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

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Introduction

The phenomenologist Edmund Husserl invented the "époque" 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, arguments 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 Experience (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.

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 possible to "be all talk." They do so far more interestingly so than "consciousness" and "ex-..."
A general framework for an experiential practical phenomenology

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 phenomenological 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 metaphor of the twin-girls and of the incestual alliance 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.

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 “parent,” to use Lévi-Strauss’ 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 “appartenance” (belonging).

A first pioneering thrust: Experiencing époché

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 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
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 Petitmengin (2009, 2011). It was then further unfolded by Vermersch with a new method of elicitation as “self-elicitation” (auto-explication), 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.”

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

1. re-living (not remembering from afar nor reconstructing);
2. first-personally describing (not explaining nor argumenting); 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.

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 experimental method is double-oriented:

1. Contrary to the Husserlian eidetic variation – from which it retains the move of extracting invariants and the interference of irreducible singular variables – 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, which is, by the myth of an objectivity obtained in abstraction from any subjective account, the elicitation methodology 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 reformation of philosophical methodology such that it operates with embodied concepts:

1. rather than rigidly opposing conceptual a priori descriptions and experiential singular ones, an experiential philosophical methodology, 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 époché 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 or heart of attention.

I suggest that with attention as vigilance, we integrate époché 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 époché, 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 époché into a concrete daily process and a local first-personal function. Attention thus contributes to achieving the concretization of the époché at work in On Becoming Aware and the consciousness debate within the cognitive sciences.

From attention to vigilance

Why then refine attention into vigilance? Indeed, the popular virtue of attention lies in the fact that everybody understands it: it speaks to anybody. "Soyons attentifs ensemble!" (roughly, "Let's pay attention together!") is what you hear daily in the Parisian metro! However, the drawback of this virtuous advantage is its standard understanding (both school-laden and scientific) as concentration-focalization: this is quite a narrow view of attention.So, my main contention is to promote attention-vigilance against attention-concentration. Why? Because of the inner limitations of the attention-concentration experience and its definition, which lie in four main, overly narrow features:

1. It is a state.
2. It is mental.
3. It is individualistic.
4. It is closed up.

Let us therefore shift to attention-vigilance, which is in turn characterized as:

1. Having a mobile and variable dynamics;
2. Being a receptive, temporal process of openness;
3. Being a generative embodied growth; and
4. Being a deeply relational vertical presence.

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-awaiting 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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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 reformatting 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 Külpe, who suggested contrasting hypotheses. Whereas Wundt contended that the modulatory process is of an intermittent nature, Külpe 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 mainly as being at the subpersonal level of neuronal processes.

2. Novelty compels experiencing/explicating surprise, as both a rupture within linear time and the creation of an attentional relation 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. ... 39 We are surprised at those things which we have seen often, but which we least of all expected to meet with in the place where we find them; we are surprised at the sudden appearance of a friend, whom we have not seen for a thousand times, but whom we did not imagine we were to see then.**

Smith (1962: 3)

3. Generation: experiencing/explicating the phenomenological analysis of attention as repropagation 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...
through experiencing reading, the reader will focus on the first-person situational indications (non-serif) and the singularized context and thus first-personally embody the situation.

4. Relationality is best illustrated by experiencing explicating the ethical experience of a strong empathetic resonance of the emergency psychiatrist with a person in a critical state. Here attention is essentially a need for an inter-subjective kind: the psychiatrist listens to the patient and hears her or his suffering. Through the resonance techniques first thematized by Mony Elkaim (1989), the psychiatrist will listen to his/her own suffering, and rely on his/her own personal and family history as an inner felt indicator of what is needed and helpful for genuinely answering the suffering of the patient. Here attention is no longer a mental state, it is a highly-lived affective interaction between two persons.

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 continuity of my sedimented experiences.

But contrary to such a common sense understanding, I suggest the dynamic antinomic “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 protentional 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 yells “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 attenti-attendere (Saint Augustin 1993, Book IX, chapter 28: 397–400), and the more recent Bergsonian-Welian references to attention as inherently linked to awaiting (Bergson 2009; Weil 1966).

Such a double-sided antinomic dynamic of attention-surprise indeed slowly emerges from the threefold generative cross-disciplinary inquiry I pursue in the 7 framework of the ANR Research program based at the Husserl-archives, ENS, in Paris. What are these three approaches?

1. The philosophical phenomenology of surprise, relying on texts and concepts but with emphasis on an experiential “reading look.”

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

3. The linguistic verbalisations in “spon- taneous” enunciation contexts (primarily led by Pascale Goutéraux at the University of Paris-Diderot), which are supplemented again by first-person 25 elicitation interviews that I am currently leading.

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 conceptualability of surprise and its first-person experiential embodiment.

In parallel, the psycho-physiology of surprise deals with three groups of sub- 37 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-physiological measures in each group are compared to 45 the first-person experiential criteria obtained through elicitation interviews of a 47 sub-group of these three groups.

Finally, the linguistic verbalisations of surprise, above all enunciations and names, but also more spontaneously interjections, interrogative and exclamative expressions 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.

1 | 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 antinomy of attention-vigilance and surprise is a more ecological re-formulation of the dynamics of time present in Varela (1999).

2 | A strongly experiential theme:
   - Through the central use of elicitation interviews as a rigorous descriptive and analytic tool extracting experiential invariants, in line with Petitmengin’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.

3 | 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.

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OF RELATED INTEREST ON BECOMING AWARE
Edited by Nathalie Depraz, Francisco Varela and Pierre Vermersch, this book searches for the sources and means for a disciplined practical approach to exploring human experience. The spirit of this book is pragmatic and relies on a Husserlian phenomenology primarily understood as a method of exploring our experience. The authors do not aim at a neo-Kantian a priori "new theory" of experience but instead they describe a concrete activity: how we examine what we live through, how we become aware of our own mental life. The central assertion in this work is that this immanent ability is habitually ignored or at best practiced unsystematically, that is to say, blindly. Exploring human experience amounts to developing and cultivating this basic ability through specific training. Only a hands-on, non-dogmatic approach can lead to progress, and that is what animates this book.


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