

Embodied Critical Thinking:

The Experiential Turn and its Transformative Aspects

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Abstract

While the emphasis on embodiment and situatedness is strong in contemporary philosophy and cognitive sciences, its implications for the practice of critical thinking are just beginning to be taken seriously. The challenge is to think with the richness and the intricacy which come along with embodiment of situated knowers and on the basis of the experiential turn (based on phenomenological and pragmatic approaches). Even though the embodied and experiential dimension is operative and continuously present all the time in thought and action, it is hardly acknowledged, cared for or made transparent in academic philosophical training. In doing philosophy we are actually rather trained to detach ourselves from the experiential basis of our thinking. In this paper we claim that by doing so we cut ourselves off from important sources of what it means to think for oneself. We argue that the more embodied context one dares to include in critical thinking, the more critique becomes personally and politically transformative. This has major methodological implications: one needs to learn “reading” embodied, felt experience as carefully and closely as the texts. The methods of ECT presented here are based on the micro-phenomenological approach of Claire Petitmengin and the Thinking at the Edge method developed by Eugene Gendlin and Mary Hendricks.

Key words: Embodied critical thinking, situatedness, vulnerability, experiential turn, reflexive care.

1. Introduction

Traditionally we conceive of critical thinking roughly as either reasoning, argumentation, discourse analysis, deconstruction or as social criticism in the tradition of critical theory, ranging from Marxist, structuralist to feminist, postcolonial and environmental forms of criticisms. Embodied Critical Thinking (ECT) adds to these approaches, by facing the challenge of embodiment on a methodological level. In doing so, we inquire into the experience of thinking as situated knowers. (Haraway 1988) In the following we describe theoretical and practical aspects of critical thinking as embodied and situated on the basis of our research project which is a cooperative effort of philosophers, cognitive scientists and educators. <1>

The philosophy and practice of ECT grows out of a sense of discomfort we experience as students and teachers of philosophy. In learning and teaching philosophy, we become accustomed to cut ourselves off from our experiential and affective sources of thought. We experience this also with our students, who come fresh into philosophy, with the desire to learn to think for themselves, and after one or two years of studies we notice an almost habitual disappointment in their expectations that we have come to take for granted.

It is eye-opening to learn from the research of micro-phenomenology that abstract thinking is a training in micro-gestures of distancing and disconnecting with the bodily experience (Petitmengin 2007). The question arises here, if it is possible to think and not disconnect in the ways described by micro-phenomenology? What would this mean in the practice of thinking? While it is widely recognized today, that embodied experience

actively functions in the formation of concepts and ideas, it proves to be difficult in practice to become aware of this functioning and to draw on it deliberately. In ECT, we experiment with shifting between different forms of thinking, cognitive operations of abstraction and distancing as well as cognitive forms of deep engagement and close experiential interaction with subject matters. As subtle as these methods appear at first sight, their practical and political implications are wide ranging.

Embodied critical thinking implies for the practice of philosophy to include the intricacy of feeling and experiencing that tacitly participates in our situated thinking, as research on embodiment has convincingly demonstrated. In our research project, we study how to spell out the fabric of our lived situations in our articulations of the meanings of concepts, in order to become more aware of the tacit embodied dimension functioning in the approaches we choose and the words and concepts we use. Therefore, we not only focus on producing new conceptual descriptions of thinking, we are also interested in getting in touch with and accessing the very experience that is involved in this process of clarification and analysis.

Let us give an example of the change we envision in philosophical practice. If one talks about the notion of experience in a philosophical seminar-setting, one might refer to Kant's texts, the many facets of his concept of experience, his predecessors, and to criticisms and interpretations of his notion of experience. In order to reflect how the philosophical understanding of experience matters, we would feel uncomfortable to refer directly to our own rich, embodied, situated experience in reflecting the concept of experience. Why do we feel uncomfortable in doing so? Why do we study texts on the concept of experience, but would not, for example, <2> also draw on the the seminar-

setting itself in which the texts are studied, which is also highly complex phenomenon that is different for everyone?

Does the reader notice a puzzlement, excitement or discomfort in the above question?

ECT has its point of departure in questions such as these, and in the subtle kinds of perplexities which are not easy to formulate and come along with them. (Gendlin 1992, Casey & Schoeller 2017) So many layers of tacit assumptions, experiences, situations, meanings and feeling are implicitly included in them. Even though the embodied and experiential dimension is acknowledged as operative and continuously present all the time in thought and action, it is rarely acknowledged, hardly cared for, hardly made transparent in the actual practice of academic philosophical thinking. When someone exclaims that hearing an argument makes her feel uneasy, uncomfortable, alienated or excited in a way that is difficult to describe, this may not seem an important proposition to make in an academic philosophical context. Yet, meanings that can be felt and not yet clearly posited, indicate a complex point of reference that has the potential to evolve into meaningful and substantial statements. In ECT, moments such as these are considered as rich and valuable entries for the deepening of reflective processes. In the methods we study, these moments are an occasion to pause, and they are “read“ as carefully as one reads a challenging text-passage. In striving to be clear and provide arguments that defend our position, we tend to overstep these moments. In a habituated climate of critical philosophical discussion, it would neither seem appropriate nor safe to attend to a felt meaning that needs time to evolve, that requires the search for right words, that proceeds in tentative moves. (Schoeller 2018) ECT thus involves establishing what we call maieutic conditions to sense and think care-fully into a situatedness pregnant with meaning.

Of course one can ask, why does it matter? Why indulge with a seemingly individualistic sense or felt meaning, instead of operating in the common sphere of shared propositions and concepts? We claim, that understanding embodiment opens up new ways to understand the so called “subjective” or merely individual. The interactional perspectives that we need to get used to when understanding embodiment, alter our understanding of what used to be devalued as only “private.” Felt meaning might include more interactional entanglement with others and wide environments than propositions one can easily say. We hope that these perspectives will become more clear in the following.

2. Becoming a Beginner Again

In our project, meaning making is understood as a processual phenomenon, a somatic-semantic continuum. (Schoeller 2016) This continuum can be called a “felt sense“ (a term coined by Eugene Gendlin 2012). A philosophical discomfort about an argument, an excitement about a research topic, a frustration about an answer etc. is a “felt sense“, as it entails a thickness, entanglement of experiences, situational specificity, local and deep backgrounds (Searle 1983), which also involves emotions. We grope for words to lay it all out. Attending to this pre-conceptual “experienced meaning” is a philosophical move in embodied critical thinking and a way to reconnect to a raw, messy or vague situational ground that might unsettle our conceptual assumptions. To say that this is a philosophical move seems to be a loaded and provocative claim. Again, we can feel that. So many traditional assumptions and prejudices about the body manifest in this feeling, and of course also habitual ways of how to do philosophy and what philosophy is supposed to be. As mentioned before, even though we know today, that these kinds of tacit, experiential and felt dimensions are involved in powerfully regulative ways in every kind of thinking,

we claim that we ignore to include these dimensions in our methodologies in philosophy due to the predominantly and profoundly disembodied tradition of philosophical thinking.

In this respect, ECT implies that professional philosophers need to become beginners again in order to learn how to productively engage these dimensions in a philosophical reflective, critical and explicit way, as a point of reference in clarifying thoughts and meanings and “getting it right.” (Frankfurt 2006)

Embodied critical thinking means acknowledging a social and relational vulnerability (Gilson 2014) in philosophical thinking not just in conceptual terms as a human condition of being open and exposed. Rather than detaching from it through abstract description, we allow the practitioner to make her own vulnerability a source for recognizing, describing, reflecting and reconsidering the actual embodied experience of her situatedness. Judith Butler has opened our eyes to understanding more profoundly the power dynamics that we deeply embody as situated knowers by pointing out the reiterative dimensions of conditioning, discursive power-structures. (Butler 1990, 1997) Her analysis cultivates an awareness of a power of conditioning that is constitutive in who we think we are. Butler has convincingly demonstrated how we incorporate forceful exclusive mechanisms and power-dynamics that are operative in the conditioned identifications. Our work strives to complement such a level of awareness by changes in philosophical practice. Situatedness not only consists in social and political positions we are aware of but also in pre-reflexive habits, dispositions and background feelings at work when we think. We suggest, that one needs to dare to touch and unpack what Antonio Damasio calls somatic markers, Claire Petitmengin calls lived experience or Matthew Ratcliffe feelings of being (Damasio 1999, Petitmengin & Bitpol 2009, Ratcliffe 2008) to get a realistic feeling and taste of the depth

of reiterative conditions that hamper one's thinking something through for oneself. This needs courage and at the same time bearing with openness rather than jumping into a seemingly accepted conceptualisation, interpretation or conclusion. We dare to inquire into the many layers of background-information that play out in the inter-affective dimension implicit in our thinking and our situation. We claim that while it needs courage to do this, eventually this kind of openness makes us less defensive and less aggressive in philosophical discussions and debates.

Thinking in this way becomes performative, to work precisely on the situated experience in order to explore possible forms and steps of resistance and transformation that can only emerge from the actual situatedness. (Butler & Gambetti & Sabsay 2016) From here new conceptual moves can emerge that have effects because they work closely in an actually experienced situation, while at the same time gaining a meaning that goes beyond that experience. The acknowledgement of the intricate experiential dimensions of frustrating and stifling conditions, can open up affective channels that allow for a differentiated and precise grasp of embodied structures conditioning roles, identities and behaviors. In this process, in which a conceptual approach cooperates with an embodied approach, tearing up can become a moment of recognition, an integrative part of a profoundly reflexive process, just as laughter, given that the setting is safe and caring (compare section 6). This seems to be forgotten in the business of thinking as it is taught and conceptualized in philosophy today. Often the subtle, clarifying shifts and moves in the practice of ECT allow for surprising meanings and connections to emerge that overcome a thoughtless framework holding thought-progressions in a habitual place. The emerging meanings are supported by embodied responses of what is actually experienced and often cannot find a language. The practitioner may not have a language available at the beginning, but in the

process finds concepts and connections that enlarge her habituated or learned language-game in ways that are very much owned by herself. New ways of saying something transform a linguistic repertoire by re-working backgrounds that condition it. We are only at the beginning of understanding this kind of performativity of ECT on the basis of the groundbreaking work of Gendlin and Petitmengin.

Let us get back to the hopeful first year philosophy student who arrives with so much motivation for why she wants to study philosophy. The motivation is not only based on arguments but on a strong driving force and sense of relevance, pregnant with connections. In philosophy classes she will soon come to understand that there is little space to articulate, clarify her own sense of philosophical problems and challenges. Nobody will be interested, except maybe fellow students she trusts. She will quickly learn that this thick meaningfulness has to be excluded from the classroom, or only be accepted in some narrow or indirect way, e.g. in her rigorous working style. This student is thus tacitly „tranquilized“, silenced in her strive of finding her own voice and thinking in her own terms. The classroom or the seminar setting in which power structures are criticized, without at the same time encouraging and enabling student to find their own voice, paradoxically reenacts the power structures that are critically analyzed.

In ECT finding one's own voice is intrinsically connected to thinking for oneself. We need to lay out what this means for philosophical practice, and to understand the micro- and macro-conditions enabling as well as limiting the capacity to think in a way that allows for someone finding their own voice. (Casey 2010)

The methodologies we use thus support the endeavour to get out of or not give in too easily to conditioned, learnt, thoughtless and habituated ways of approaching, thinking and saying things. In other words, ECT is a form of resistance that needs to be practiced. The critical impact of our project is therefore to be seen on a paradigmatic level: with this research, we claim that philosophers need not merely be capable to read and analyze the discourse, but also to be able to support, open up, encourage and strengthen the capability to think for oneself. This freedom needs to be cultivated and practiced in small steps and moves. Getting in touch with a background dimension allows to articulate the conditioning networks functioning in the meaning of the words and concepts one uses. This subtle micro-inquiry of spelling out what is in the background transforms this very background and creates a space for what we call a “freedom to make sense.” (Schoeller 2016)

3. Bodies We Think-From and Into

The embodied, situated knower that feminist epistemologists like Donna Haraway, and Sandra Harding introduced displays the need for more diverse knowers within philosophy. (Haraway 1988, Harding 1991) Being situated means embodying difference. This is not only a category, as Irigaray has shown so powerfully with her work, but an inscriptional place, something we think with, from, and into. (Irigaray 1980) With her notion of diffraction Donna Haraway takes this approach further. Diffraction means that we do not only reflect or mirror the world from an untouched place when we think. Thinking, as Karen Barad also beautifully shows, is inter-relating insights and approaches (Barad 2007), thus attending to what difference this makes is an intimate process, a “process of transition“ (Braidotti 2012, 30), as a “subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters.” (Haraway 2007, 4)

To think inductively from-here means entering a sensitive differentiating process in the way we experience, feel and formulate matters with highly transformative potentials. In this spirit Rosi Braidotti writes that “experimenting with thinking is what we all need to learn.” (Braidotti 2012, 29) This is precisely the goal of the research into theoretical underpinnings and methodologies of ECT. We claim: The more embodied context one dares to include in this experiment, the more critique becomes transformative. As we think into the embodied conditions of matters, we think with- and into how something matters.

ECT has a long and rich theoretical history in different philosophies of embodiment from the last 150 years, in phenomenology of the body, pragmatism, hermeneutics, ordinary language philosophy, new materialism, philosophy of the vulnerable subject, and the contemporary turn to embodiment in the cognitive sciences. Taking into account these sources and their rich body of research enriches philosophy with complex concepts of experience, perception and meaning as embodied that challenge traditional notions of disembodied thinking. The philosopher’s body has often remained obscure in its abstractness, like Donna-Dale L. Marcano points out, and the disregard of the body is at times hidden behind a fascination with meta-analysis. The body of the philosopher disappears in the text, and thinkers like Marcano have shown how the predominance of one kind of body (white, male) in philosophy has made different bodies seem less or incapable of philosophical accomplishment. (Marcano 2014) With the methods of ECT the situatedness of the philosophers is deepened and intensified. Needless to say, the emphasis on the experiential starting point does not discard the necessity to be informed by existing bodies of knowledge-systems, data and informations. Rather, taking embodiment into account fosters an understanding that the bodily place from where we start to think is not another concept, nor a category, neither is it an isolated subjective island, but an ongoing experiential inter- and intra-actional process from which we think-

from and also which we think-into, indicated by the tree E's: embodied, enacted and embedded. This place is a constant interaction with different kinds of environments (physical, natural, social, cultural, linguistic, all interlinked), all the way into the body. Haraway summarizes this in the spirit of Alfred North Whitehead: "Beings do not pre-exist their relatings." (Haraway 2003, 6). The challenge we need to face 'from-here' is to understand the interdependence of contextuality, interaction and a universality that is not disembodied and abstract.

Since we acknowledge experiential complexity, we also need to acknowledge that everything we think and say, and the knowledge-systems we produce, affect the interactional and highly dynamic entanglement called human consciousness. This has great consequences: In contrast to a "view from nowhere," from where descriptions do not seem to affect the described, describing from-here is affecting, transforming and changing what is described, yet not in random ways. A philosophy of immanence (Colebrook 2002) thus begins with the acknowledgment that we must give up an illusionary place of separateness, an inheritance of distance from where we reflect on the world, man and himself. Yet, how can we think in and with immanence, the dynamics and intricacy involved? It implies to have in-built self-reflectivity, in the way we think. Like Barad says: "What is needed is a new starting place." (Barad 2007, 137) The methodological challenge we face can thus be put differently: How can we start anew without reducing the intricate entanglement we sense and feel into known and static concepts and categories, on the one hand, and without getting stuck in complexity, on the other hand? To put it more simply, how can we consciously, carefully and explicitly combine critical and systematic thinking with our own highly dynamic, responsive and intricate felt sense for the issues and concepts?

4. Methods of Embodied Critical Thinking

Thinking at the Edge (Gendlin 2007) and Micro-phenomenology (Petitmengin 2006) are the two basic methodological cornerstones of ECT. Micro-phenomenology was developed by Pierre Vermersch and Claire Petitmengin in order to explore the fine-grained, precise and subtle dimensions of lived experience to complement the neurobiological third-person perspective. (Depraz & Varela & Vermersch 2002) As a methodology it was developed in the context of the "neurophenomenological" program of the neurobiologist Francisco Varela, as a technique for researching a complexity of experience that consists in pre-reflexive dimensions that are most difficult to access and to describe. The method elaborates an interview-model that supports the steadying of attention towards the pre-reflective and pre-intentional dimensions in perceptions and cognitive operations. In micro-phenomenological research, the usual starting points such as intentions or so called inner entities come to be understood as results of a highly dynamic, subtle, transmodal micro-genesis which occurs while one is perceiving something, focusing on clarifying an idea or learning something. Micro-phenomenology is thus not only a research-method but also a practice to attend the processual field of lived experience while an intentional focus narrows down our awareness. The elicitation interview provides detailed and subtle descriptions of the dynamic functions of feelings, transmodal qualities, embodied gestures and diffractive patterns of embodied thinking. By applying this first-person research method in ECT we gain new categories and rich criteria for the complex embodied shifts happening when something clarifies or "falls in place" during thinking, giving us a deeper insight into what actually happens when someone is "finding their own voice", i.e. thinking their own thoughts in the pursuit of truth. (Casey 2010)

Thinking at the Edge is a philosophical method of inquiry that was developed by Mary Hendricks and Eugene Gendlin at the University of Chicago. (Tokumaro 2011, Deloch 2010, Gendlin 2007) It has three clusters of steps. In the first cluster one learns to engage a “felt sense“ of a problem, issue, subject matter or question and to practice with a resonating/responsive relation of experienced meaning and symbols/formulations. In the second cluster one trains to think with the complexity of actual experiences, deliberately relating experiences not in a comparative or analytical, but diffractive manner. Becoming aware of a subtle interaction of experiences, the practitioner learns to work with shifting patterns and schemes of thinking, as well as with the dynamics of emerging new insights through the crossing, diffracting, interrelating and substituting of key concepts. In a third cluster one experiments with different kinds of orders, logical and experiential, having both inform and precision one another.

Thinking at the Edge and Micro-phenomenology offer methods to draw on embodied experience as a precise apparatus from where phenomena and different kinds of orders, categories and concepts come to emerge and matter. Both methods are a practice in friendliness as a self affecting-attitude, creating a climate for a vulnerable and fresh process of unfolding differentiation (becoming different in oneself), which has not yet found forms that can be brought forth as arguments or concepts. The capacity of listening is not only emphasized but needs to be practiced as a preliminary step of ECT. Both methods, TAE and Micro-phenomenology take everyone seriously as thinking-for-oneself (with the potential of widening, renewing, transforming discourses), starting from the unique embodied context each one is. The ECT process can be divided into four stages: 1) Birthing a topic. 2) Bearing with perplexity and paradox. 3) Responsive formulation. 4) Diffractive, experiential relating.

5. Stages of an ECT-Process

The precondition for the setting of an ECT-process is an open, thoughtful atmosphere in which the practitioner has time to unfold a field of considerations, feelings and experiences connected with the topic that is not yet fully clear but already relevant. In stage 1, topics and issues are “birthed” and given a language that are not set in advance by any preconceived agenda from the teacher, the seminar or the study-programm. At first glance, these topics may even seem irrelevant in relation to a scientific or philosophical agenda. Yet these individualized, very specific topics in ECT are relevant for the reasons elaborated above (see point 2), also the difficult kind of process of verbalizing what matters most.

The felt meaning of topic is understood as a somatic-semantic continuum (Schoeller 2016), and it implies considering and not disregarding an interaction characterizing human bodies, like gestures, breathing, facial expressions, bodily comportment, etc. The skin-line is not the great divide insofar the environment greatly affects the sense-making process. Attention to the complexity of the process of clarifying a thought can be steadied by the supportive environment of the attention of someone else. The complexity and vulnerability of the process requires the cultivation of what we call “reflexive care,” replacing a premature critical climate of argumentation. One works with a partner who listens. There is strong emphasis on the practice of listening, not only to the other, but also to oneself, in the sense of noticing what happens while explicating and conceptualizing.

In Phase 2, the practitioner is invited to notice any paradoxical factor in the felt issue and welcome the perplexity that might surface. The early hermeneutic and pragmatic thinkers (Dilthey 1992, James 1950), as well as the contemporary cognitive scientists underline the

ability to hold contradictions, to not obey causal and temporal linearity, to undermine logical orders without losing continuity as a significant characteristic of experiencing. Facing the paradox means to grapple with an element one all too easily stream-lines conceptually in ways that seem coherent and acceptable according to the standards of some discourse. In this step, common dualistic or oppositional distinctions often become problematized and collapse.

In Phase 3, an experimenting with formulations is taken further by zigzagging from formulation to the sense of difference that is made by it, and back again to the formulation (Gendlin 1995). In this stage, one explores how formulations resonate with felt meanings, and one works with the mutual responsiveness of both. While in close reading we learn to unfold layers and layers of meaning in texts, in ECT as a practice of “close talking” (Schoeller 2018, 2019) one learns to stay connected to an experiential puzzlement and hold on to it.

Experimenting in a deliberate and slow way with the intra-actional difference formulations make, has interesting implications for theories of meaning. Neither representation nor construction seem helpful models to conceive of a clarifying processes in which one encounters the double-bind of having more to say than can be easily said. Gendlin suggests that formulations that work, “carry forward” an implicit experiential process. (Gendlin 2004b) Something becoming explicit does not mean it was there before, given as an inner entity, but that the formulation worked into an “embodied context” (Schoeller 2019) in transformative ways. Now, only after the formulation can we say more of what we mean, what we want to say, further implications etc. What we needed to say was the change our formulation made.

In Phase 4, one inter-relates different aspects of experiences, patterns and contradictions that come up while reflecting and articulating the topic. As mentioned above, Barad elaborates Haraway's term of diffraction as an alternative of the "well-worn metaphor reflection," saying, that both are optical phenomena, but whereas "reflection is about mirroring and sameness, diffraction attends to patterns of difference." (Barad 2007, 29) Diffraction "involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how these exclusions matter." (Barad 2007, 30) So, she continues: "A diffractive methodology provides a way of attending to entanglements in reading important insights and approaches through one another." (Barad 2007, 30)

In ECT, we deliberately read approaches through approaches, and insights into insight. We understand that this needs bodies complex enough to feel and bear the change happening thereby, notice the meaningful implications, which exceed the insights that are read into each other, containing more words than we could say, implicit situations that exceed what needs to be said, at times vast backgrounds of competences and knowledges, including practices and skills, learning histories – at times going back centuries. Reading insights into insights thus requires bodies as unique meaningful locations producing formulations in order to make meaning that is then accessible from different embodied locations.

We think that at this point the limit of Barad's beautiful and helpful optical metaphor of diffraction becomes apparent. Barad herself expands on Niels Bohr's concept of an apparatus that is inter-dependent with the phenomena it makes conceivable and measurable, by including more and more aspects, also the human bodies involved in the apparatus. (Barad 2007, 143) This has radical methodological implications that Barad does not attend to and

we spell out. Human bodies as part of the apparatus means facing and integrating a kind of precision that lies in experiencing and feeling. Ratcliffe in his study on how feelings are operative in the backgrounds of the positions one holds, writes that “the feeling body more generally is a framework through which world-experience is structured. The body can play an experiential role without being an object of experience.” (Ratcliffe 2008, 107)

In ECT, the practitioner becomes aware how experiential patterns and structures inter-affecting each other are the frameworks that silently and unnoticeably inform our approaches to subject-matters. Polanyi coined the term of tacit dimensions of knowing. (Polanyi 1966) In ECT, one learns to notice and access experiences and feelings functioning in formative ways in the background of a cognitive process, while formulating and inter-relating them. The more embodied context we dare to include in this experiment, the more transformative it is bound to get.

6. “Reflective Care“ and “Transformational Understanding”

ECT necessitates reflective forms of “closeness“ to subject matters that in themselves cannot be conceived as “objects“ of reflection, but rather as forms of lived engagement. (Arendt 2006, Gillisen 2008, Klinke & Jónsdóttir & Thorsteinsson 2014, Johannesdottir and Thorgeirsdottir 2015). Meanings involved can not to be described independently of the describing, thinking or researching person. Hence ECT complements traditional, notions emphasizing a onesided distancing of philosophical reflections as the ability to get something into perspective, bring it before you, take yourself out of the picture and being disengaged.

Working closely with the felt meanings of subject matters is paradoxically a way to create reflective distance to otherwise unnoticed layers of the cognitive process.

Here critique becomes operative on a foundational level that we embody. In reflecting experiential and felt conditions of our thinking, we become better equipped to scrutinize our own positions as well as gaining a deeper understanding of the positions we criticise. The condition for critique is the ability to discern and distinguish the different elements that constitute a problem or a position. Yet, we need to reconsider the relation of critique, care, explication and transformation. Philosophical practice understood as an unfolding-process of unreflected tacit dimensions operative in thinking discloses the formative conditions that work unnoticed in the background of claims and positions. Making implicit backgrounds explicit is in itself a transformative shift. Explicating needs sensitive formulation, the touching of experienced connections in order for something to become clearer in an experiential way. If what has tacitly regulated our thinking has been clarified by careful unfolding, shifts of perspectives happen, other matters emerge, different ways of saying something come to mind. Such explications cannot be fully grasped by representational or constructive models of meaning due to the very fact that backgrounds of intention are mostly pre-propositional, like Searle convincingly demonstrates. (Searle 1983) While Searle regards this fact as a severe limit of intentional speech acts, pioneers of an embodied approach to intentionality and meaning, such as Gendlin and Petitmengin, demonstrate that it is a matter of practice and methods to be able to say more and more. What according to an analytical approach sets the limits of expressibility, becomes a source for further unfolding of meaning on the basis of new methodological practices. This gives rise to a transformational model of meaning which considers the performativity of words in relation to an implicit background that responsively changes by what is said. William James already noticed the subtle

experiential shifts happening when starting and finishing a sentence. Explicating backgrounds must therefore be conceived as an interaction of words working ‘into’ a complex and responsive network of conditions that become thicker and more embodied the deeper we go. Thinking, from this perspective, is not just to be conceived in terms of its results in propositional contents, but a highly complex transformational process in which vast backgrounds are involved that may start to shift, change and move. What we call thinking therefore may be a deeply transformative process.

Thus, a major methodological challenge of ECT consists in reconsidering the relation of critique and care, so that philosophical practice provides a space for such an unfolding-process of tacit background dimensions of a topic. The concept of care has a specific meaning in this context. ECT provides and develops methodologies of “care“ for what is not yet clear but feels relevant to a philosophical inquiry. If conceptualized without care, the use of language can cover, block and cut away what actually needs unfolding and reflexive processing.

In Adorno’s reflections on critical thinking we find a similar concern in his search for modes of cognition that overcome a reductionism in what he describes as the violence of conceptual identification. Instead of determining and identifying, Adorno circumscribes a use of language that becomes “anschmiegsam,” a term that is difficult to translate but indicates a non-imposing, close and intimate explicative attitude. (Adorno 1975, 24) This does not imply imprecise concepts, rather a different kind of precision which is able to “open up” the phenomenon at stake to start a fresh process of thinking something through.

The transformational effects of an explication are studied in contemporary cognitive science, and in psychological and philosophical research. (Gendlin and Zimrig 1955, Gendlin 1963, Colombetti 2009, Jung 2009, Schoeller 2018) If these effects are taken into account, the relation of thinking/understanding and the use of language/concepts needs to be understood as a performative micro-transformational dynamic. Research on ECT aims at spelling out and examining a change that begins in the subtle relation of understanding/thinking and explicating.

Philosophical interest in transformational-therapeutical practices has been driven by the hope to cultivate a thinking that is able to overcome established, institutionalized frameworks and conceptual structures that are formative and at the same time deeply restricting, by blocking new ways of thinking and questioning (Cavell 1979, Hadot 2002). Wittgenstein famously coined this hope as showing the fly its way out of the flybottle. In ECT, an often assumed strict opposition of a therapeutic approach and a philosophical quest for truth is questioned, like philosophers from Kierkegaard to Wittgenstein have done before. It is actually astonishing how automatically and thoughtlessly humanities researchers often assume a strict line between clarifications considered to be therapeutic or philosophical. Instead of drawing strict lines, we must ask what concerns are implicit in such strict divisions. Then we know how to get a deeper sense of the functionality of this opposition. In ECT the line between therapeutic and philosophical concerns is not strict and we openly need to reflect on it. We draw on distinctions generated by philosophers in order to enhance reflexive methodologies. The shifting from “knowing that“ to “knowing how“, from intention to preintentional “background,“ from claims of reason to “felt meanings“ and “situational contexts“ functioning in them is based on philosophical studies, descriptions and concepts. Yet this shifting becomes practicable by drawing on methods developed in the therapeutic context and

in the context of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn and Davidson 2005), such as the skill of radical listening, stabilizing attention, noticing images, feelings and feeling-tones while thinking and formulating. As a philosophical project, methods and theories that are integrated in ECT re-understand the Socratic dialogue as care-full intra-action of knowledge-systems, symbolic formulation, experiential-intricate processes and implicit background-dimensions. There is a subtle but noticeable change in meaning that goes hand in hand with this clarification process. (Colombetti 2009) The practice of philosophy is not only about what we do with words but also about a transformation that begins like a seed in a context that is embodied, affecting other contexts that are inherently interconnected, to initiate a change in ways that cannot be fully controlled in how and what it affects. This philosophical transformation can begin with a new way of thinking and saying something.

Conclusions

ECT enacts the idea that situations, practices, networks and backgrounds work in the understanding of concepts. Making them more explicit, as difficult as this is (so much of it is pre-reflective), is what we mean when we say that something becomes more clear. The thickness of experienced meaning transforms into connections that one can become aware of, explicate, think-with and develop further. This widens and specifies ordinary and professional language-games and counteracts the meaninglessness of excessive, automatic abstraction, technicality, clichés or jargon. In ECT, conceptualisation is understood as a happy outcome of a process that starts as an “anticipatory intention.” (James 1950)

One can forge one’s own formulation and sense of an issue by staying in touch with an intricate precision that is situated and experiential. One needs to experience a formulation, in

order to modify a phrase. Gendlin's close-up studies of formulation-processes have shown that one first must experiment with the precision of an experiential response to a concept, in order to inquire into its complex functions and meanings. (Gendlin 1991) These manifest in the complex difference that different formulations make. More changes when we finally get „it right“ than the words we used. This kind of process requires maieutic conditions of “reflexive care,” in which the skill of listening is very important. This unfolding power of listening is described by Luce Irigaray, which we would like to quote in this conclusion: “I am listening to you rather as the revelation of a truth that has yet to manifest itself – yours and that of the world revealed through and by you. I give you a silence in which your future – and perhaps my own, but with you and not as you and without you – may emerge and lay its foundation.” (Irigaray 1996, 117)

William James was the first to notice a kind of complex change happening while we succeed to formulate something. (James 1950) Paraphrasing Arne Naess, this change can also be explored in terms of an increase of “depth of meaning.“ (Naess 2005) When imposing a concept, its meaning does not “deepen.“ In a reflective and careful clarifying movement, there is a growing sense of the meanings of the notions and concepts one uses. In order to theoretically understand the implications of the transformative character of ECT, this growth, change or deepening of meaning needs to be studied and described.

Within philosophy voices have emerged that criticize the narrow and detached exercises of academic philosophy which Philip Kitcher characterizes as an “self-indulgence for the few“ professionals of the field. (Kitcher 2011) ECT strives to not just criticize such self-indulgence but to find new ways out of this flybottle, by experimenting with methods that invite a broader situational and experiential base into philosophical thinking.

Last but not least, engaging with the way we actually experience and feel situations, concepts and systems in critical thinking is desperately needed in this age of digitalisation and the forms of disembodiment it can cause. Social and mass media constantly distract and disrupt engaged thinking causing new forms of disconnection, while major investments flow into the development artificial intelligence rather than in the development of the capacity to think for oneself.

Endnotes

1. For further information on the research project and the group behind it, see www.etc.hi.is.
2. Natalie Depraz has asked a similar question, see Depraz 2012, Introduction.
3. Claire Petitmengin's micro-phenomenological research demonstrates, how spelling out the coming of thoughts brings to light a constantly shifting micro-genesis needing hours of interview in order to unpack the fine grained dimensions of complexity, subtle bodily gestures and dynamics, connectivities and trans-modal qualities involved in which a change is experienced as continuum and coherence. (Petitmengin 2006, 2007, 2009)

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