

2

3

For a Phenomenological Psychology

4

5

Pierre Vermersch

6

CNRS, GREX

7

Original publication in french : Vermersch, P. (1999). "Pour une psychologie
phénoménologique." Psychologie Française **44**(1): 7-19.

8

9

In this english translation no foot notes, no bibliography.

10

11

12

13 Research theme

14 Phenomenological consciousness, a methodology to help in clarifying the
15 phenomenological psychiatry of cognitive acts, the history and methodology of
16 introspection, the memorisation of scores with professional pianists.

17

18 Summary

19 Is it possible to reintroduce the first person point of view in psychology in a rigorous
20 fashion? Can one lay out the two sides of psychology: the external, behavioural,
21 public point of view and the subjective point of view - intimate, private but capable of
22 being brought to consciousness and verbalised? I offer a few answers while
23 emphasising that there has never been any decisive objections to introspection, that,
24 with a view to the development of a global theory, in the last analysis, the
25 phenomenological level imposes constraints upon the computational level. But in order
26 to study the phenomenology of cognition, an epistemological break is needed, a break
27 which allows us to discriminate between living one's experience and knowing it. In
28 sum, I propose to develop phenomenological psychology both as an autonomous
29 programme of research and as a domain which is complementary to existing
30 programmes

31

32

33

34

35 Psychology has a two-sided research object: a behaviourist side which is public and
36 which lends itself just as well to the constraints of the natural sciences and a private
37 side which is subjective (to which the subject is the only one to have access in the
38 experiential mode definitive of the first person point of view) a side which this
39 discipline has for a century done everything possible to avoid addressing directly by
40 trying to disqualify any direct approach of the introspective kind. (Vermersch 1998).
41 But this experiential dimension is coming back as a fundamental question in recent
42 publications and to such an extent that it can be identified with the question of

2 phenomenological consciousness. Moreover, this theme is presently undergoing a
3 veritable editorial boom via innumerable colloquia and, more still, as the privileged
4 point of contact for all those disciplines which make up the philosophy of mind:
5 neurophysiology, philosophy, psychology, cognitive psychology, linguistics, psychiatry,
6 artificial intelligence etc To the point where one might well ask whether what
7 psychology rejected from its field is not going to make the fortune of other researchers
8 less encumbered by fears about not being recognised as a true science, fears which
9 have haunted psychology from its inception. In numerous recent publications on
10 consciousness, authors stress the need for an examination of the area between the sub-
11 personal or computational level and the phenomenological level (for example:
12 Jackendoff 1987, Flanagan 1992, Mc Ginn 1991, Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991,
13 Chalmers 1996). They underline the importance of taking account of subjective
14 experience and some of them emphasise the need to mobilise introspection (Pesoa1998,
15 Block 1995) and even ethics (Howes 1991. Varela 1996a). In short, a group of authors
16 (with many differences) argues for a certain level of analysis to be taken into account,
17 the level of what appears to the subject, therefore a phenomenological level and so
18 oriented around a particular object of study arising typically at this level, namely,
19 subjective experience and a methodology capable of gaining access to it, namely
20 introspection, which designates globally both the reflecting gesture and the verbalised
21 description of the reflected content (cf. Depraz, Varela, Vermersch). However, for the
22 majority of authors, while their writing may carry a wealth of bibliographical material
23 bearing on cognitive psychology, the neurosciences, clinical neuro physiology or the
24 philosophy of mind, in connection with the phenomenological level, by contrast, one
25 hardly finds any references at all and when introspection is appealed to one finds
26 virtually nothing. All that is left is ready made thought. In addition, everything
27 happens as if both the supporters and the opponents of the phenomenological level
28 experienced no difficulty in citing an example drawn from their personal experience. At
29 this time, and in connection with most of these publications, it is as if mobilising the
30 phenomenological level of description posed no methodological problem.

31 Is phenomenological access so simple then? Is it so obvious that it stands in
32 no need of any regulated procedure? No work of critical elaboration of the data? One
33 might object that few references are cited because few have been published. This
34 objection is fair, but could one not conclude therefrom that it has become a matter of
35 urgency to develop an empirical, phenomenological psychology? (i.e., one based upon
36 an amassing of data in contrast to philosophical phenomenology or philosophical
37 psychology). Without spending time on objections of principle which set out to prove
38 a priori that it is meaningless or impossible to even attempt to concretely develop a
39 rigorous methodology with a view to producing new data and assessing, by scientific
40 practise, what real limits one comes up against with regard to what pertains to
41 consciousness and with regard to the possibility of validating it. Just such an attempt
42 has been made, from 1995 on, in Paris, by a research group organised around a seminar
43 devoted to practical phenomenology but a large part of the methodology had already
44 been generated by the development of the clarificatory interview *entretien*
45 *d'explicitation* ??? (Vermersch 1994) and the founding of GREX (Groupe de recherche sur
46 *l'explicitation*) in 1991.

2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

in what way the systematic/methodological taking into account of subjective experience presupposes an epistemological break, a need to break with the naive familiarity of the relation with our experience and the passage to a genuine reflecting activity.

The Rejection of Introspection and the First Person Point of View

1890, Binet 1903) and, on the other, the requirements of experimental psychologists who, at the same time, tried to constitute a psychology on the model of the natural sciences. One attempt at a reconciliation assumed the form of inserting the methodology of introspection into the constraints of experimental programmes - the 'Wurzbourg school' in Germany under the direction of Kulpe (Burloud 1927, Humphey 1951, Mandfler & Mandler 1964) the 'Cornell school' in the United States inspired by Tichener (Tichener 1909, 1912, 1913) and, preceding both of them by a few years, the 'Paris school' represented essentially by the work of Binet and his pupil Henry (Binet 1903). The greater part of the published work mentions the word 'experimental' in its title (for example: Binet 1903, Watt 1905, Ryle 1909, Tichener 1909, Okabe 1910) attesting thereby to their determination to situate their thinking both in the first person point of view and in that of a scientific psychology synonymous with an experimental set- up and with quantification. Elsewhere I have presented the details of this history (Vermersch 1998).

But this reconciliation was never accepted and criticism, taking as its target the very possibility of introspection, never ceased. Should one even bother to criticise the critique of introspection? Throughout the two centuries in which the list of critical objections never ceased to accumulate have there ever been any which carried conviction (cf. the assessment of opinions throughout the history of psychology: Dumas 1924, Bakan 1954, Guillaume 1942, Radford 1974, Howes 1991)? After all, had a single one of these proved well founded, the rest would not have been necessary!

In the first place this discussion is useless. Useless to mount justifications, to show the irrelevance of these criticism, because in principle no one of them would ever carry conviction to the extent that the form of these criticisms is that of trying to establish a negative result: impossibility, uselessness, impracticability, suspicion directed toward the act, or the object. And trying to prove the absence or the

2 impossibility of something is an ill-founded epistemological enterprise (except in the
3 formal sciences). If one can show that a claim can be rejected with reference to a
4 counter-example, it is, on the other hand, difficult, in the empirical domain, to
5 establish with certainty that it would never be possible to find counter examples. Only
6 the ability to master the totality of the available possibilities would make it possible to
7 demonstrate the impossibility of a certain type of result. If one had to make a list of
8 what each period claimed to be a priori impossible and which was realised in the
9 following generation, one would be obliged to enumerate most of the technical
10 inventions of our time. Beginning with the so-called 'absurdity' of making something
11 'heavier than air' fly. The strategy aimed at proving the impossibility of something is a
12 waste of time. It seems that as a general rule it is much more productive to
13 investigate 'under what conditions?', 'within what limits'? Unless the argument
14 underlying the attempt at a proof of impossibility is, in the end, sponsored by motives
15 which are not scientific.

16 However, from a second point of view, this review of the critical arguments
17 allows us to bring to light the properties of the methodology which we need and
18 towards which our efforts are aimed. In fact, even if the criticisms are not sufficiently
19 conclusive to condemn introspection, they do point up questions which deserve
20 thought. Let us sum up the main arguments. Introspection is impossible, in principle,
21 since it presupposes a duplication of the subject - which is impossible (Compte 1830);
22 introspection only produces contradictory results on which no one can reach agreement,
23 so it should not be used because it is non-scientific (general reaction to the
24 controversy on the theme of the relation between thought and mental image);
25 introspection is based on descriptions, therefore on verbal results which can teach us
26 nothing since they are the product of 'social training' (Pieron 1927); introspection is
27 directed towards private, non observable objects with regard to which it is impossible
28 to use a scientific method based upon the agreement of observers, so it has to be
29 abandoned; introspection is, at best, only able to get at that which the subject can be
30 conscious of, but numerous psychological investigations show that the subject is not,
31 and can not be, conscious of basic psychological facts and laws, so it is useless
32 appealing to it; introspection exists but it is completely mistaken regarding what it
33 yields, so the claims it produces are of no scientific interest (Skinner 1974);
34 introspection does not exist, what is taken for introspection being only the expression
35 of naive theories of the subject regarding psychological causality, pointless getting
36 interested in this, it isn't introspection (Nesbitt & Wilson 1977); the information
37 generated by introspection is worthless, it has no fundamental utility, one can only
38 disregard it (Boring 1953); the proof that there is no such thing as introspection -
39 assuming that it is the world of an 'internal sense' - is that, in contrast to the other
40 senses, this internal sense could yield no phenomenology (Lyons 1986)

41 Despite the diversity of their content, all these criticisms adopt the same
42 approach of trying to prove the existence, or impossibility, of something. But in
43 addition to these fully worked out criticisms, there exists a 'ready-made thinking' which
44 may be summed up in the declaration that: 'it is well known that it is not scientific' or
45 even, at the hands of certain recent authors, 'introspection is notorious for being
46 unscientific'. With certain psychologists the word 'introspection' releases phobic
47 reactions, that is, compulsive and irrational reactions.

2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

Establishing Structural Relations Between the Sub-personal and the Phenomenological Level

2 *The Pre-eminence of the Sub-personal: A Fallacious Argument*

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

33

34 *The Irreducibility of the Phenomenological Level and its Conformity to Practise*

35

36

37

38

39

40

41

42

43

44

45

46

47

2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

The Phenomenological Level Constrains the Sub-personal Level

The Epistemological Break Between Living and Knowing One's Experience

2 distinguish between living and knowing results in a confusion between the fact of
3 thinking about experience and the fact of knowing it.

4 Many difficulties have to be overcome before one can gain access to one's
5 experience and describe it.

6
7 *Lived experience is not immediately accessible for it is largely implicit in the sense of pre-*
8 *reflective*

9 That is, it has not been made an object of consciousness and so still remains
10 inaccessible to reflective consciousness. But one can only give verbal expression to
11 what one is conscious of. Verbalisation requires in advance that one should be
12 cognisant of what has been lived through. This state of affairs is often translated by
13 replies of the kind: 'I don't know' or even by rationalisations deriving from the
14 psychology of common sense.

15 The negative side of this state of affairs is that the phenomenological
16 dimension is not so easy to know. It is not immediately available as a whole. The
17 positive side is that there is a store of extraordinary data which has not been seen and
18 therefore not exploited by research up to the present time. Most often, the
19 spontaneous view of the psychologists is that either the information is available and
20 therefore can be brought to consciousness. The subject can verbalise it if one asks him
21 to do so with minimal instructions. Or else the information is not available. It is non
22 conscious or non-existent and the subject can not talk about it - in which case it is
23 useless proceeding further. However, what makes its appearance with the notion of the
24 pre-reflective is the domain of what can be rendered conscious: that is, information
25 which is not actually conscious (through lack of awareness and not necessarily for
26 reasons of censorship as in the Freudian model) but which can become so by means of
27 a particular activity, and, as we shall see later on, of intersubjective mediation. This
28 brings to light an important disequilibrium in the programme of research as between
29 the study of non-conscious aspects (perception without awareness, learning techniques
30 or implicit memory cf. Bornstein & Pittman 1992) and the absence of symmetrical
31 programmes which would explore the limits of what a subject can bring to
32 consciousness, as if this limit was already well known, unchangeable, the same for
33 everyone!

34 What makes it possible to acquire knowledge of one's experience is a specifically
35 'reflecting' activity. This is often confused with a 'reflected' activity.

36 We know from all of Piaget's work (1937, 1974 a,b,c) on becoming conscious
37 'of' that it is a valid and entirely independent comportment and that it is brought about
38 essentially for reasons extrinsic to the subject, such as, for example, the failure of his
39 action, gaps, momentary disequilibrium. If this comportment is to become deliberate
40 (at least to the extent of creating sufficient conditions for it to become so) our
41 understanding of the process of becoming conscious of something from a
42 phenomenological standpoint, from the point of view of a cognitive activity which the
43 subject can put into operation, has to be improved. In a certain sense, it is a question
44 of applying psycho-phenomenological analysis to the realisation of the act that makes
45 it possible (cf. Depraz, Varela, Vermersch in preparation). This procedure brings out the
46 value of the distinction between reflected and reflecting activity. The first bears upon
47 data which has already been brought to consciousness, it is a reflection 'upon' and is

2 largely synonymous with the commonplace meaning of the term 'reflection': to take as
3 object of thought other ideas (therefore already available as thoughts). The second, on
4 the contrary, is a form of 'reflexivity', in Piaget's sense of that term (1977), that is, it
5 implies a transition from the experience 'in act' to the alternative plane of a
6 'representation' of this experience. In advance of the possibility of experiencing it, it
7 is a reflection 'upon'. Both activities are reflexive in the sense that they imply a
8 change in the direction of attention, starting out from a 'natural' direction
9 spontaneously oriented towards the external world and then turned towards the
10 'interior' world. However, the difference between them is founded in the fact that the
11 reflecting activity is based upon a *gesture of accommodation* (Piguet 1975) which is
12 relatively speaking more passive than that of the deliberate research proper to the
13 reflective apprehension. Practising the reflecting activity is a delicate matter since it
14 presupposes a form of suspension of the regime of habitual cognitive activity, an
15 inhibition of the commitment towards others and the world, then a more or less
16 extended delay, since the subject is envisaging something which still is not present and
17 which is not given to him in the mode of access of an already reflected knowledge. So
18 there is a first suspension (epoche) permitting the reflecting act to get started, then a
19 second suspension, accompanied by an empty expectation in order that the fulfilment
20 should function. And what makes its appearance may do so in accordance with a much
21 slower temporalisation than that which presides over the cognitive task based on data
22 which has already been brought to consciousness. In sum, this reflecting activity is
23 relatively unfamiliar as a deliberate activity. Its practise demands either a long
24 personal education (in the spirit of what the book by Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991
25 has clearly emphasised, cf. also Varela 1996) or an expert mediation in he sessions
26 devoted to the work of clarification (Varela 1994). But this last solution, which offers
27 the advantage of enabling us to work with whoever shows up whether or not they have
28 been formed for the task, raises a new problem.

29
30 *The reflecting activity requires a training and/or the help of an expert mediator.*

31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46 *Subjective experience is as complex as any other object of research.*

2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

knowing it

With regard to subjective experience, an epistemological break is needed.

2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46