Open Peer Commentaries

on Claire Petitmengin's "Enaction as a Lived Experience"

Enacting Enaction: Conceptual Nest or Existential Mutation?

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> Upshot • I reflect and expand upon three aspects of Petitmengin's illuminating article. After (a) contrasting *existential* (Petitmengin) and *theoretical* (Kirchhoff and Hutto) views of neurophenomenology, I (b) embed Petitmengin's account of the experiential dissolution of the hard problem of consciousness into a larger framework by drawing parallels with previous experiments on unitive/non-dual experiences (Deikman). Finally, I (c) raise the question of how seriously we are willing to take the pragmatics of investigating and cultivating lived experience both in phenomenological research and in education and science in general.

« 1 » Claire Petitmengin's target article, centered around the distinction between light, or *mild neurophenomenology* (MNP), and deep, or *radical neurophenomenology* (RNP), is a welcome and much-needed contribution to the ongoing discussions about the aim, nature, and scope of neurophenomenology (NP), and casts fresh light on some of its far-reaching, yet often neglected implications. In what follows, I retrace and critically examine three aspects of the target article:

a the (in)appropriate ways of accounting for NP;
b the experiential/existential dissolution of the hard problem; and
c the relevance of "enacting enaction": of incorporating the pragmatics of investigating and cultivating lived experience in phenomenological, scientific, and educational practices and technologies.

« 2 » It is illuminating to compare Petitmengin's construal of NP with a proposal put forward recently by Michael Kirchhoff and Daniel Hutto (2016). On their account, Francisco Varela's original construal of NP (1996) fails to meet its objective – to provide/realize an adequate (dis)solution of Chalmers's hard problem of consciousness – due to its metaphysical commitment to a form of *non-reductive monism*. According to the authors, by embracing the idea of "the irreducible nature of experience" (ibid: 333), Varela "tacitly accept[s] the terms of the hard problem in a way that makes it impossible to close the epistemic and metaphysical gaps in the way neurophenomenology hopes to" (ibid: 348). The methodological remedy proffered by Varela – articulating "mutual constraints between the field of phenomena revealed by experience and the correlative field of phenomena established by the cognitive sciences" (Varela 1996: 347) – fails to address the hard problem as it "leaves us wandering in the realm of correlations without providing the requisite kind of illuminating explanation" (Kirchhoff & Hutto 2016: 351), and thus keeps the gap between the phenomenal and the physical as gaping as ever. Instead, the proper way to tackle the hard problem is to pull it up by its roots: first, by recognizing that it is insolvable *in principle* ("[o]nce the assumptions that give it life are in play, the problem cannot be put to rest," ibid: 352); and second, by denying, bluntly *and dogmatically*, that such a problem exists in the first place, i.e., by adopting a form of *identity thesis*. *Fight metaphysics with (more) metaphysics*, that's the cure prescribed by the authors for the ailments supposedly bedevilling Varela's NP.

« 3 » Kirchhoff and Hutto's diagnosis has been met with considerable criticism (Bitbol & Antonova 2016; González-Grandón 2016; Miyahara 2016), and it is worthwhile to rehash some of the main objections in light of Petitmengin's article. First off, it is clear that Kirchhoff and Hutto construe Varela's NP as *MNP* in that they depict it as a research program set on seeking *correlations* between the phenomenal and the physical. And if this were the case, they would be right in claiming that such an approach fails to bridge the explanatory gap: no matter how nuanced the correlations, the metaphysical parameters in which the problem is originally cast remain unaltered. However, it is highly dubious that this is a *correct* – or to put it more mildly, *charitable* – reading of Varela's initial proposal. If NP were merely about correlations, why make such a fuss about it? Why claim that it enables us to (re)cast "[the hard problem] in an entirely different light," and leave behind, by "transforming the style and values of the research communities," "a certain image of how science is done" (Varela 1996: 340, 331, 348)? Surely, looking for correlations between neural and conscious events is a staple procedure in cognitive neuroscience – even if it be required that the methods for investigating conscious experience be made more sophisticated –, so what is so radical about *that*?

« 4 » There are at least two reasons for Kirchhoff and Hutto's misconstrual of NP, and they both boil down to not taking, or being willing to take, Varela's proposal seriously. First, Varela makes it explicit that his methodological point of departure is *phenomenology* (in a broadly Husserlian way), and it is this, he feels (*pace* Kirchhoff and Hutto), that sets him apart from the non-reductionist approaches in the analytic philosophy of mind (à la Owen Flanagan, John

Searle, and David Chalmers) he is otherwise sympathetic to (ibid: 333). According to the phenomenological tradition, *any* investigation, be it of consciousness *or* the world, starts from *the lived experience* (ibid: 334; cf. §23) – after all, where else could it start? So, what Varela means by the irreducibility of consciousness or lived experience is *not metaphysical*, but *methodological* irreducibility: the inescapability of *first-person givenness* of phenomena. Lived experience, in this sense, is irreducible not only to the physical, *but also* to the mental as typically construed in analytic philosophy, i.e., as an antipode of the physical. To equate the irreducibility of lived experience with the irreducibility of the mental ("conscious") is to commit a *category mistake* – the famous phenomenological maxim "(back) to the things themselves" demands precisely that we give up, at least temporarily, our preconceived notions about the mental and the physical, and return to how things are given to us in experience. In other words, it means enacting the phenomenological epoché, the "bracketing" or "putting out of play" of unexamined naturalist-objectivist presuppositions about the nature of, and relation between, mind and body. The point of emphasis is thus shifted from metaphysical issues to developing "a proper, rigorous method and pragmatics" (ibid: 347) for a systematic exploration of lived experience.

« 5 » This brings us to the second reason for why Kirchhoff and Hutto seem to misinterpret Varela's proposal, namely their decontextualized reading of Varela's seminal NP text. Varela (ibid: 346) is, again, explicit in pointing out that NP must be understood as a (much-needed) *methodological supplement* to the ideas previously developed in Varela, Thompson & Rosch (1991). Most people associate that book with the concept of "enaction," but fail to realize that, for Varela et al., this notion is but an *operative shorthand* for the co-constitution or mutual specification of the embodied subject and its world, which, in turn, is understood as a *theoretical approximation* of the *lived in-betweenness* (non-duality or groundlessness) as disclosed by the disciplined examination of experience (for a more in-depth account see Vörös, Froese & Riegler 2016). Two points are of special importance here: first, the notion of "enaction" denotes *co-constitution*, and not correlation; second, the authors are emphatic in claiming that "enaction" is *not* to be understood as yet another metaphysical model (a "ground" or "nest," as they call it), but a concept that "point[s] beyond itself to a truer understanding of groundlessness" (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991: 228).

« 6 » In this regard, Petitmengin's conception of RNP is a much-needed *corrective* to MNP approaches similar to that of Kirchhoff and Hutto. To begin with, it recognizes that the hard problem is not only (or even primarily) a metaphysical problem, but also (or rather) *a problem of experience* (§22) – which is why *postulating* that there is no gap simply will not do –, and thus requires disciplined methods of examining and cultivating lived experience (§§23f). Further, it appreciates the fact that a call for "an open-ended quest for resonant passages" (Varela 1996: 346) between first-person and third-person analyses does not translate into a run-of-the-mill correlationism, but involves *enacting the enaction*: developing first-person methods for *en-living* the process of the co-constitution of subjective and objective poles of experience, and thus *living away* the hard problem (§§48, 52f). However, unlike some previous approaches (e.g., Bitbol 2012; Vörös 2014), which have already emphasized the importance of the experiential and existential dimensions in dissolving the hard problem, Petitmengin takes a step forward and shows, by drawing on her practice as a first-person researcher, how this might be actualized.

« 7 » Petitmengin's elucidations of both *progressive dissolution of (subject-object) duality*, i.e., of a "gradual loss of intentionality" (§36) and the enactment of "a space which is neither 'interior' nor 'exterior,' neither subjective nor objective" (§39), and the *reverse process of the emergence of duality*, i.e., of the instantiation of "micro-acts of separation, localization and recognition" (§49), are reminiscent of experiments conducted in the 1960s by the psychiatrist Arthur Deikman. In those experiments, the subjects were asked to concentrate – not think or analyse – on a blue vase placed on a table before them. As described by David Loy, it is particularly interesting that

> "[a]ll Deikman's subjects reported that the vase lost its solidity and rigid boundaries, becoming more fluid and formless; yet, paradoxically, this made it seem even more vivid and real to them. Subjects often used the term 'feeling' to describe these experiences, meaning not touch or emotion, 'but rather perception that cannot be located in the usual perceptual routes of sight, hearing, and the like.'" (Loy 1988: 82f)

« 8 » Loy also draws attention to the fact that a female subject had a "merging experience," which she described as follows:

> "It was as though everything was sort of merging and I was somehow losing my sense of consciousness almost. […] At one point it felt … as though the vase were in my head rather than out there: I know it was out there but it seemed as though it were almost a part of me." (ibid: 83)

« 9 » Summarizing the results of his experiments, Deikman contended that the concentrative practice studied produced "alterations in the visual perception of sensory and formal properties of the object, and alteration in ego boundaries – all in the direction of fluidity and breakdown of the usual subject-object differentiation" (ibid: 85). He famously attributed these results to the process of *deautomatization*, a progressive reversal or undoing of the habituated (automatized) somatosensory patterns and their reinvestment with attention, which seems to bear some resemblance to Petitmengin's practical instantiation of epoché and phenomenological reduction leading to the (re) discovery of "invisible microgeneses that the absorption of attention into the object or content of experience usually masks" (§29).

« 10 » Supplementing Deikman's and Petitmengin's accounts with similar accounts found various contemplative traditions, it would seem that what Petitmengin refers to as the "felt" (§§41f) and "transmodal" (§§43–45) dimensions of progressively unitive/non-dual experience (§§46–48) has been reported, and studied – sometimes extensively – in many different culturo-historical settings. But even if this is correct – *what of it?* This, I feel, brings us to the crux of the matter: How seriously should we take such experiential accounts? Or more broadly: *How seriously should we take the call for developing and implementing the pragmatics of lived experience?*

« 11 » On the one hand, such questions pertain to what Evan Thompson and

Dan Zahavi call the "ambivalence in the phenomenological tradition regarding the *theoretical* and *practical or existential* dimensions of the epoché" (Thompson & Zahavi 2007: 71; emphasis added). For example, Zahavi (2005), an important proponent of the "renaissance" of phenomenology that has been underway in the past two decades or so, claims that subjective and qualitative aspects of phenomenal consciousness are inseparable, whereas Petitmengin maintains that they are not, i.e., that it is possible for an experience to retain its what-is-it-like character while losing its character of ipseity or mineness (§§46–48). Presumably, both authors feel that they have derived their conclusions (at least partly?) from phenomenological investigations of (lived) experience, and thus from having successfully implemented the phenomenological epoché. Yet in doing so, they have adopted very different approaches, which have led them to diametrically opposed views. For Zahavi, who is more firmly rooted in the "classical" Husserlian tradition,[1] epoché does not seem to require special pragmatics and is still related primarily to theoretical inquiry; for Petitmengin, who is sympathetic to the Varelian-style attempts of creatively combining phenomenology and contemplative practices, epoché requires a rigorous methodology and is closely linked to a profound existential transformation. How should we account for these differences? Is there *a right way* of carrying out epoché and doing phenomenology? If so, which approach should we prefer, and why? If not, what does this mean for phenomenology? Is it, after all – given that it leads to diametrically opposed views with no clear procedural tools to settle the matter – a discipline with no method, no data, and no promise, as its critics like to claim?

« 12 » On the other hand, questions such as these have broader implications still. In the past two decades, the notions of "enaction" and "embodiment" have been slowly seeping into the philosophical and scientific mainstream. However, although there has been a lot of *theorizing* about pre-reflective, enactive, corporeal, etc. forms of cognition and knowledge, little has changed with regard to the prevalent pedagogical and epistemic practices and standards within the academic and scientific institutions (even among many of those who study them). In other words, although embodied (practical) cognition is becoming a staple term in academia, it is still investigated *primarily from the perspective of abstract (theoretical) cognition*. We *think, talk* and *write* about it, yet few attempts have been made – with some noteworthy exceptions (Petitmengin being one of them) – *to try and study it in its own modality*, i.e., to incorporate it into the very fabric of academic and scientific practices, which is precisely what Varela and his collaborators were so adamantly arguing for. This brings us full circle to where we started: Varela's original proposal is *in no need of "further radicalization,"* especially if the latter entails (re)casting it in terms of identity theory (or any fixed metaphysical position, for that matter). In fact, to claim that it does is to already miss its radicality. The latter, it would seem, boils down to the question of what *enaction* means to us: Is it yet another conceptual/theoretical tinker toy, or are we willing to explore it in its own right, by developing, experimenting with, and implementing various first-person approaches in the scientific/academic setting? Is the price of the second of the two options, as Varela feared, "heavier than most are willing to concede" (Varela 1996: 338)? And if we are willing to embark on this adventure, and undergo the profound "existential mutation" it requires of us (Bitbol & Antonova 2016: 356), how should we proceed, and what exactly would that entail for science and society at large?

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1| Although, as correctly pointed out by Michel Bitbol when reading the draft version of this OPC, one must not forget that particularly Husserl's late renditions of epoché resound with profound existential and ethical implications, calling for "complete personal transformation" which carries within itself "the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to humankind as such" (Husserl 1970: 137).

Phenoneurology

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> Upshot • Petitmengin's strategy of dissolution of the "hard problem" of consciousness is shown to rely on some radical phenomenological premises that are listed and analyzed. It presupposes a starting point of research in a state of *epoché* (or suspension of judgment); it unfolds into a participatory conception of truth; and it ends in a quest for non-dual pristine experience. Each one of these moves is endorsed and amplified.

« 1 » In her target article, Claire Petitmengin has packed a whole life of research and collaboration (including some with myself, see Bitbol & Petitmengin 2017) into a single line of argument whose clarity and internal consistency are impressive.

« 2 » She addresses a threefold challenge to the standard formulation of the mind-body problem (especially the "hard problem," §29), to the standard appraisal of the (in)validity of introspective knowledge (§16), and more generally to standard representationalism in epistemology.

« 3 » Being enthusiastic about, rather than scared by, such an overturn, my commentary will consist in intensifying Petitmengin's non-dualist construal of being and knowledge. This is made all the easier since her non-dualism is neither simply one theory of mind among others nor a nostalgic yearning for the lost wisdom. It is developed into a full-blown paradigm based on reproducible experiential facts, and on its ability to make sense of both scientific knowledge and its limitations.

« 4 » My intensification will bear on three points:

a further "deepening" neurophenomenology;
b recasting the concept of truth so that it relies on bodily commitment rather than on objectifying detachment;
c tracking down the genesis of the dualist prejudice.

In every case, I will adopt a consistently phenomenological standpoint from which