

## Micro-Phenomenology as a Practice of Critical Thinking

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**Abstract:** Micro-phenomenology is a successful research tool with major environmental implications. However, there is much to be gained by also approaching it as a philosophical method in its own right. As such, we use it as a critical practice of overcoming habitual conceptual distinctions between body and environment, inside and outside, rationality and feeling, reconnecting the thinking process to the experiencing body. Enacting this reconnection inspires the research and training of embodied critical thinking. Yet, one needs to be careful to not overstate micro-phenomenology as a solution for the social and environmental crisis.

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### Micro-phenomenological research as an act of resistance

1. An act of resistance could be a heading over the totality of Claire Petitmengin’s work. I see her resisting several streams of intellectual traditions: with respect to phenomenological research, taking canonical authors as the sole source to experience; with respect to neuro- and cognitive science, a focus on the brain from a third-person perspective; and with respect to the philosophical mainstream, the dismissal of any anchoring of knowledge in lived experience as a relapse into “givenism.” To be able to swim against several mainstreams at a time requires a strong steadiness of focused attention. Petitmengin’s steadiness on establishing micro-phenomenology has enacted a change in research habits and attitudes, by convincingly demonstrating what is required in order to skilfully explore lived experience from within, while researching with precision, analytical power and surprising outcomes. All the while, she backed the cultivation of practice with excellent theoretical work, facing up to criticism and staying in close touch with a wide research context. Petitmengin’s act of resistance has been transformative for the field and has established a platform for a vibrant community of new researchers to safely and fruitfully explore lived experience without getting lost or ignored any longer.

2. In the target article, Petitmengin is summarizing major findings and implications of micro-phenomenology to which she has pointed to in articles before. Rarely, however, has she drawn out so extensively the ethical, social, pedagogical and existential dimensions of something that started as a research tool. It seems that she can now afford to widen the focus in order to articulate the underlying current of deep and multidimensional meaning that supported her swim against mainstreams. This is why this article is special and beautiful in its use of language, making a strong point of the transformative power of becoming more aware of lived experience and its potential to unblock the central nerves of an environmentally destructive culture stuck in consumerism.

## Micro-phenomenology's potential for philosophical practice

3. In my commentary, I would like to approach the transformative power of micro-phenomenology from one more angle, by referring to what it contributes to philosophical practice.
4. To begin with, micro-phenomenology opens us to the cognitive experience of awe. When working micro-phenomenologically on a simple perception, an ordinary aspect of experience or an act of cognition, one can experience a new sense of wonder; there is so much more to be discovered than what one believed one had experienced.
5. Let me draw on a well-known metaphor to indicate the philosophical power of this move. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953: §309), the power and potential of philosophy lies in showing the fly the way out of the fly bottle. The latter signifies a “stuckness” in conceptual frameworks that constrict not only thinking but also the experience of a world beyond the framework. We cannot get out of this conceptual fly bottle by *merely criticizing* language and concepts, or by *arguing the logical possibility or impossibility* of getting in touch with experience, as happens, for example, in the reiterating discussions around the “myth of the given.”
6. As I have observed in my own work with students of philosophy, short exercises of micro-phenomenology cut through this kind of conceptual conundrum. Interviews on simple cognitive acts or perceptions provide an awareness that one is not even aware that one was unaware of something, as Petitmengin formulates (§3). Twenty minutes of defocusing and broadening the attention on *how* one memorizes something displays dimensions of lived experience that convey an utterly new experience of experience and of simple cognitive acts. In an exercise of exploring the experience of memorizing a list of words, for instance, students notice that this task is far more complex than they thought. They become aware of how various experiential modalities as well as transmodal aspects of lived experience function in memorizing. They are surprised by the scope of experience participating in the task, sometimes going back to very early stages of their life. Whereas most believe, at first, that memorizing is a matter of looking at the words or finding strategical bridges between them, they discover with surprise that they do things like “swallowing words,” “pushing them diagonally from left to right,” “coloring and holding words,” etc., while noticing other unexpected embodied modalities partaking in the task.<sup>1</sup> When students grope for words to convey the subtle gestures, acts and felt dimensions hidden behind concepts like the “act of memorizing” or “sense-perception,” micro-phenomenology efficiently uncovers an impoverished dimension of ordinary and abstract language.
7. A fly bottle consisting of explicit, ready-made and second-hand concepts in which one thinks that one thinks and experiences, opens up in short practices of a micro-phenomenological interview. In this way, micro-phenomenology contributes what I

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<sup>1</sup> The quotes are taken from seminar protocols.

would like to call a challenging philosophical experience, calling for new words, descriptions and considerations which are relevant to classical problems of philosophy.

8. On the basis of an empiricism that would have made William James rejoice, micro-phenomenology also freshly provokes fundamental, ago-old questions:

- Could we touch a non-dualistic source of thoughts beneath dual structures imposed on experience by Western knowledge and thought-systems (Petitmengin 2017)?
- Do we uncover essential structures of experience or rather a responsiveness of experiential structures with regard to the way they are approached, with implications for concepts of objectivity and knowledge within first-person science and beyond (Kordeš & Demšar 2019)?
- Do we face epistemological paradoxes in exploring lived experience that resemble the ones on a quantum level (Bitbol & Petitmengin 2013)?
- How can we understand the process of the emergence of generic structures during analysis of lived experience (Valenzuela-Moguillansky & Vásquez-Rosati 2019)?
- How does language constrict, contribute or manipulate the unfolding of experience and the finding of its structures (Schoeller 2019)?

9. It is because of its capacity to open language barriers and inspire philosophical questions through the experience of getting in touch with lived experience that micro-phenomenology is a core method used by the embodied critical thinking (ECT) group in our ongoing research (Schoeller & Thorgeirsdottir 2019; <https://ect.hi.is>) and in our training of embodied critical thinking (<https://trainingect.com>).

### **“Getting it right” as an embodied experience of using language**

10. An embodied dimension of thinking becomes especially noticeable in a phase of reflection we call “getting it right.” When one tries to get something right, one can sense a question, an idea, a problem without having words for it yet. Thomas Nagel formulates the challenge of this phase very precisely:

“the difficulty is to pose it [the question] without turning it into something superficial, or inviting answers that may seem adequate to its verbal form but that don’t really meet the problem beneath the surface.” (Nagel 1986: 56)

11. Petitmengin convincingly demonstrates, in her work and the target article, that a disconnection to lived experience is held in place by beliefs and preconceptions that are superimposed on experience and sustained by language and concepts (§4). Yet, she also notes, that “words are not doomed to separate and dissect” (§25). The solution she indicates for a language to display experience is words playing “the role of pointers or ‘handles’” or the creation of new words (ibid). This makes me wonder: Does this view on language imply that the only thing we can do to reconnect to lived experience is describe it? Is conceptual thinking doomed to disconnect us? In other words: how can one think with words only indicating and pointing or merely with the creation of new words? Do we not need to reform our concepts? (Q1)

12. In embodied critical thinking, the challenge is to not let disembodied representations separate the thinking process from the felt experience of a question. This requires what I call a tentative use of language that does not lose the experienced and felt meaning during the conceptualization process (Schoeller 2018). Embodied critical thinking, besides being a research project, is also therefore a practice-based project to find a language in thinking that does not superimpose (traditional or habituated) beliefs on experience. One must rather find words that “carry forward” the felt dimension of lived experience (Gendlin 2004a), for which Gendlin coined the term “felt sense” (e.g., Gendlin 1970).

13. The carrying-forward function, described and theorized by Gendlin, is not graspable in terms of a representational model of meaning. It indicates the possibility of a felt dimension of a question, idea or a problem clarifyingly transforming in the course of formulating it. The use of concepts in embodied critical thinking thus faces the double challenge of conceptual *and* experiential elaboration (Schoeller 2016). The formulation process requires subtle gestures for zigzagging between felt sense, verbal formulation and back (Gendlin 1962, 1997). This process involves phases of sensing, formulating, re-sensing and re-formulating. Words that “get it right” shift the experience in non-random and precise ways that “work” to say more of what matters (Schoeller 2020). “Thinking at the edge,” which Petitmengin mentions (§9), is a method Gendlin developed to make this kind of attentional shifting in thinking practicable (Gendlin & Hendricks 2004, Gendlin 2004b). This is one of the core methods that the ECT group uses, along with micro-phenomenology.

14. In the ECT group’s ongoing research on the process of “getting it right,” the micro-phenomenological interview helps us discern the embodied dimension of using words in the process of thinking: In an experiment conducted by members of the ECT group, a listener who is supposed to reflect back exactly what the person involved in formulating (a felt question, hunch, idea) is saying, will deliberately give back a word that is a little off track, as if she has misunderstood what was said. Later, the micro-phenomenological interview is used to make accessible the experience of hearing back the wrong word in the context of one’s formulation process. The embodied dimensions of using words become strikingly apparent in the descriptions gained by our interviews. This work in progress is to be published soon.

15. If one connects to the paradoxes of lived situational experience, what one touches on is often not yet clear, sometimes unbearably vague, confusing, disturbing, sensitive and at times vulnerable (Schoeller 2019). Embodied critical thinking that engages with the subtlety of lived experience calls for a climate of self-care and care for the other. This we also learn in the micro-phenomenological interview. The potential of differentiating and making more precise the use of language due to a micro-phenomenological access to lived experience offers a stark contrast to philosophical discussions in which criticality is enacted mainly as spotting the weak points of mutual argumentation, which then often fosters disembodied language games, power plays of discourses and a jump into pre-existing claims and concepts.

## **Reconnection requires new political solutions and new ways of thinking**

16. A society lost in frantic consumption exhausting the earth has lost contact with itself and lived experience. I certainly agree with Petitmengin's diagnosis. However, the cure seems more complex than liberating ourselves from the "narrow attentional tunnel" that conceals the activity itself (the "how") (§3). Here, Petitmengin could easily be understood as overstating the point. If large parts of the population of our countries and the overwhelming majority of the world population need to focus on *what* to bring home at the end of the day to make ends meet, on *what* to produce to not lose their job, on *what* to do to stay alive, then a shift of attention to the "how" one experiences something may seem a luxury not many can afford in their daily *conditio humana*. So, does the possibility of reconnecting on a collective level to lived experience not require new political solutions, a structural shift in social and sustainable and educational systems? (Q2)

17. For the ECT group, embodied critical thinking seems important as a kind of missing link that connects the re-animating power of micro-phenomenology to the use of concepts and abstract thinking. It needs the work of critical thinking to shift a conceptual framework of our thinking that keeps the disconnection in place in our economic, political and educational systems. It is not enough to have islands of connection, without carrying this experience further into critical thinking and critical practices that change systemic structures, to allow for more unfolding of lived connection to the earth. This is why we who can work in peaceful and safe conditions need to necessarily practice the shift of attention to the "how". Being in touch with lived experience provides surprising possibilities and resources to re-think structures and engage in actions that re-form and re-animate exhausted environments one is embedded in.

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