

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Dec 5, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/a-guide-for-the-perplexed-introduction-to-on-becoming-aware-1/>

Natalie Depraz, Francisco Varela & Pierre Vermersch

# **A Guide for the Perplexed. Introduction to On Becoming Aware (1)**

## **What are we up to?**

In this book we seek the sources and means for a disciplined practical approach to exploring human experience. Since that's already quite a program, please be patient while we explain what we mean.

## **A practical approach to human experience**

The spirit of this book is entirely pragmatic, for at least two related reasons. First of all, because of our approach: we will have to discover what pertains to our question as we go along; we will have to learn on the job, rather than give you ready-made results. Une dynamique d'amorçage in the French original. The verb amorcer means to bait, to entice, to start or begin, to prime. The intended meaning here is to help something get going by giving it a little help, like pushing a car to jump-start it, running some fluid through a pump in order to let it begin working on its own, or picking up some tricks of the trade from your elders while an apprentice. We will use "jump-start," "learning as we go along," or "learning on the job," and so on to translate Une dynamique d'amorçage. In other words, we must keep things open in our exploration of this new field, a terra incognita of which we know almost nothing. We proceed armed only with a sketchy map and some surveyor's tools, and so the progressive unfolding of the book follows the very emergence of conscious activity as it happens.

Secondly, because of our theme: since we are not trying to set forth a priori a new theory of experience as the neo-Kantians might have done, but instead want to describe an activity, a concrete praxis, we investigate conscious activity in so far as it perceives itself unfolding in an operative and immanent mode, at once habitual and pre-reflective.

## **What is at stake in becoming aware?**

Briefly put, we wish to understand how we come to examine what we live through. That is, we wish to understand that most peculiar of human acts: becoming aware of our own mental life. Now the range of experience of which we can become aware is vast. It includes not only all the ordinary dimensions of human life, (perception, motion, memory, imagination, speech, everyday social interactions), as well as cognitive events that can be precisely defined as tasks in laboratory experiments, (for example, a protocol for visual attention), but also manifestations of mental life more fraught with meaning, (dreaming, intense emotions, social tensions, altered states of consciousness). Among all these acts of consciousness which remain in a condition of immanence, there lives, unperceived, a form of pre-reflexivity on the basis of which consciousness is able to perceive its very self at work.

Hence our central assertion in this work is that this immanent ability or capacity is habitually ignored or at best practiced unsystematically, that is to say, blindly, and that exploring human experience amounts to developing and cultivating this basic ability. What type of "reflexivity" is proper for exploring without

disembodying this unreflected level of our life, traversed as it is by habitual patterns and sedimented experiences? In other words, how do we gain access to this pre-reflective and pre-given zone of our subjectivity in making it conscious? Other than what is merely on the fringe of consciousness, are there other levels of pre-noetic experience that become available when rigorously explored? These are open questions. Only a hands-on, non-dogmatic attitude can lead to progress, and that is what animates this book.

### **What do we mean by experience?**

We mean the lived, first-hand acquaintance with, and account of, the entire span of our minds and actions, with the emphasis not on the context of the action but on the immediate and embodied, and thus inextricably personal, nature of the content of the action. Experience is always that which a singular subject is subjected to at any given time and place, that to which s/he has access “in the first person.”

The experience of a given subject is at once precise, concrete, and individuated. It is centered on particular spatio-temporal parameters, and is thus new and different each time: at the same time it covers the whole of the already lived and sedimented life of the experiencing subject. That is why it is very difficult to speak of subjective experience without being equally interested in the full range of lived conscious activity, a life that is lived both innerly and in relationship with the outside world (in phenomenological terms: immanently and intentionally), that is, a life related to itself and related to objects, be they perceptive, affective or indeed for that matter, apperceptive, self-reflective.

We will thus speak, in the terms of various disciplines, of “first-hand accounts”, “first-person access”, “introspection”, “phenomenal data”, or “lived experiences (vécus Erlebnisse)”, but we will also – acknowledging the realm of embodied habits which the process of becoming aware is to reveal – speak of the unconscious, the preconscious, the pre-reflective, the self-present, the pre-noetic, the pre-predicative, or of one’s sedimented habitual life or habitus. As the book unfolds we hope the differences and articulations of these various terms will become apparent.

### **To whom are we talking?**

It should not be surprising that the aim of this book raises many questions. Our purpose, as we said, is not to form a theory, system, or unifying philosophy of experience and consciousness. Rather, we seek the explicit characterization of a very specific human ability: becoming aware as coming to know in the first person.

We want to find the commonalities and isomorphisms between the practices found in different domains for different reasons. Specifically, we are referring to the need for first-person data in the cognitive neurosciences, the need for reduction as a concrete and embodied praxis in phenomenology, the need for introspection in cognitive psychology, the need for various know-hows in a wide range of psychotherapies, and the needs of various spiritual practices which highlight the “examination of consciousness” and the “practice of effortless effort” We take a long-range view of these various resources in working toward finding a common pattern. Impossible, you say? Perhaps, but we firmly believe we are on to something of value, which we hope those readers who make it past the Introduction will see for themselves!

The results presented here will thus stand or fall only in so far as they can provide the means for reaching, via a disciplined practice, the experience characteristic of all the domains we mention above. In the contemporary context, given the way this book integrates the typically disjointed discourses of the cognitive sciences, applied psychology, philosophy, and spiritual traditions, it has no direct antecedents. Perhaps our closest ancestor in the English-speaking world is the pioneering work of Cendlin (1962/1997). As far as continental philosophy is concerned, Ricoeur (1950/1988) is the only one, as far as we know, to have broached this issue in his description of numerous “practical acts of consciousness (attention, emotion, effort, habit)”. This was written before he abandoned his project in favor of hermeneutics. In fact, the description of the passage from involuntary to voluntary is another possible formulation, no doubt the most classical, of what we attempt in this work.

Because of this lack of precedents we are in trouble, since we have no clearly defined audience. Our hunch is that we are addressing ourselves primarily to those people within each of the domains we mention above who have become sensitive to the need for further work on the method of exploring experience. If you are a cognitive scientist who just can’t stand the very idea of working with first-person data, then you might as

well just put this book down right now. Likewise if you are a philosopher who doesn't find the phenomenological reduction and the epoche to be the crucial truly operative method of phenomenology. And so on.

Are you still there? Good. This probably means that, being familiar with one of our domains, you are already sensitized to some of their internal shortcomings. In other words, you the reader might be able to identify with one or another of the following scenarios:

1. You are a research neuroscientist and it is beginning to dawn on you that first-person accounts are becoming more and more important for exploiting the latest tools of the trade, such as brain imaging.
2. You are a philosopher whose heightened sensitivity to phenomenology extends to actually engaging in new, fresh examinations and descriptions of experience, as opposed to the study of texts in the phenomenological tradition.
3. You are a research psychologist dissatisfied with the current tools for accessing subjective contents.
4. You are involved in one of the many professions dealing with human transformation, such as education, remedial therapies, knowledge management, and so on, and you know how difficult it is to have adequate guides for what clients have to do in their daily therapeutic work.
5. You are personally interested in a spiritual tradition that engages in self-analysis and a close examination of the sources of experience, and you are finding it necessary to connect your particular spiritual tradition with a broader, secular perspective.

If any of these scenarios, or ones similar to them, pop up in your life, then this book will help you by providing a sketch of the very act of becoming aware, the common ground of all these domains. You are not alone in your concerns, and there's a lot to gain by having a look around!

### **More trouble: Three heads, six hands, one book**

Given the scope and ambition of our book it would be silly to imagine that any one person could pull it off. It is no surprise then that this is a collective effort, but this poses many problems, including finding a single voice. To achieve such unity would have taken many more years of work, though, so rather than putting up with such a delay we have gone ahead with what we have. We will just have to ask our readers to forgive the occasional infelicities.

Since our own individual areas of work motivated this pragmatic inquiry, let us now speak about them. Depraz is a philosopher who has worked for many years in contemporary Husserlian phenomenology. Varela is a cognitive neuroscientist who works both in the laboratory and in theoretical biology. Vermersch is a research psychologist who has become interested in the development of methods of making knowledge explicit. Beyond these professional backgrounds each one of us has an interest in one or several spiritual traditions dealing with human transformation. Caveat lector: these inspirational sources are not to be simply assigned to the author of the essays, but rather to a complex network of concerns shared by the three of us, albeit with different degrees of emphasis and expertise.

### **How did such a joint work come about?**

The history of this book is worth telling at this point. The authors met in December 1994 in Vermersch's Seminar on "Psychologie et Phénoménologie." We each gave a presentation and immediately found a resonance between our texts, leading to intense discussions through the summer, when we decided to bring our work together. The unifying spark was introduced by Vermersch's piece, which went far beyond his original presentation, and was to provide a context for our discussions. That tentative, open-ended and incomplete manuscript was the seed for this book.

Between then and now every line of the book has been reworked, with several new chapters added and some older ones deleted. In fact it was the very process of writing that led us to our core results, since we had not

foreseen many of them when we started, and they did not fully come together until the summer of 1997. On a pleasant country retreat during that time we produced a version close to the present one. On the whole, we would say that this book is the record of a discovery voyage rather than a report of pre-established findings. This also means that throughout all the writing stages we have become immersed in each other's language, ideas and styles to the extent that what we say here we say with a collective voice. Thus in this six-handed performance we have equally shared responsibilities; in particular, we would like to stress that the order of authors' names is strictly alphabetical.

### **So what's the bottom line?**

You will find the core of the book in Part 1. There we set forth a methodical and practical description, the dynamic of becoming aware. We distinguish five principal steps.

Step 1: the movement of epoche as an initial suspension, repeated at each step.

Step 2: the recognition of intuitive evidence as the criterion of truth internal to each act.

Step 3: the expression of the content of each act.

Step 4: the intersubjective validation of findings from Step 3.

Step 5: the becoming aware of the multi-layered temporality of each act.

The first two steps form, strictly speaking, the kernel of each act of becoming aware (what we call the Basic Cycle); the two following steps inscribe the act in its communicability and objectification; the final, transversal, step reveals the unique temporal dynamic of each act. Obviously this thumbnail sketch remains mysterious and silent before it is fleshed out. But we set it forth here so you might see both the nature and limits of the research we are offering.

Our main contribution is the formulation of a research program:

A common ground for a multiplicity of approaches to becoming aware

In other words, this is not a fully articulated book. It is more like a Progress Report: sufficiently detailed to be communicated and shared, but not yet mature enough to warrant a "definitive" presentation. In fact, all three of us took off from the writing of this book in our own different directions, without spending too much time on the subtleties of its expression. Writing this book opened our eyes; in that spirit we share it with you the reader.

### **Why isn't this just psychology?**

One might think that studying becoming aware, the very structure of reflective activity, should legitimately be the concern of a psychology research program. But that's easy to say! As if it were only a matter of studying this structure from an experimental point of view, that is to say from a first-person (and, as we will see, a second-person) point of view. But this is precisely what most of scientific psychology has spent a century rejecting, disqualifying and ignoring. We acknowledge that after the downfall of behaviorism, experimental psychology and cognitive science have opened themselves up to considering mental contents and verbal reports. But these are merely the tip of the iceberg of the full range of a person's lived experience. This paradox can only be solved if psychology reinvests introspection while modernizing it, perfecting its technique and refreshing it with a practical knowledge at once direct and formalized. However, such a conversion does not only imply a renewed and rigorous methodology, but also precise descriptions of subjective experience. Now the prolonged absence of psychology from these grounds means that one has only a few psychological materials at one's disposal. Hence the necessity of turning to both the immanent mode of categorization of practitioners (teachers, psychotherapists, coaches, trainers) and to the remarkable source of psychological inspiration contained in the descriptive work of Husserl. If our work is going to take its rightful place in a psychology research program, it's only going to happen via an opening up to a "psycho-phenomenology." In this sense our book can be seen as a re-awakening of introspective psychology.

## **Isn't this book just more phenomenology?**

Of course, beyond the practical ontology of this book, another important common denominator is the phenomenological approach we adopt here even as we re-appropriate and renew it. But, from the outset, we should clear up a certain number of misunderstandings that are attached to the term “phenomenology.” Among philosophers, it mostly refers to the tradition founded by Husserl and pursued by (among the most well-known) Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and then reinvigorated by Levinas and Michel Henry. Among psychologists and sociologists along the lines of Schiltz and Garfinkel it refers to an interest in describing and categorizing concrete experience. Among cognitive scientists it has yet another usage, referring to the still controversial possibility of a first-person access to data which are scientifically credible, that is, objective.

There are thus several usages of this term, more or less restricted, which range from 1) traditional texts to 2) an interest in returning to first person concrete experience. Hence a certain conceptual hesitation, indeed a terminological blurriness, surrounds the contemporary use of this term. We ourselves insist on experience in a wide sense, yet 1) centered on its concrete singularity, and with reference to 2) its effective workings, its praxis, and 3) to its procedural description. With this range of meaning, the “phenomenology” we invoke evidently borrows from the sense of the term current in the human and cognitive sciences – hence the search for a methodology oriented to gaining access to such singular experience – all the while calling upon the resources of meaning and rigor inherent in a still-lively phenomenological philosophy.

## **Don't you know that contemporary philosophers have shown that experience is not something that can be “explored”?**

We acknowledge that our pragmatic orientation is likely to leave some readers a bit cold. The skeptical reader will no doubt want to raise perhaps the most fundamental objection to our inquiry, namely: “How do you know that by exploring experience with a method you are not, in fact, deforming or even creating what you claim to ‘experience’? Experience being what it is, what is the possible meaning of your so-called ‘examination’ of it?”

We can call this the “excavation fallacy,” or in philosophical terms, the hermeneutical objection (inspired as it is by a Heideggerian move). In still another formulation, this is the deconstructive objection, based on post-modern philosophical analysis (mostly derived from Derrida). All these objections go to the heart of our project here. They all emphasize the claim that there is no such thing as a “deep” pre-linguistic layer of experience, since any account is “always already” enfolded in language. Hence any new account will be only an inflection of linguistic practices that “go all the way down”.

We might as well be direct on this point. If you are an utterly convinced hermeneut or Derridean, then you might as well put this book down right now and save yourself some time and trouble, for we cannot offer an air-tight argument that precludes all the possible flaws and traps of our approach. We can only offer what we hope are prudent and flexible answers to the above objections. We unabashedly admit that in some basic sense there is indeed a significant problem posed to our project by these objections, and no a priori arguments or methodological contortions are going to solve this problem for us with a wave of the wand. It seems indeed inevitable that any method will be part and parcel of the kinds of entities and properties invented by that method.

This is, among other things, true in the most consecrated forms of natural science, as recent scholarship has made abundantly clear. For instance, the ideas about the vacuum and ether, the construction and design of the air pump, and the social milieu where Boyle worked at the gestation of the Royal Society, were all inseparable ingredients of this fundamental advance in physics (Shapin & Shaeffer 1994). The vacuum is, as Latour put it, a quasi-object, partly social-instrumental, partly empirical-physical (Latour 1995). And if this is the case for the so-called hard sciences, it is all the more so for first-person disciplines which are still in gestation.

But this problem is also found in philosophy texts which concern, more or less, the experience of the author. Describing experience implies using a set of categories which will always make up an interpretive grid. Moreover, description is from the start an explication (an instance of *Auslegung*), at once reflective and comprehensive. Whether it is Husserl, Heidegger, or Ricoeur, each of these philosophers has clearly put at

the center of his enterprise the explication of the meaning of experience, although they do so in distinct modes (Dastur 1992).

Acknowledging all this means not getting too shook up about the fact that no methodological approach to experience is neutral; they all inevitably interpret their phenomenal data. The hermeneutical dimension of the process is inescapable: every examination is an interpretation, and all interpretation reveals and conceals at the same time. But it does not follow that a disciplined approach to experience creates nothing but artifacts or a “deformed” version of the way experience “really” is. There are at least two arguments to support this stance.

First, the entire history of the natural sciences goes to show that although its objects are indeed quasi-objects, and inescapably hermeneutical to boot, they are nonetheless also inextricably constrained by their empirical appearance and reality. Vacuums and ether are not “mere” artifacts of social practices, nor are they simply “deformed” from some pre-given transcendental purity. *Mutatis mutandis*, the exploration of experience will suffer, along with all other methodological investigations, from cultural expectations and instrumental bias, but there is no evidence that the phenomenal data gathered are not equally constrained by the very reality of conscious contents. Thus the descriptions we can produce through the act of becoming aware as we describe it in Part 1 are not taken here as solid “facts,” but as valid intersubjective items of knowledge, as quasi-objects of a cognitive kind. No more, but also, no less.

The second argument is that human experience is not a fixed, predelineated domain, but is instead changing, changeable, and fluid. If you undergo disciplined training in musical performance, the newly acquired skills of distinguishing sounds, of being sensitive to musical phrasing and ensemble playing, are undeniable changes in your capabilities of experience. But this means that experience is explored and modified by such disciplined procedures in non-arbitrary ways. Similarly, if we think of psychotherapeutic practices – even if one can be skeptical about their overall efficacy in dealing with human discontent at one level – the accumulated experience of psychotherapy indicates that the client’s experience is transformed by the work they do in the therapeutic context. We might also consider the example of anthropological work on the practices, rites and customs of a given cultural group. Anthropologists do not remain untouched by their immersion in the foreign culture, just as the “natives” see their conception of the other modified by the presence of such strangers. However, this mutual intersubjective transformation is not without rules or results, as the example of the “observer participation” in ethnology shows us.

In other words, we are trying to avoid two unilateral extremes that we see as nonsensical or absurd: 1) claiming that experience is standard, raw, pure or ineffable; 2) claiming that all our experience is always already molded or even deformed by the language we use. All we have is experience at its own level of examination, depending on the kinds of effort and methods brought into play in that very examination. Experience moves and changes, and its exploration is already part of human life, even if the exploration has different objectives than the experience it explores.

It should be clear by now that we want to position ourselves in a prudent but daring middle ground. On the one hand, we wish to explore fully the tools available for first-person accounts. On the other hand, we do not claim that such an access is method-free or “natural” in any privileged sense. This mixed stance is yet another manifestation of the pragmatic spirit of this work.

Do I have to read Part II?

Perhaps not at all. As we have already said, Part II presents our motivations for exploring experience. We include it to reach out to all the different kinds of people we anticipate will read this book. It provides a kind of statement of what led each of us, to different degrees, to undertake the research project outlined in Part 1. Reading Part II is therefore not essential to getting at what we want to say, but it may be of interest by providing a background to those domains that are unfamiliar to the reader.

Consequently, Part II is laid out according to the interests of the authors. Each essay is signed individually, with the exception of Chapter V, which is dedicated to practice, and which constitutes a synthesis of the different approaches to this question.

## **An invitation**

We hope we have clarified some of the contents and difficulties of our book, as well as shown how important it is to open up this area of work. The ability to become aware of experience simply cannot remain unexamined and underdeveloped without seriously compromising our ability to meet a major challenge today facing several areas of research, practice, and indeed, human life. Please read on and judge for yourself how well we are meeting that challenge. Welcome to the inquiry. We hope you will be able to learn on the go, just as we did.

## **Notes:**

1) 2003.