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**L'énaction comme expérience vécue**

**Enaction as lived experience**

Claire Petitmengin

Groupe des Écoles de Télécommunications (GET-INT)  
Centre de Recherche en Épistémologie Appliquée (CREA)

## Could enaction be a lived experience?

- Enaction: hypothesis according to which "cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs." (The Embodied Mind)
- Most of the arguments supporting this hypothesis are based on observations or experiments "in the third person" (drawn from robotics, artificial life, developmental psychology, theory of evolution, immunology, or cognitive linguistics).
- Could the process of enactment or co-emergence of mind and world, inside and outside, subject and object, also be verified "in the first person"? Could this process be a lived experience?

## How to answer this question ?

Adopt a perspective which is both phenomenological and dynamic.

### ■ phenomenological:

- Lift the ban that until now has excluded lived experience from the field of scientific investigation.
- Refine the (psycho-phenomenological) methods enabling us to become aware of our lived experience and to describe it.

### ■ dynamic:

- In our most ordinary experience, the separation between "inside" and "outside" is pre-given. Following on from this, classical epistemology considers thoughts as internal representations reflecting a pre-given external world.
- We have to consider thoughts not as "things", but as processes, and study how thoughts "are born, develop and fade away" (as James wrote), while putting between brackets the usual distinction between inside and outside.

# Outline

- ✎ How can we become aware of the dynamic structure of lived experience?
- ✎ The "source" dimension of lived experience
  - ┆ Structural characteristics
  - ┆ Micro-gestures for accessing it
- ✓✎ Working hypothesis
- ✓✎ Path of confirmation by "third person" observations
- ✗✎ Consequences
  - ┆ Pedagogical and artistic
  - ┆ Existential and ethical
- ✗✎ Conclusion

# Outline

## **How can we become aware of the dynamic structure of lived experience ?**

### The "source" dimension of lived experience

- | Structural characteristics
- | Micro-gestures for accessing it

### Working hypothesis

### Path of confirmation by "third person" observations

### Consequences

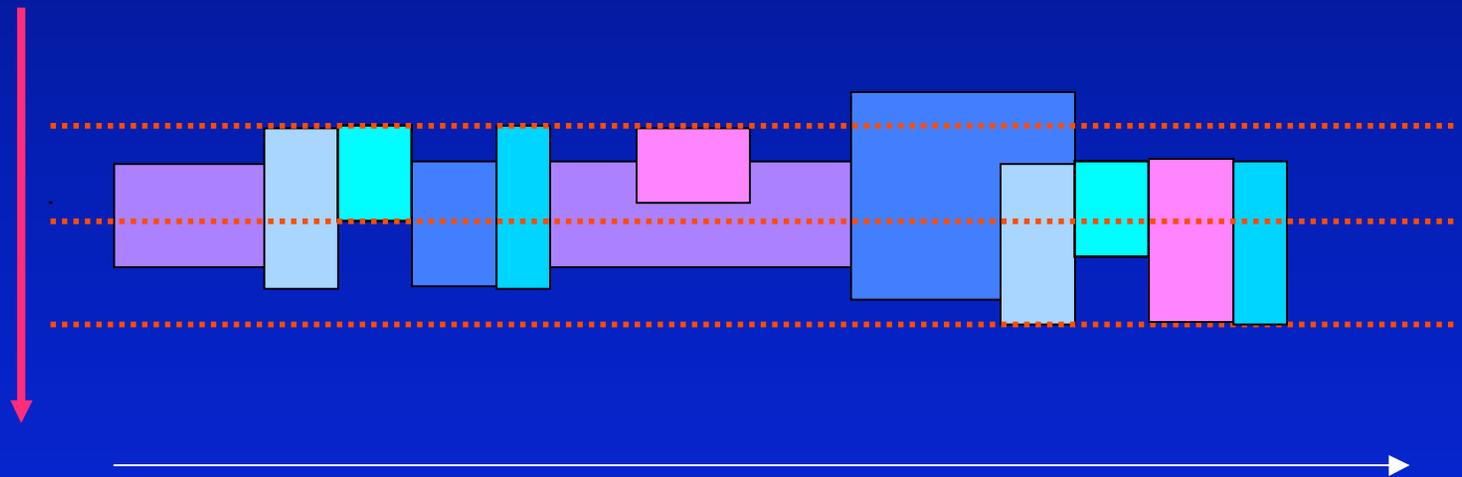
- | Pedagogical and artistic
- | Existential and ethical

### Conclusion

# How can we become aware of the dynamic structure of lived experience ?

## 1. Breaking with the belief that access to lived experience is immediate and easy

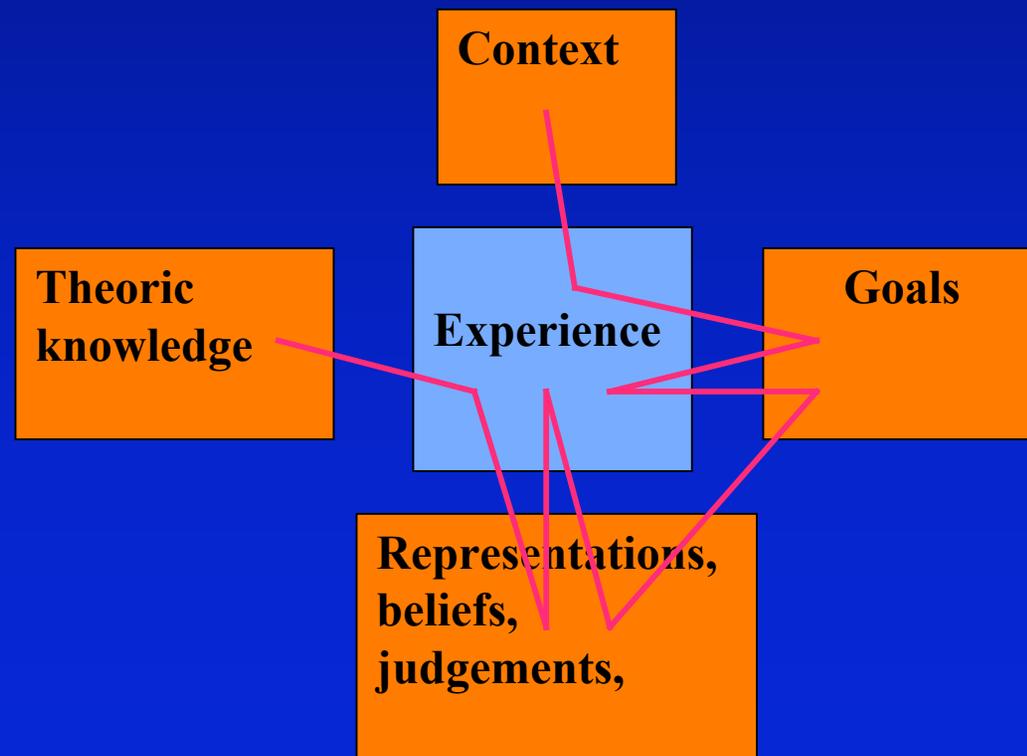
Levels of  
consciousness



**"Pre-reflected" experience: the part of our experience which, although "lived through" subjectively, it is not immediately accessible to consciousness, introspection or verbal report.**

# Gestures enabling us to become aware of the dynamic structure of lived experience

- ☞ Breaking with the belief that access to lived experience is immediate and easy
- ☞ Dropping representations and beliefs concerning the experience being explored



# Gestures enabling us to become aware of the dynamic structure of lived experience

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- ✎ Dropping representations and beliefs concerning the experience being explored
- ✓ Stabilizing attention

# **Gestures enabling us to become aware of the dynamic structure of lived experience**

-  **Breaking with the belief that access to lived experience is immediate and easy**
-  **Dropping representations and beliefs concerning the experience being explored**
-  **Stabilizing attention**
-  **Turning attention from "what" to "how"**

## Small experiment

Take your time, here and now, to **imagine a mountain waterfall.**

Just make a sign to me when you have got this image.

# Gestures enabling us to become aware of the dynamic structure of lived experience

- ☞ Breaking with the belief that access to lived experience is immediate and easy
- ☞ Dropping representations and beliefs concerning the experience being explored
- ✓ Stabilizing attention
- ✓ Turning attention from "what" to "how"
  - **From the content of the image towards its structural synchronic characteristics:** its constructed or remembered character, its size, color, distance, your 1st, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> "position of perception".
  - **From the image once stabilized towards the dynamics of its appearance, its genesis:** the different, generally very rapid phases, that have preceded its stabilization; at every phase, the very rapid succession of interior micro-gestures that you made to evoke this image, to stabilize it, to recognize it, evaluate it, and eventually to discard it.

# Gestures enabling us to become aware of the dynamic structure of lived experience

- ☞ Breaking with the belief that access to lived experience is immediate and easy
- ☞ Dropping representations and beliefs concerning the experience being explored
- ✓ Stabilizing attention
- ✓ Turning attention from "what" to "how"
  - From the content of the image toward its structural synchronic characteristics
  - From the image once stabilized towards the dynamics of its appearance, its genesis.
- ✗ Adopting a specific "attention position":
  - not related to a specific sensorial register
  - not focused but panoramic, open
  - receptive, non voluntary

## Facilitating interview devices

- Essential prerequisite: exploring a singular experience, precisely situated in space and time
- Retrospective access enabling several successive re-enactments of the experience ("Explicitation Interview" of Pierre Vermersch)
- Regressive access from the experience once it has been recognized.
- "Direct reference" (*Focusing* d'Eugene Gendlin)

# Shamatha-vipashyana

- Meditation techniques of Indian Buddhism
- *Shamatha* (where *shama* means "calm, peace" and *tha* "to rest, to stay") is often translated by "calm abiding". This technique enables the meditator to learn to stabilize his attention by concentrating it on a single object.
- *Vipashyana* (where *vi* means "superior" and *pashyana* "vision"), often translated by "insight", consists in applying this sharpened attention to the flow of experience once quietened by shamatha, in order to find out its dynamic structure, and to discover the true nature of phenomena.
- However, these techniques are not intended to produce a verbal description of experience; this requires a very special kind of expertise, or the help of an expert interviewer.

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# Interlude

# The emergence of an idea

"For all these years there was a feeling of direction, of heading straight for something concrete. It is of course very difficult to express this feeling in words. But I had it in a sort of overview, and in a certain way, visually."

Einstein's answer to psychologist Max Wertheimer who questioned him "in great detail about concrete events in his thoughts having led to the theory of relativity". (Holton, *The Scientific Imagination*)

# The emergence of a memory

Sometimes, the memory is slow to emerge, and take precise form. Before we can even recognise the memory and name it, before the emergence of images, sounds and emotions which are precise and identifiable, we are overwhelmed by a feeling which does not belong to a specific sensorial register.

"The value is often given to us before the representation."

(Gusdorf, *Mémoire et Personne*)

## The experience of encountering a work of art

Imagine that you are in a museum that you know, in front of a picture that you like very much. And direct your attention to the sensation that this picture creates inside you. It is a blurred sensation, diffuse, difficult to describe but nevertheless intense and specific (it would be very different if you were imagining another picture). The same experience could be achieved by evoking for example a poem, or even a novel, the title alone of which evokes a complex world of fleeting impressions, which are fuzzy, but full of meaning.

## **The impression we feel in the presence of another person**

The interior, global and complex impression we feel in the presence of another person, or merely when we are thinking about this person, belongs to the same dimension of our experience. It is often easier to become aware of this subtle impression when we meet the person for the very first time.

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## Structural characteristics of the source dimension

- The felt dimension should not be confused with the "background" of a perception.
- Although fuzzy, a felt meaning is very specific, i.e. peculiar to a particular situation.

# Structural characteristics of the source dimension

## 1) Transmodality

- The vocabulary used to describe the "stuff" of the felt dimension often calls simultaneously on several sensorial registers.
  - For example, the subtle internal sensations that the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik listened to with his "third ear", are sometimes described as visual ("nuances and fleeing psychic shadows"), auditory ("almost imperceptible half-tones", and tactile or kinesic ("little incoherencies, slight irregularities that weren't visible but were perceptible to touch as when a hand slides carefully and softly over a fabric", "tiny subterranean variations").
- This transmodality is not equivalent to synaesthesia.
- The felt dimension has precise sensorial submodalities – essentially form, intensity, rhythm and movement – which have the common characteristics of being "transmodal", i.e. they are not specific to a particular sense, but can be transposed from one sense to another.
- This is the world that the child experiences ("vitality affects", according to the work of D. Stern on the subjective experience of babies)

# Structural characteristics of the source dimension

## 2) Rythmic and gestural character

- A "felt meaning" has an internal dynamic, it is a subtle "interior movement".
- It is this subtle dynamic dimension of experience (and not categorial affects) that the composer, the choreographer, the poet or the painter tries to express (cf. Suzan Langer's "felt life").
- It is this world of subtle dynamic modifications of intensity and rhythm, which enable the "affect attunement" between mother and child, that the infant experiences. According to Stern, this stratum of experience remains active throughout life, it is the very stuff of our experience.
- Even abstract thought seems to be anchored in this transmodal and dynamic dimension (cf. Lakoff and Johnson, and the French anthropologist Marcel Jousse).
- Coverbal gestures, which very often accompany verbal expression, are a sort of open window to this dimension .

# Structural characteristics of the source dimension

## 3) "Spatial" characteristics

- Loosening of the interior / exterior frontier
  - Permeability of the border usually felt between the interior and exterior spaces.
  - Example: a painting, or a music, generates inside us a world of fleeting impressions of intensity, contrast and resonance, which are neither objective nor subjective.
- Transformation of the feeling of identity
  - The feeling of being a distinctive "self" becomes "lighter" and even disappears. .
  - Example : unexpected emergence of an "intuition": the sense of agency (the sense that I am the one who is generating a certain idea in my stream of consciousness) as well as the sense of ownership (the feeling that this idea is *my* idea) is altered or disappears.

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# The emergence of a perception

- "The process that takes place here takes place in a fraction of a second of consciousness, that lasts something like a five-hundredth of a second. First you have the impression of something. It is blank, nothing definite. (...) The very, very first blank, which may last a millionth of a second, is the meditation experience of the primordial ground. Then the next instant there is a question – you do not know who and what and where you are. The next moment is a faint idea of finding some relationship. Then you immediately send your message back to the memory, to the associations you have been taught. You find the particular category or the particular label you have been taught and you stamp it on. Then at once you have your strategy of how to relate with that in terms of liking it or disliking it. This whole process happens very quickly. It just flashes into place."  
(Chogyam Trungpa, *Glimpses of Abhidharma*)

# The process of verbal expression

- Coming into contact with the felt meaning
- Let the felt meaning mature
- Let the words come
- Comparing the expression with the felt meaning
- Transformation of the felt meaning

# Plan de l'exposé

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# Working hypothesis

Subjective pole

Objective pole

Levels of differentiation

Thresholds of consciousness

Co-constitution of the subjective and objective poles

## Some questions

- How precisely are the microdynamisms which animate the source dimension amplified to give birth to the solid and compartmentalised world in which we habitually move? What are the mechanisms and stages of this process?
- How does "abstract" thought develop? By which processes can we cut ourselves off from the source dimension, to the extent of forgetting it?
- Does the pre-articulated dimension of our experience, which for the moment is almost a *terra incognita*, have different strata, different degrees of differentiation? Does the stratum that we are exploring covers others ?
- If subject and object co-determine each other, instant after instant, they have no independent existence. What is the ontological status of such a construction ?

## How can we refine and test these hypotheses, born from first person observations ?

- Continuing the work of first person description of the micro-genetic process.
  - Interviewing experts in the exploration of lived experience.
  - Designing "experiential protocols" enabling us to slow or interrupt the micro-genetic process, in order to access its primitive stages.
- Searching for mutual confirmation and refinement of first person and third person descriptions.

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## Co-verbal gestures

- Gestures precede the verbalisation of the referent.
- It is impossible (or very difficult) to express oneself without gestures.
- Gestures occur even when the listener cannot see them.
- The more elaborate and complex the verbal message, the denser the gestural activity that accompanies it.
- Co-verbal gestures are pre-reflected.
- During a training, the right gesture often comes before the right word.
- Even blind people make gestures.

All these "3rd person" observations confirm 1) the first person descriptions of a preverbal, gestural and pre-reflected dimension of lived experience, in which meaning is to be found 2) that co-verbal gestures are a sort of open window on this dimension.

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## Pedagogical consequences

- If understanding an idea means accessing the felt gesture which is at its source, are our teaching methods well adapted?
- For at present, teaching consists in most cases of transmitting conceptual and discursive contents of knowledge. The intention is to fix a meaning, not to initiate a movement.
- Which teaching methods, instead of *transmitting* contents, could *elicit* the experience that gives these contents coherence and meaning?
- Such a teaching approach, by enabling children and students to come into contact with the depth of their experience, could re-enchante the classroom.

## Consequences in the artistic domain

### Example: the genesis of a painting

For Cézanne, to paint a landscape does not consist of trying to reproduce as accurately as possible the sight that presents itself to his *vision*, thanks to skilful pictorial processes which make it possible to give the illusion of depth, volume, and different forms of light and texture, but of suggesting the primordial, transmodal experience of his encounter with this landscape.

He tries "to make us *see* how it *touches* us. (...) The painter reworks and converts precisely into a visible object that which without him would remain enclosed in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things." (Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non sens*, p. 33)

"What I try to translate for you - Cézanne said - is more mysterious, is entangled at the roots of being, at the impalpable source of sensations" (Gasquet, *Cézanne*, p. 242).

Paul Cézanne

*Le Grand Pin*



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## Ethical and existential consequences

- Does becoming aware of the process of co-emergence of the self and the world change anything in our life, and if so, what does it change?
- Becoming aware of this process is not only a conceptual understanding, but is closely linked with a movement of inversion or resorption of the process.
- What happens when this process quietens down? Subject and object progressively lose their solidity, their rigidity. There are no fixed landmarks, solid ground on which to lean on any more.
- But this absence of frontiers and obstruction enables the world to unfold in all its depth and richness.
- "The loss of a fixed reference point or ground in either self, other, or a relationship between them, is said to be inseparable from compassion like the two sides of a coin or the two wings of a bird." (Francisco Varela, *Ethical Know-How: Action, Wisdom and Cognition*).

## Conclusion

- Enaction is not only an epistemological position, but can be realized through a concrete experience.
- Studying our cognitive, emotional and intersubjective processes in this genetic perspective could have important consequences in the pedagogical, existential and ethical fields.
- Urgent task : training a new generation of young researchers in first and second person methods for exploring consciousness.

## Bibliographical references

References corresponding to this presentation can be found in the bibliography of the following articles (available on <http://claire.petitmengin.free.fr>):

"L'énaction comme expérience vécue", *Intellectica* 2006/1, n° 43, pp. 85-92

"Towards the source of thoughts. The gestural and transmodal dimension of lived experience", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 14, n° 3 (2007), pp. 54-82

"Describing one's Subjective Experience in the Second Person. An Interview Method for the Science of Consciousness", *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 5 (2006), pp. 229-269