) *Sagesse et illusions de la philosophie*. Paris: PUF.