Experiential phenomenology of novelty
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An Experiential Phenomenology of Novelty: The Dynamic Antinomy of Attention and Surprise

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Introduction

The phenomenologist Edmund Husserl invented the "époque"5 as a method for dismantling metaphysical constructions, and put forward a strong experiential claim: "coming back to the things themselves." He thus aims at promoting a logic of experience capable of putting explanations, argumentations and general discourses in the background, because these latter often account more for our representation of experience rather than for the very singularized lived experience itself.

The founder of phenomenology, however, very rarely gives indications about how to concretely come back to such an experiential individualized level of reality: how to explore one’s own experience, how to cultivate such an intimate presence to myself, what inner gestures and practical tools are to be put to work. The main challenge of our joint work On Becoming Aware: A Pragmatics of Experiencing (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch 2003) has been to offer an operative description of the concrete move of the époché as a process of becoming aware through the exemplified dynamic of three inner gestures that are organically correlated: suspension, conversion as re-direction, letting-go as welcoming. In this paper, as in that joint book, the phenomenological method that results is presented as it is performed, and not just described.

A decade later — the necessary time for "digesting" such a pioneering work — I realize that the concrete operative experience of such a practical performance of époché is less a case of "consciousness," even in its dynamic of "becoming aware," than attention, understood less as a formal function or as an inner state than as a processual lived quality of vigilance, or again, as an "augmented" presence (Depraz 2013a). It is the main point I want to make in this contribution, after having unfolded the methodological and epistemological framework that underlies it (Depraz 2013d). Now, while going through such research, led by a de-centering of concern from consciousness to attention as vigilance, I have just begun to understand that attention as a key operator of the experiential phenomenology is nothing without its intimate other, which disturbs, intrigues and troubles it: I mean "surprise," which is, at a closer look, the very mobile tissue of our experience as a dynamics of experiencing.1

In short, here is my contention, which I will demonstrate in this contribution: attention and surprise are the two concrete experiential key operators of an antinomic dynamic of a circular processual kind that also contributes (as we will see) to interrupting the linear temporal successive rhythm of "before" and "after." Strikingly enough, "attention" and "surprise" are both quite common and ordinary words that are immediately understandable by everybody: they straightaway confront us with specific situations and ordeals where it is not possible to "be all talk." They do so far more interestingly so than consciousness" and "ex-2

1 | In this paper, I will retain the standard French manner of accenting the word "époque," rather than the semi-Anglicized usage, "époque."

2 | About such a hypothesis, see the on going Emphiline EMCO ANR Project I lead at the Husserl-Archives (ENS/CNRS), entitled “La surprise au sein de la spontanéité des émotions: Un vecteur de cognition élargie” (2012–2015).

3 | Charles Sanders Peirce is probably the philosopher that provided the most acute account of surprise as coextensive to experience itself. On this matter, see “About phenomenology” in Peirce (1994).
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In this first step I aim at presenting three historical-personal stages of the growing interest in a rigorous first-person phenomenology, one which is able to catch up with its native experiential claim even whilst one is practically performing it. Such a phenomenology needs to be distinguished from a theoretical conceptual one: the method of the latter is hermeneutical and its object primarily textual; the former takes a specific lived situation as its singular (each time different) object, and its method of accounting for it is of a descriptive kind. Having made such a clear-cut distinction between both, it is crucial to insist on their close cooperation. Far from being autonomous, they both historically and heuristically need each other and grow from each other. However, I am skeptical about Husserl’s well-known metaphors of the twin-girls and of the incestual antinomy of co-innervation needs to be distinguished from a standard conceptual theoretical phenomenology — as distinct from a standard conceptual theoretical phenomenology — and its possible transposition into the first- and third-person scientific contemporary debate; second, I will investigate the relevance of the key operator of experience, attention as vigilance; third, I will present the hypothesis of the antinomic dynamics of attention and surprise via a rough, still preliminary presentation of the originality of the phenomenon of surprise.

A general framework for an experiential practical phenomenology

To my mind, such an image carries with it an understanding of “relation” that is based on a con-fusional link and on the potential ambiguity of perversion. On the contrary, the clear-cut distinction I contend exists between psychology and phenomenology aims at creating another kind of relationship, based on the clear knowledge of their methodological and ontological difference and offering the opportunity of a rational and pragmatic “engagement.” If I had to suggest a metaphor for the relation between a first-person experimental and a third-person conceptual phenomenology, I would favor the image of the “couple” dynamic, that is, the structure of “alliance” rather than the one of “parenté,” to use Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological categories. I would choose this metaphor in order to stress the idea of two liberties choosing to engage rather than two subjects linked by a natural common-rooted “apparentance” (belonging).

A first pioneering thrust: Experiencing épochè

With On Becoming Aware, our primary goal is to stop talking and writing about the phenomenological method and to put it into practice, that is, to show how to experience it concretely. Now, experiencing the act of reducing obviously requires coming back to the experience of a singular individual subject, able to account for what he or she concretely does and lives.

As soon as you draw attention to the concrete way of performing an act, here lies the act of phenomenological reduction, you cannot simply refer to it in general, as if we already knew what it is made of. You need to
Philosophical concepts in enactive cognitive science

1 go into details, that is, as expected of a philosopher, to “analyze” it, to differentiate it into segments and components. In the case of a philosophy oriented toward practice, that is, toward experiencing and performing, such an analysis cannot remain formal: it will unavoidably be made of lived contents and of dynamic processes.

2 Therefore recast the act of Husserlian époche into its experiential pragmatics and analyzed it into three organically correlated inner operationalizable gestures: suspension, redirection and letting-go, as is shown in Figure 1.

3 Époche is thus concretely experienced in its three main phases: I suspend my “realist” beliefs and prejudices about what appears to me as being truly the state of the world and thus break with the “natural” attitude and question it; I redirect my attention from the exterior, the “object,” to the interior, the modal quality of my living and acting; I welcome what happens without controlling it, thus opening up the possibility of unexpectedness and novelty (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch 2003).

4 Though such a pioneering experiential thrust remains for me totally unique and un-trespassing, insofar as it definitely establishes the experientiality of the phenomenological method and also already hints at attention as redirection and at surprise as novelty. However, it still remains – I would say now – too “meta”-practical and structural. In short, practicing époche while operating its three articulated gesturations and referring to seven structural examples (elicitation, meditation, writing, heartprayer, psychoanalysis, experimental depth perception, philosophical workshop) in order to show its being put into practice in different fields, is crucial as a first step toward the becoming experiential of phenomenology but in no way sufficient. We now need to go beyond such a meta-practice of époche and its only structural exemplification and enter into the very concrete texture of the dynamics of experience.

5 How?

Entering into the introspective elicitation methodology

While immersing ourselves into a finer and more detailed method of experiencing and describing, we are able to contact a truly individual, specific, lived situation. Such a method exists and it has its own effective rigor. It was founded by Pierre Vermersch (1994) under the name: “elicitation interview” (entretien d’explicitation). It was carried on and developed further by Claire Pettimengin (2009, 2011). It was then further unfolded by Vermersch with a new method of elicitation as “self-elicitation” (auto-explicitation), which for example emerged from 2006 onwards in the framework of a small research group around the “sens se faisant,” where I myself first experienced the possibility of first-person self-explicating, nevertheless having difficulties, on my side, with the form of the second person “elicitation interview.”

4 For this new way of “elicitating,” see an example in Depraz (2009b) and a detailed presentation in Vermersch (2012).

What does the elicitation technique consist of? As a working embodied introspective methodology, it amounts to:

1 | re-living (not remembering from afar nor reconstituting);
2 | first-personally describing (not explaining nor argumentating); and
3 | analyzing an individual, specific, lived experience while identifying it through embodied contents and processual dynamics (not in the formal way of universal and necessary static categories).

It offers the most adequate empirical matrix and methodology for a truly experiential phenomenology, strongly aware of its lived and specified practical rootedness. With such a method, first-person descriptions become available and we are able to discover out of them recurrent features, as well as hapax logomena (unique and specific occurrences). The specificity of this experiential method is double-oriented:

1 | Contrary to the Husserlian eidetic variation – from which it retains the move of extracting invariants and the interest in irreducible singular variables and leading threads – it is not a priori but empirical, thus allowing discoveries and new phenomena – in short, epistemically “surprises”;
2 | But contrary to the inductive move characteristic of empirical science and philosophy, which remain “fascinated” by generalizations from the facts, that is, by the myth of an objectivity obtained in abstraction from any subjective account, the elicitation method sticks to subjective lived singularities.

In short, to “hapaxes,” which it does not consider as mere noises but as proper intrinsic components of objectivity itself.

Unfolding a practical philosophical methodology: Experiential reading and writing

Beyond formal apriorism and factual empiricism, phenomenology is truly and intrinsically “experiential.” But as a philosophy it deals with texts, not with empirical data. My main activity as a philosopher – phenomenologist consists of reading and writing texts; so I need to radically unearth phenomenology’s genuine provenance from the lived unique experience of a singular subject. Phenomenology’s truth-validity ought to be two-fold: its logical coherence ought to come through its first-personal experiential authenticity. Such an experiential lever needs to be put to work at two different but related levels in order to provide an adequate reformulation of philosophy such that it operates with embodied concepts:

1 | rather than rigidly opposing conceptual a priori descriptions and experiential singular ones, an experiential phenomenological philosophy, properly understood, will undertake a comparative work between both conceptual and experiential levels, the aim of such a comparison being to bring about new, more complex and more embodied categories;
Attention as vigilance: The key operator of experiencing

Attention is a crucial phenomenon for an experiential phenomenology because it is two in one: an experience and a method at the same time. Each time I experience something, I am using attention as its operator: any activity (perceiving, talking, imagining, remembering) is achieved along with a certain degree of attention. In short, it is not a separate tool, but the very tissue of such an experience. It is the "curseur" (a French term; i.e., the accompaniment, or concomitant) of my presence to any event, be it inner or outer.

Whereas epoché can be formally isolated as a technical method of phenomenology and while "consciousness" appears too global to be precisely identified as a concrete tangible operator, attention is an ordinary and intrinsically graduated experience we unceasingly have daily: I listen carefully to a friend who talks to me about his aged mother; I let me eyes wander away while sitting in the train that goes to Rouen. I name this unique capacity of qualifying my presence to any phenomenon "vigilance" and, in that respect, "vigilance" is the very core of heart of attention. I suggest that with attention as vigilance, we integrate epoché and "consciousness" as preliminary experiential and methodological steps, but that we also take a step beyond these two.

From consciousness to attention

Why attention? Three main reasons are here at work. First, as I said, attention is a daily and ordinary experience and an easily understandable term, contrary to epoché, which results in a more complex and too radical experience and is also a "screen-concept," that is, one that hides and hinders my spontaneous ability to understand. Second, attention is a concrete lived act, a focal accessible operation, whereas consciousness remains a global diffuse experience, a generic entity and a 'big' word. Third, and this is my hypothesis here, attention helps in refining époche into a concrete daily process and a local first-personal function. Attention thus contributes to achieving the concretization of the époche at work in On.

The four features of attention-vigilance

Attention-vigilance is therefore a "complex" phenomenon, which interweaves the above-mentioned four processes as circularly articulated to each other in the following ways:

1. Its inner structural dynamics of modulation (mobility-variability-fluctuation) paves the way for an augmented being that is a more dense, stressed, underlined presence.

2. Its genetic processuality of openness is a receptive, embodied, temporal, emotional one. It opens up a lighter being, that is, a never-avoiding but always welcoming presence.

3. Its generative growth, which includes the different facets of evolution, development and training, brings about a

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The antinomic dynamic of attention and surprise

I therefore need to complement my conceptual approach with an experiential one and, here, "surprise" will be the phenomenon that I crucially need and that will compel me to renounce the pure conceptual level of analysis. Why? The working hypothesis is that surprise is the experiential access to experience as novelty. In short, surprise goes hand in hand with novelty and compels the philosophical conceptual attitude to go beyond itself. Whereas conceptuality alone tends to favor a systematic closure, experiencing goes hand in hand with exploration and discovery. Therefore, surprise as novelty is a crucial lever in reforming the philosophical attitude into an experiencing one. So no longer "conceptualizing first!" but "experiencing first!"

However I will not play one level against the other. I will show that conceptualizing and experiencing belong to one and the same antinomic dynamic: they need each other. In that respect, they are embodied and concretely exemplified by the very similar antinomic dynamic that is at work between attention and surprise.

A twofold move builds such a dynamic: there is no surprise without (be it merely organic) tensed attention-vigilance towards it, but conversely, there is no attention without the irreducible reality of surprise. I will examine both moves more precisely in turn, even though they form the unique integrated view of attention-surprise I want to promote.

No surprise without attention-vigilance

In order to embody such an integrated dynamics, I need to go one step further and provide you, my reader, with a few invitations to experience various concrete situations. Otherwise I will stick to the comfortable conceptual level and will be self-contradictory with my own claims.

Therefore, for each of the above features characteristic of attention, let me offer you four specific "experimental-experiential" sets:

1. Modulation is maybe best exemplified by the historical experimental discussion between Wilhelm Wundt and his student Oswald Külp, who suggested contrasting hypotheses. Whereas Wundt contended that the modulatory process is of an intermittent nature, Külp on the other hand (and Husserl came to share his view) argued that modulation is a fluctuating process. In what sense? Among cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists, modulation has come to designate one main feature of attention, but it is presented as being at the subpersonal level of neuronal processes. The lived reality of what the modulation of attention means for a subject is not described. The historical debate between Wundt, on the one side, and Külp and Husserl, on the other, 15 points towards the care needed to provide first-person descriptive features of modulation. Even though these thinkers did not reach agreement, such a debate is a good indication of the importance of a first-person description of the phenomenon, and indeed of the kinds of first-person features that are relevant.

2. Novelty compels experiencing/explicating surprise, as both a rupture within linear time and the creation of an antenatal relationship with what is unexpected. Such a complex articulation is for example shown by Adam Smith’s situated embodied definition of surprise: 

*Wonder, Surprise, and Admiration, are words which, though often confounded, denote in our language, sentiments that are indeed allied, but that are in some respects different also, and distinct from one another. What is new and singular, excites that sentiment which, in strict propriety, is called Wonder; what is unexpected, Surprise; and what is great or beautiful, Admiration. ...* — Smith (1962: 3)

3. Generation: experiencing/explicitating the phenomenological analysis of retention as retroprojection and reactivation reveals the non-linear character of time, which enables us to show the catching up with presence through attention. Concerning this attentional process, I give the reader an indicative example through experiential
No attention-vigilance without the reality of surprise

Now, “surprise” is commonly presented as synonymous with “unexpectedness”: I am surprised by your decision to stay in Paris during the summer; you had told me about a holiday-trip to Turkey, I did not expect you to be a summer Parisian! It is thus experienced as a rupture in the contingency of my sedimented experiences.

But contrary to such a common sense understanding, I suggest the dynamic anticipation of what was to come. In that case I would be left to the mercy of chance.

“Working hypothesis”: there is no surprise without a quality of attention-vigilance that is time-embodied and relies on “awaiting.” In the line of Husserl’s “horizon d’attente” (Erwartungshorizonte) and of the French-Latin connection between “attention” and “attente” (waiting), surprise does not equate complete unexpectedness, but rather involves:

1) an open awaiting, so that the time of surprise is a circular prototypical dynamics that I elsewhere named “auto-antécédance” (Section II in Depraz 2001);

2) a somatic cardiac and neural embodiment, where one key aspect of the lived body of surprise is the heart as the “body of the body” in its specific rhythm and variability (Depraz 2008b);

3) an emotional-affective lived experience characterized by a polarity/valence (+/-) intrinsically associated to the moment of surprise (Varela & Depraz 1999); and finally

4) the language of surprise is embodied as (a) an organic bodily expressive paraverbal language, (b) the expressions of the lived body itself and (c) the semantic and lexical verbal expressions of surprise (Depraz 2013b).

To synthesize a little, we have to deal with surprise via a multifarious dynamics, which needs to take into account at least four main components:

1) time,
2) body,
3) emotion; and
4) language.

and constantly surprised. … But consider a case in which I am caught completely by surprise, as when someone close by, but out of sight, suddenly yell’s “Surprise!” In this case, there is no anticipation of the event, even of the most indeterminate kind:”), with whom I here part company.


10) In this connection, see the early Augustinian attentio-attendere (Saint Augustin 1993, Book IX, chapter 28: 397–400), and the more recent Bergsonian-Weilian references to attention as inherently linked to awaiting (Bergson 2009; Weil 1966).

References

Husserl writes the following description in the Lectures about Passivity and the theme of unity.

Between two persons.

Attention is no longer a mental genuinely answering the suffering of the patient. Here attention is essentially a critical state. Here attention is essentially context and thus first-personally embodied by the situation.

Temporal (italic) spatio- (italic) temporal (underlined italic) antécédance” (section ii in Depraz 2008b), which is best illustrated by experimental work between the third-person conceptual measures in each group are compared to depressed subjects (involving decreased heart beat, for example). The third-person psycho-physiology of surprise, above all enunciations and names, surprise deals with three groups of subjects (25 in each group): (1) depressed, (2) in remission, (3) control. Each group is confronted with horror, erotic and neutral images. The experiments are guided by the hypothesis of hyporeactivity to surprise for depressed subjects (involving decreased heart beat, for example). The third-person psycho-physiology of surprise, relying on texts and concepts but with emphasis on an experiential “reading look.”

The philosophical phenomenology of surprise, understood as startle, and its emotional implicit anticipation (priorly carried on by Thomas Desmidt 18 at Tours/Inserm), to which I graft first-person elicitation interviews. The third-person psycho-physiology of surprise, relying on texts and concepts but with emphasis on an experiential “reading look.”

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I have already broached the issue of the specific experiential reading I suggest for 29 philosophical-phenomenological texts in order to explicitly unearth their embodied dimension. It gives rise to a comparative work between the third-person conceptuality of surprise and its first-person experiential embodiment.

In parallel, the psycho-physiology of surprise deals with three groups of subjects (25 in each group): (1) depressed, (2) in remission, (3) control. Each group is confronted with horror, erotic and neutral images. The experiments are guided by the hypothesis of hyporeactivity to surprise for depressed subjects (involving decreased heart beat, for example). The third-person psycho-physiology of surprise, relying on texts and concepts but with emphasis on an experiential “reading look.”

The third-person psycho-physiology of surprise, understood as startle, and its emotional implicit anticipation (priorly carried on by Thomas Desmidt 18 at Tours/Inserm), to which I graft first-person elicitation interviews.

Finally, the linguistic verbalisations of surprise, above all enunciations and names, but also more spontaneously interactions, are obtained thanks to a group of 100 students of English linguistics confronted with aesthetic images (paintings triggering ad-

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Concluding while looping the loop: Neurophenomenology revisited, put to work and extended

Finally, I would like to address explicitly the following question: To what extent is the neurophenomenology hypothesis revisited, indeed truly put to work and also extended, thanks to such a research program?

In order to succeed, the co-generative neurophenomenological program needs to be actually performed and not just sketched. But how can Francisco Varela’s neurophenomenological research program of mutual generative constraints be tested? How can we check its relevance, show its limitations?

I would like to mention three different themes in the present research, which can inform us as we revisit neurophenomenology:  

A strictly twofold categorial theme:  
- Attention-vigilance is a descriptive categorial-experiential refinement of the époché as described in On Becoming Aware, but it is here supplemented by its ineliminable dual of surprise.  
- The antimony of attention-vigilance and surprise is a more ecological re-formulation of the dynamics of time present in Varela (1999).

A strongly experiential theme:  
- Through the central use of elicitation interviews as a rigorous descriptive and analytic tool extracting experiential invariants, in line with Petitmenigaux’s own research program of over a decade, I am concerned with a structural comparison between third-person neuro- and physiological invariants of startle and first-person ones of lived surprise.
- I re-integrate textual philosophical phenomenology into a first-person phenomenology of experience by means of (1) extracting concepts from texts as experienced (via experiential reading and writing) and (2) comparing experiential invariants from elicitation interviews and a priori categories from philosophical texts, thus generating new categories.

An epistemological theme:  
- Psycho-linguistics opens the way for a truly experiential embodied language of surprise with specific linguistic and paraverbal markers: up to now, the language dimension has always been underestimated, or at least awkwardly dealt with, in the neurophenomenology paradigm.

- Psycho-physiology brings about a crucial new complementary field besides neurodynamics:  
  » There is direct access to first-person experience: I can spontaneously and experientially feel my heart beating (not my neurons).
  » The psychological and gross physiological levels have a less subtle micro-timing than the neurological level, but are more easily map-able to lived subjective timing.

In sum, I would argue that neurophenomenology could not be performed in its initial framework, which compared speculative categories and neuronal invariants. The present framework shows what is required such that it can be performed:  
- a priori philosophical categories that are experientially embodied; the complementation of neuro-dynamics with physiology and cardiology, which creates a far subtler continuum with the pre-conscious level of the elicitation techniques; and the latter itself being thoroughly used in order to extract experiential invariants of surprise. The time has come to create the experiential synergy that is needed for neurophenomenology to become an effective phenomenological epistemology.

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