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A Body of Knowledge: The Role of Human Experience and the Living Body in Knowing

Abstract

The study of the ways of knowing is a major topic in psychology and cognitive sciences. However, one may argue that subjectivity and human experience as roots of knowing are little addressed, despite the perspectives they may offer. Our work investigates the epistemic status of experience and the living body in knowledge processes. It asserts that human experience is a myriad richness and argues that a first-person epistemology and precise methods are needed to genuinely conduct experiential research. The stakes of such a proposal is not only epistemological but also nourishing an ethical and societal goal.

Keywords

Human experience, knowledge, first-person science, bodily sensations, explicitation and micro-phenomenology interviews.

A Body of Knowledge: On the Role of Human Experience and the Living Body in Knowing

Introduction

The study of the ways of knowing is a major topic in psychology and cognitive sciences, which has been particularly invested by philosophers, especially phenomenologists, as well as psychologists. However, one may argue that subjectivity and human experience as roots of knowing are little addressed, despite the perspectives they may offer. Along these lines, our work investigates the role of human experience and the living body in knowledge processes. Especially, we contend the idea that experience, when probed with a suitable epistemology and methodology, can be a source of knowledge. Thus, this paper aims to consider the epistemic status of human experience and invites to a questioning on the broadening of the ways of knowledge. Taking the measure of what knowledge owes to subjective experience within all its richness, the stakes of such a proposal is not only epistemological but also nourishing ethical and societal goals. In the first section we present human experience and its major properties within a phenomenological perspective. Second section examines the invisible part of experience, *i.e.* the Implicit and the Pre-reflective. Third section is dedicated to bodily knowledge in connection with some of our results from two first-person studies using the explicitation interview method. Fourth section examines the question of the epistemic access to human experience and focuses on the need for specific experiential methods to fully take into account experience. Before concluding, fifth section anchors our contribution in the field of first-person epistemology.

Experience as a myriad richness

Every living human being has an experience at every moment of her/his life. We consider experience as an ongoing process which is lived “from within”. For Depraz, Varela and Vermersch (2003 p. 2), *experience is always that which a singular subject is subjected to at any given time and place, that to which s/he has access ‘in the first-person’*. The subjective experience unfolds within the social and material interactions in which the subject is engaged, and in her/his body’s state at a given moment. It is the *hic et nunc* experience of the event that affects the subject. This refers to the German concept of *Erlebnis*¹, *i.e.* the fact of having lived something, as well as the set of thoughts, perceptions, and sensations that this experience has aroused.

The experiencing subject is an “I” who is not merely a consciousness directed at the world, but is also a being affected by the world: She/he is affecting the world as much as she/he is affected by it (Henry, 2008). The subject is engaged within a “dual” active/passive movement: *(...) with experience there is something like an encounter between a subject and a reality that transcends him and which, by its novelty, creates surprise. From this we may conclude that experience is, for the subject, both active, in so far as it represents a formative trial, in the sense of an attempt at knowledge of what is encountered, and passive in as much as it is a trial in the sense of an ordeal* (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch, 2003 p. 171). This dual property of experience (both active and passive) implies that it needs to be considered from a relational perspective. The real is a lived world – an experienced world – that is necessarily given to the subject from her/his particular perspective. This approach is centered both on the subject and on the world and in doing so, tones down the duality between subject and object. This relational position is also the one of Nagel (1974), for whom a living being’s experience of the world is what defines her/him as a being: *Clearly ‘what it is like to be’ a bat or a human being refers to how things (everything)*

look when being a bat or a human being. (...) A phenomenon, in the most original sense of the word, is an appearance and therefore something relational. By very definition an appearance is indeed what something is for something else; it is a being for by opposition to a being in itself, to what something is independent of its apprehension by another entity endowed with apprehensive abilities (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch, 2003 p. 125).

When an appearance (a phenomenon) occurs to a subject, her/his experience is characterized by its holistic nature. Vermersch (2006) highlights the different layers of the lived experience, which relate to its perceptual, cognitive, motor, or emotional aspects. This typology echoes John McCarthy and Peter Wright's (2004) four experiential threads: the sensual thread (sensorial involvement in experience), the emotional thread (meaning attributed to an object or a person on the basis of our values, objectives and desires), the compositional thread (relations between the parts and the whole of an experience) and the spatiotemporal thread (the links of experience to the past and to the future). McCarthy and Wright's fourth experiential thread refers to an essential component of experience: time. Although the time of lived experience is always the present (Stern 2004), it integrates both the past and the future. Within a phenomenological perspective, one aims at the study of things as they appear or are given to our experience, in the present moment, with a micro-temporality (seconds and fractions of seconds). However, for Husserl (1996), in the present time one finds echoes of the past (retentions), and what he calls the future of the present (protentions). Husserlian retentions are the immediate past, whose echo is still heard in the present moment, a little like the "tail of a comet". Protentions point to the potential future of the present moment. Retentions and protentions are thus both part of present-time experience, and belong to a global, unified and unique experience occurring in a subjective now (*ibid.*).

To sum up, *the experience of a given subject is at once precise, concrete, and individuated. It is centered on particular spatio-temporal parameters, and is thus new and different each time* (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch, 2003 p. 2). Experience can be a source of knowledge for researchers and for the subjects themselves. And to study it “from within”, especially in its invisible part, we need a specific epistemology and rigorous methodology we will develop in section 4 (‘The need for specific experiential methods’).

The invisible part of experience: the Implicit and the Pre-reflective

Lived experience relies on several types of consciousness. Vermersch (2008) offers a synthesis of Husserl's theory of modes of consciousness, which goes beyond the usual dichotomy from cognitive psychology, *i.e.* one unconscious mode and one conscious mode. He argues instead to consider a trichotomy of modes of consciousness organized this way: First, an unconscious mode that does not presuppose a censorship mechanism like the Freudian unconscious. It is rather the phenomenological unconscious, called by Husserl “pre-giveness field” (our translation for “champ de pré-donation”). It is the prenoetic activity, during which the sedimentation of retentions occurs, resulting from the permanent passive memorization of lived experience (Gusdorf, 1951), before any intentional act. Secondly, a mode of consciousness, which Vermersch describes as direct consciousness, or consciousness in action (Piaget, 1974). It is a pre-reflective mode of consciousness, because this mode suggests “an immense field of data available for the subject without her/him knowing, and whose access is only subordinated to a mutation of her/his consciousness, a ‘handle’ towards the reflective consciousness” (Vermersch, 2008 p.58, our translation). Direct consciousness includes all the perceptions (whether visual, auditory, inner speech), the sensations, and the feelings composing the

subject's experience at a given moment. Vermersch suggests to name these first two modes of consciousness as “the unreflective consciousness”, to designate all that is unreflected, raw and not communicable yet. Third, he distinguishes a reflective mode of consciousness, which is what the subject “is aware of” and can relate easily. As we will develop below (see section 5 ‘Towards a first-person science’), the transition from direct consciousness to reflective consciousness is not immediate, and requires a reflection phase, which can be supported by the interview methods we will present in section 4. This path, which Piaget (1974) calls “bringing to conscious awareness”, allows the implicit part of the experience to become verbalizable, as Remillieux (2010) formalizes it by situating the different facets of the experience on two axes: an enunciation axis (from implicit to explicit) and a consciousness axis (from pre-reflective consciousness to reflective one).

Certain methods, such as the explicitation interview and the micro-phenomenological interview (cf. section 4), precisely, concern the transition between pre-reflective consciousness and reflective consciousness, although Petimengin (2010) questions the relevance of the very term “pre-reflective”. Indeed, she is first of all cautious concerning the use of the *pre-* prefix, which implies that pre-reflective consciousness would be systematically followed by reflective consciousness. Moreover, for her, the metaphor of the mirror within reflection phase (bringing to conscious awareness) evokes a distancing from one’s experience in order to observe it, whereas the experiential description needs to be the most close as possible with experience, in an intimate contact. Consequently, while affirming that lived experience is partly not immediately accessible to the subject, and that this part has to be explored with an experiential interview method, Petimengin (*ibid.*) suggests rather to use the term of “unrecognized experience”. Many authors whose work deals with experience and its pre-reflective facet point to the importance of the physical dimension of experience and bodily sensations.

Bodily knowledge - touching the Implicit

The principle of a cognition, as an act of knowing, rooted in an embodied subject, situated into a particular setting is the foundation of the theory of enaction (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993). This theory develops a conception of cognition as an “embodied action”, *i.e.* as a phenomenon rooted in the constant interactions that the subject has with her/his environment and by which these two realities co-occur.

In recent years, the “4E cognition” paradigm (for embodied, embedded, enactive and extended cognition) suggests that cognition involves the whole body, as well as the situation of the body in the environment (Newen, de Bruin & Gallagher, 2018). The term “embodied” is actually the most general term, encompassing the other three. Indeed, the idea is to take into account the way the body contributes to cognitive processes, body being always located in a physical, social and cultural (embedded) environment, body allowing us to perceive our environment according to what can be done there, according to its “affordances” (enactive), and finally body mobilizing objects and instruments of the environment, which also participate to cognition (extended).

In first-person researches, the conception of the body is from a first-person perspective, it is not simply a body, a particular physiological entity, but *my* body (or *your* body) as *I* live it (or as *you* live it) (Austry & Berger, 2011). It is the distinction between the objective body, which is a physiological entity - the body as a physical object (*Körper* for Husserl) - and the phenomenal body – the living body or flesh (*Leib* for Husserl). The distinction between the objective body and the phenomenal body should not be considered as an opposition (*ibid.*), since each person has only one body, but rather denotes two distinct and inseparable aspects of the same reality. This distinction is however fundamental to understand the way embodiment is considered by phenomenology, *i.e.* on the phenomenal mode, integrating the whole role of the body in lived experience. Indeed, according to (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2005), the human body is a permanent

condition of experience, because it constitutes the perceptive opening to the world. For him, there is a co-participation of consciousness and body, for which the analysis of perception must be accountable. In the words of James (1892), all thoughts, feelings, and actions are rooted in bodily sensations: “Whenever I try to become sensible of my thinking activity as such, what I catch is some bodily fact, an impression coming from my brow, or head, or throat, or nose” (*ibid.* p.432). According to him, to know our psychic functions, it is necessary to identify the processes by which thoughts become conscious while deriving their origin from the body (Švec, 2013).

Gendlin (1992) develops the idea of a radical involvement of the body in our relation to the world with the notion of bodily felt sense. It is the observable dimension of experiencing, concretely felt by the subject’s body, *i.e.* the global sensation relating to the whole situation she/he is living. It is a fundamental resource for the creation of meaning from implicit and pre-reflective experience, which Gendlin (*op. cit.*) calls *felt meaning*. In such a process of creation of meaning, the living body coincides with the lived body, through its irruption into reflective consciousness. We all know that particular feeling associated to the experience of trying to remember someone's name. The trace of the name is as if lodged in our body, its feeling is there, present (Preston, 2014). This feeling guides us when we ask ourselves “Is it Juliet?”, and our feeling in one way or another says “no”. “Is it Judith?”, we know that we are getting closer, our felt sense responding to our request. Another example is when an author is looking her/his next line of her/his text. There are many possibilities that would allow the novel to be continued consistent with what the author seeks to express, but there is only one line that is good, “validated” by her/his felt sense. This is the feeling to which Stern (1997) refers to when he describes the fact that we often feel that the words we use “are appropriate” to what we mean, or are not, as a vague signifying form, a kind of “proto-meaning”. The most famous example

of bodily felt sense is given by Gendlin (1992 p.346): *Suppose you are walking home at night, and you sense a group of men following you. You don't merely perceive them. You don't merely hear them there, in the space in back of you. Your body-sense instantly includes also your hope that perhaps they aren't following you, also your alarm, and many past experiences - too many to separate out, and surely also the need to do something - walk faster, change your course, escape into a house, get ready to fight, run, shout My "... " expresses the fact that your body-sense includes more than we can list, more than you can think by thinking one thing at a time. And it includes not only what is there. It also implies a next move to cope with the situation. But this implying of your next move is still a ... Your actual move has not yet come. Since it includes all this, the ... is not just a perception, although it certainly includes many perceptions. It is then a feeling? It is certainly felt, but "feeling" usually means emotion. The ... includes emotions, but also so much else. Is it then something mysterious and unfamiliar? No, we always have such a bodily sense of our situations. You have it now, or you would be disoriented as to where you are and what you are doing. In this example, the felt sense is a kind of integrated "feeling-seeing-hearing-remembering-imagining-anticipating" sensation that goes far beyond seeing and hearing. Thus, in the line of (Depraz, 2014 pp. 132-133, our translation), we can affirm that *contrary to the Cartesian assertion that my senses deceive me, we can affirm with Spinoza that we do not know what a body is capable of, there is an authentic power of corporeality (...), this role of absolutely reliable guide that Hippocrates emphasizes. In fact, every living being "knows" from within what she/he is experiencing and can rely on it to adjust her/his following action* (Lambooy, 2003 p.125, our translation). This *no-word knowledge* (Damasio, 1999 p.35, our translation) is the feeling that one has when one knows, which is, for Damasio, the basis of self-awareness. It seems to be very close to what Burloud (1927), a French psychologist from the beginning of the twentieth century, calls "intellectual*

feeling” (“*sentiment intellectuel*”). Burloud’s work is in line with the Würzburg School which argued for the existence of particular states of consciousness - “thoughts” - which are more than sensory content. They come as “non analyzed impressions” and “become ideas, judgements and reasoning” (Burloud, 1927). As Burloud explains, “the subject knows what to do but he has no representation of it”. In a study about first encounters between therapists and their patients (Ollagnier-Beldame & Cazemajou, 2019), we found in our explicitation interviews several intellectual feelings, which were embodied expert conclusive judgements, relying on the therapist’s whole expertise and to all the situations she/he has experienced in her/his professional life. These intuitive, expert and conclusive judgements come most of the time after a series of perceptions and intermediate judgments, as an insight. For instance, during a session, a therapist is paying attention to her patient’s attitude, her appearance, her silence and she also pays attention to her own bodily sensations. She becomes aware of her altered breathing and of some tension behind her neck and her head, she makes different judgements concerning the quality of silence in the room and the quality of presence of her patient, and then she comes to the intellectual feeling: “I feel something strange / I feel that something is happening to him which is a bit strange / I am saying to myself there is something there which is not all right”. Of course, what she “feels” is not a feeling strictly speaking, but we can grasp it in the light of Burloud’s work (*ibid.*). Gendlin's major contribution is his study of reciprocity between implicit felt sense and explicit formulation - the “zigzag” as he calls it.

To “touch the implicit” within its living and emerging dimension, to describe subjectivity finely, we need to broaden our conception of subjectivity, to go beyond the classical dichotomies (body/mind, inner/outer, subject/object) and to accept to be submitted to the authority of life within its dynamic and processual dimension. For Gendlin (1978 p.161), “a felt sense is body and mind before they are split apart”, it is the overall feeling of the situation in

which the person is. Feeling is usually thought of as a purely inner activity, whereas there is no inner / outer separation in the feeling according to Gendlin since for him, the body “is the situation”. Feeling most often mobilizes different sensorialities, which intertwine, in a sensory blur. This blurring of sensorial modalities is what describes Stern (1989) in his work with infants. For him, before experiencing discretized emotions (as we classically describe them, for instance surprise, joy, anger, sadness, *etc.*), infants experience affective characters that can only be described by dynamic and kinetic words: “Arise”, “faint”, “transient”, “crescendo / decrescendo”, *etc.* For Stern, infants live in a world made of shapes, movements, intensities and rhythms (Petitmengin, 2006b). These transmodal qualities, transposable from one sensorial modality to another (the “vitality affects”) “allow the child to experience a unified and unique world (*e.g.* the seen world is the same as the heard or felt world). According to Petitmengin (*ibid.* p.89, our translation), “Stern's work leads him to conclude that this transmodal capacity and the world that little children experience are not a phase of their development, which would then be abandoned to the benefit of another operating mode. Under perceptions, emotions, thoughts and actions that constitute our conscious experience, this silent stratum remains active throughout our life, though generally below the threshold of consciousness.” This sensorial indistinctness certainly makes the verbalization of feelings more difficult, which justifies the use of rigorous experiential methods for their description. Among the limits of language for the description of experience (Coupé & Ollagnier-Beldame, 2019), let us note for instance the fact that linguistic categories create delimitations in a phenomenon which is lived in a continuous way, as do, for example, the names of colors to describe the continuous spectrum of visible light (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993 p.271). The blur, as it appears within the felt sense, indicates the fringe of the implicit and is not at all arbitrary, empty or unfounded. It has its own requirement for precision: a verbal or pictorial “handle”, so that, for instance, the author is able

to choose between different words to continue her/his text, relying on a fresh and new feeling (a *felt shift*), associated with the discovery of a real feeling of “rightness” or “adequacy”. This ability to check the implicit “signifying form” of words is evidence, from an experiential point of view, that there is something “here”, at the fringe of immediate consciousness - something embodied which can guide to find the next right words (Preston, 2014). Gendlin says, speaking of the bodily felt sense: “IT answers”, as if the subject has a modified sense of agency when her/his bodily felt sense arises. In a study about first encounters (Ollagnier-Beldame & Coupé, 2019), we conducted explicitation interviews which revealed that a sense of agency is an important facet of experience. Agency is mainly the faculty of beings to achieve actions, but it also refers to a subjective judgment or an experience that one triggers and controls an action, especially an intentional, goal-directed action, regardless of whether one objectively triggered, or is responsible for, that action. This experience is called “the sense of agency” by (Haggard & Eitam, 2015). This sense of agency ties in with what (Ataria, Dor-Ziderman & Berkovich-Ohana, 2015) describe in their research on the phenomenological nature of the sense of boundaries within a long-term mindfulness meditator. They show that for this person, in certain circumstances, things happen “on their own,” spontaneously, without the need for an agent who controls what happens, whether at the thought level or the bodily level. The sense of agency is organized by the contradiction between sensation that one is being active and sensation that one is being passive. The reports from our participants show that they tend to experience themselves as the agent of most of their experiences, but that they also sometimes experience themselves being acted upon – or moved - by events, as illustrated by these statements: “it’s in my thoughts that it actually opens,” “it surprised me, it gave me energy actually” or “it reminded me of the experience with my children” (Ollagnier-Beldame & Coupé, *op. cit.*). Our analysis of subject’s

statements revealed that the duality between an active lived agency and a passive lived agency is partly pre-reflective, and that the bodily dimension of experience is a core aspect.

More widely, the meaning given by bodily sensations and the felt sense goes beyond what is verbalized by the person, especially since the categories of the language are limiting, but not only. Indeed, for Gendlin (1978), “Experience is a myriad richness. We think more than we can say. We feel more than we can think. We live more than we can feel. And there is much more still”. To get an accurate and faithful description of experience, in order to support the idea that experience can be a source of knowledge, we need some specific and rigorous methods, which are the topic of the section below.

The need for specific experiential methods

In order to access the subjective experience, the **explicitation interview** has been designed by Vermersch (1994, 2012) and Petitmengin (2001). It consists in “guided retrospective introspections”, aiming at accompanying an interviewee in recalling a past situation. It does not, however, guide the subject on the content she/he verbalizes, which comes to her/his consciousness through a movement of letting go. This is possible thanks to a specific posture from the interviewer guiding the interviewee’s attention with open and non-inductive questions but never inducing the content of what the latter says. During this movement, the interviewee is accompanied by the interviewer to suspend her/his judgment – this is the Husserlian *epoché* (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch, 2003)² –, which allows her/him to access her/his past lived experience. The main characteristics of the explicitation interview are: 1. The embodied posture of speech within the interviewee, or evocation, allowing her/him to initiate and to maintain an intimate contact with the evoked past situation; 2. The concept of “satellites of action”, to help the interviewer be aware of the area of verbalization to which the interviewee is referring and

to drive the interviewee's attention according to these areas; 3. The contact with a singular past situation (unique in time and space) in order to collect specific descriptions rather than generalizations (such as know-how or habits)³; 4. The holistic description of the lived experience; 5. The precise use of perlocutionary effects (Austin, 1962) and 6. The consideration of the temporality of the experience, carefully explored by the interviewer who is guiding the fragmentation of the interviewee experience into a series of very detailed phenomena through specific questions. The explicitation interview is used by researchers from a variety of scientific areas such as cognitive sciences (Ollagnier-Beldame & Cazemajou, 2019; Ollagnier-Beldame & Coupé, 2019), learning sciences (Mouchet, 2018), neuro- and cardio-phenomenology (Depraz, Gyemant & Desmidt, 2017), sports sciences (Lémonie, 2009), knowledge management (Remillieux, 2010), clinical psychology and psychiatry (Denis, 2016). For example, in (Ollagnier-Beldame & Coupé, 2019), we studied the experience of first encounters through 24 explicitation interviews and identified descriptive categories of "what it is like to meet someone for the first time". We thus showed that, in the experiential flow of the encounter, each micro-moment results in i. an act: imagining, feeling, observing, knowing, remembering, questioning or evaluating; ii. a sense of agency: active or passive; iii. a sensory modality: visual, auditory, olfactory, internal language or bodily sensation; and iv. a mode of intersubjectivity: to (not) have something in common, to (not) feel part of the same set, to (not) feel close to the other, to (not) identify oneself with the other, to (not) identify the other with oneself, to (not) assign to the other. These results resonate with the work of Siegel (2010) who describes our human capacity to perceive our minds and others' minds. His work especially focuses on the way we can understand our inner lives, getting ourselves off of the routines and moving closer to what we are experiencing. They are also an original complement to cognitive psychology studies on first impressions - judgements made on the basis of very little information (Evans et

al. 2000; Bar, Neta & Linz 2006; Willis & Todorov 2006; Schiller et al. 2009; Ambady 2010) and social psychology studies on the role of stereotypes in first impressions (Branscombe & Smith 1990; Abreu 1999; Dukes & Maddox 2008; Yeung & Kashima 2010).

The **micro-phenomenological interview** comes from the explicitation interview. It has been enriched, notably from meditative practices (vipassana meditation) and then adapted for research in cognitive sciences by Petitmengin (Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009; Petitmengin, Bitbol & Ollagnier-Beldame, 2015). Especially, the micro-phenomenological interview focused on the awareness of the "felt meaning" of a situation, valuing the concrete material of our experience, as many meditation techniques also work with, their only objective being to transform it in a deeper and radical way (Petitmengin, 2007). This method has also developed a strong interest in the transformation of the feeling of individual identity that sometimes occurs during interviews (for example, with the modification of the sense of agency), and as sometimes experienced by meditation experts. Compared to the explicitation interview, the micro-phenomenological interview offers a method of data analysis and validation that is precisely described and documented (Petitmengin, Remillieux, Valenzuela-Moguillansky, 2018). Like the explicitation interview, the micro-phenomenological interview aims at accompanying and maintaining the interviewee's evocation, in order to precisely describe the experience in an intuitive mode (as opposed to a signitive mode, purely conceptual), *i.e.* based on a presentification of the evoked moment.

The **phenomenological experiential interview** (Vion-Dury & Mouglin, 2018), retains some fundamental elements of the explicitation interview, but differs from it because it does not only explore the field of lived (and actually realized) action, but "aims at discovering the infinite extent of the field of lived experience in its multiple modalities (action, perception, imagination). Moreover, it takes into account the constant metamorphosis of the content and

form of consciousness, without necessarily returning to a specified moment, and also allows for the explicitation of sets of prototypical experiences. This method aims at “opening the folds of thought” and aims at the explicitation of consciousness experiences in psychotherapy and psychiatry as well as in phenomenological research.

Developed by the Duquesne University (Giorgi, 2009), the **descriptive phenomenological method** is similar to the explicitation interview on many aspects. However, it aims preferentially at the study of existential experiences (for instance, the ecstatic artistic experience, the experience of loneliness, *etc.*), whereas the explicitation interview is rather dedicated to the study of ordinary activities. Of course, ordinary experiences can also have an existential aspect, but this is not taken into account within a "strictly speaking" explicitation interview. With the satellites, we find one of the most obvious differences with Giorgi's methodology. Indeed, even if Churchill and Wertz (2015) insist that the participant's description might contain “a minimum of scientific rubric, generalization, speculation, explanation, or anything not immanent to the original concrete event”, they also write that “experience must be grasped holistically as a relationship in which the subject encounters an object through its meaning”. In an explicitation interview, the subject's comments and representations make sense only in so far as they give information concerning the meaning that the interviewee gives to her/his experience, but they do not give access to what she/he is precisely doing at the moment when she/he is doing it. However, the description of finalized and productive acts always comes first, and is the condition for accessing the meaning, which always comes as an addition. Moreover, the descriptions that we solicit from our interviewees do not rest on “everyday language” (Giorgi, 2014), but aim to access, behind it, the implicit and pre-reflective dimension of their experience - see section 2 (‘The invisible part of experience: the Implicit and the Pre-reflective).

The **focusing interview** (Gendlin, 1962/1997), relies on Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit (1978) and on the possibility of creating meaning from bodily sensations. This method is based upon the implicit semantic richness of experience - in the sense of experiencing, *i.e.* in its processual dimension - which contributes to the creation of meaning, serving as a referent to its verbalization. More precisely, experiencing is the living experience, immediate, in constant transformation, which is partly unconscious, as it is felt by a person as a unified whole. It is an ongoing process, always present, underlying, relating to a living and sensitive inner dimension. This processual dimension is what Rogers (1959) calls the “experiential flow”. The experiencing carries some knowledge, qualified as elementary and “primary”, which is immediate and which can be verbalized. The directly observable and felt aspect of the experiencing is what Gendlin calls “bodily felt sense” (1978). The bodily felt sense is the global and vague sensation felt by a subject in relation to a whole situation. The first phase of the Husserlian *epoché*, *i.e.* the suspension of “realist” prejudices, is reinforced in the focusing interview by “clearing the space” (Madison, 2014), which is the first step of focusing (Gendlin, 1978). During this step, the person is invited to identify, to welcome and then to put in brackets her/his concerns as they come to her/him during the introspection. The concept of “level of experiencing” (Hendricks, 2001) indicates the degree of connection between what a person is saying and her/his experience when she/he says it. This degree is a quantifiable first-person process: there are low, medium and high levels of experiencing. The focusing interview aims at a high level of experiencing of the implicit in order to allow words to emerge from it. The experiencing scale (Hendricks, 2009), which measures this process, is a third-person evaluation of a first-person process, based on specific linguistic and somatic indicators. As the other methods mentioned above, the focusing interview can be conducted from a radically first-person point of view or from a second-person point of view. But a significant difference from

other experiential interview methods is that focusing is not retrospective introspection but aims at describing experience as the subject is living it in the present time.

The field of “scientific” phenomenology, to which the above methods belong to, also offers other approaches. For example, the **micro-analytical interview** (Stern, 2004) which aims to represent the experience on a graph, with time on the y-axis and various subjective qualities of the experience on the x-axis, *e.g.* its richness, its intensity, or the feelings, affects, thoughts or actions associated to the experience. This interview method can be facilitated by the visualization of the video of the retrospectively evoked moment. Also, the **interpretative phenomenological analysis** (Antoine & Smith, 2017), which is based on the report of her/his experience by the subject – relying on her/his abilities for self-reflection and interpretation of her/his own experiences - so that experiences can make sense. Interpretative phenomenological interviews can be supplemented by freely written productions from the subject, with the help of the researcher in reflexive processes. Lastly, **descriptive experience sampling** (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006) is a method consisting in radically first-person descriptions (self-elicitations) supplemented by second-person interviews.

Towards a first-person science

Contrasting the perspective of the subject experiencing the experience from that of another subject - such as the researcher, phenomenological approaches draw a distinction between first-person, second-person and third-person points of view (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch, 2003). The first-person point of view is characteristic of experience as it is accessed by the subject. In other words, it is the subject’s perspective. It groups all the methods we have presented in section 4, soliciting the subject’s expression on her/his own experience. This point of view is unique, because it qualifies only the one which a subject has in relation to herself/himself

(Vermersch, 2000a). In the case where the researcher collects data about her/his own experience, Vermersch speaks of a « radically first-person » point of view to denote the idea that the data are drawn from the researcher's own lived experience. The second-person perspective implies *enabling the gathering of 'first-person' data, i.e., data that express the viewpoint of the subject herself, in the grammatical form 'I...'. But since the data have been gathered through another person (a 'You'), the method has been dubbed 'second-person'* (Petitmengin, 2006a pp. 230-231). This point of view implies a combination of empathic resonance and heterophenomenological observation (Depraz, 2012), *i.e.* an inference from behaviors (whether linguistic or other behaviors such as gestures). For all that the delimitation of what is observed is not fixed, the idea is that a second-person perspective is intersubjective and allows for an indirect point of view on the subjective perspective. The first-person and second-person points of view rely on a first-person epistemology that considers subjectivity as it is experienced by the subject herself/himself (Varela & Shear, 1999; Depraz, 2014).

They are defined this way as opposed to the third-person point of view that does not allow to study the experience as it focuses on behaviors and examines them according to predefined categories. This point of view implies a third-person epistemology in which subjectivity and lived experience are generally viewed as epiphenomena or as being beyond the reach of science (Vermersch, 2000a).

First-person epistemology is often undervalued in comparison to third-person approaches, on the assumption that an external point of view offers greater objectivity. The limits of this last statement have however been stressed, and the epistemic validity of first-person approaches has been analyzed in detail (Petitmengin & Bitbol 2009). Especially, claims denying subjects' introspective abilities (Nisbett & Wilson 1977) have been rebutted (Petitmengin & Bitbol 2009; Petitmengin, Remillieux, Cahour & Carter-Thomas, 2013). Moreover, external observations

based on third-person epistemology leave aside entire facets of the studied phenomenon, which simply cannot be accessed since they occur “within” individuals, “behind” physical movements and “in front” of patterns from neuronal imagery. These classically inaccessible facets of the subject’s activity, her/his experience, can however be reported by her/him; hence, the benefits of accompanying her/him to do so with a particular method. As for reducing introspection to solipsism (Zahavi, 2017), we contend that *gathering authentic descriptions of lived experiences is the first and necessary step to ground our research in the things themselves and access the invariant structure of experience* (Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2011 p. 36). As we wrote in (Petitmengin, Bitbol & Ollagnier-Beldame, 2015), once a corpus of singular descriptions of experiences has been collected, a whole work of reorganization, analysis and formalization is necessary in order: 1. To identify the possible structure of the described experiences, *i.e.* a network of relationships between descriptive categories, independently from the experiential content, and 2. To detect any generic structures, progressively extracted from the initial descriptions thanks to a succession of operations of abstraction (Petitmengin, Remillieux & Valenzuela-Moguillansky, 2018; Valenzuela-Moguillansky & Vásquez-Rosati, 2019). After all, research on lived experience, while recognized as crucial in philosophical and empirical approaches to the study of the Mind, is moreover confronted with the problem that each examination of experience seems to change the experience itself. Many have taken this so-called “excavation fallacy” (Kordeš & Demšar, 2018) to undermine the possibility of a first-person inquiry as a scientific practice.

It is important to bear in mind that first-person epistemology is not an epistemology of immediacy since experience, although lived by the subject, is not immediately known by her/him, despite its apparent transparency and familiarity. Experience is not directly accessible to the subject and the first-person perspective should not be confused with immediate

givenness, *i.e.*, for the subject, a sudden, clear and distinct illumination (Vermeresch, 2000). *Indeed, being epistemically related to facts about oneself is not a sufficient condition for first-person perspective taking: You can also have an objective, third-person view on your headache. [...] What is needed is a difference not in terms of the epistemic object but, rather, in terms of epistemic access – even if it may turn out to be necessary to refer to specific epistemic objects in order to clarify what the specific kind of access is. The decisive point seems to be that there are certain features of oneself that do require a specific kind of epistemic access* (Pauen, 2012 pp. 37-38).

Conclusive discussion

In this paper, we investigated the epistemic status of lived experience and of the living body in knowledge processes. We introduced why it is important, in order to conduct experiential researches, to rely on a first-person epistemology and on some precise methods.

Specifically, we showed that these methods, dedicated to the study of human experience, are particularly powerful to study its invisible part, *i.e.* the Implicit and the Pre-reflective. We exposed the privileged role of the body and bodily sensations within intuitive knowledge. The different methods of experiential interviewing presented in this article are based on the *epoché*, which is at the heart of the phenomenological and first-person science approach, and which target is to suspend judgments, in order to return to the very things and to let some “fresh” meaning arise. Indeed, according to the phenomenological perspective, the natural attitude (the idea that what appears is truly the state of the world) can be bracketed by this suspension act, which can then lead to a reorientation, *i.e.* a conversion from the *what* to the *how* of experience. This latter act, called *reduction*, makes then possible to investigate the *how* of the experience, which is the main aim of the methods we presented in the article. Finally, a return to the world

as it is experienced in its felt immediacy is potentially possible. Concretely, during an experiential interview, the interviewer aims at performing the *epoché* for herself/himself when she/he guides the interviewee with non-inductive questions about the content, questions that direct the interviewee's attention to her/his inner experience. Her/his purpose is to let the interviewee's *epoché* arise, concerning her/his own experience and to let reduction occur, this process possibly allowing new knowledge to emerge. The idea of such accompaniment is to gain access to new knowledge whose starting point is the person's experience. Questioning the person's experience with an experiential method aims to temporarily - and as much as possible - suspend representations (those of the person and those of the researcher who is questioning), in order to access and then describe the person's experience beyond the natural attitude. For example, in explicitation interviews or micro-phenomenological interviews, the interviewer is very attentive to the perlocutionary effects of her/his questions and reformulations, in order to accompany the interviewee to let a past experience come back from her/his passive memory. With these two methods, the experience is evoked in all its richness, including its pre-reflective part of which the person was unaware and which was "below" its obvious description. Access to the content of this pre-reflected part is very often a discovery for the person who has lived it, frequently constituting a source of knowledge for her/him, and for the researcher who seeks to find out what it is like to live such a situation. Within Focusing interviews, the *epoché* is also practiced by the interviewer in her/his guidance. And for the interviewee, it is the bodily felt sense - and especially some felt shifts - that is the source of fresh meaning and knowledge. We think that along the lines of this proposition, a new relationship to the body, as a source of knowledge, can be sketched. Berger and Vermersch (2006) speak of "bodily *epoché*" to describe some practices that *involve a break with a certain habitual relationship to the body, to let come a listening, an observation and a feeling that lead to the constitution of a specific*

universe, the latter only happening in these actual conditions of reduction (p. 46, our translation). Such an *epoché*, allowing “a renewed relationship to the body, more present, different from a mechanical relationship” (*ibid.*), offers a renewed trust in the body, in all its sensoriality. This practice evokes the work of Kingsley (1997) according to whom our understanding of certain ancient Greek texts is erroneous when we retain that our senses are unreliable for apprehending the world. Instead, Kingsley asserts that sensoriality offers an enormous potential for knowledge. He claims that our senses are unreliable only as we know them, because we were never taught how to use them. Finally, we claim for a holistic approach to knowledge processes, integrating various ways of knowing such as the intelligence “which knows” and the intelligence “which does not know that it knows”, and considering human subjectivity finely, beyond the normativity of subjectivity. The stakes of such a proposal is not only epistemological but also nourishing ethical and societal goals. Indeed, our proposal finds its roots in a double observation we make, as a citizen within a society which is massively weakened by an environmental and humanitarian crisis: We daily observe the destructive tendencies of our society with respect to human and non-human life, causing harm to Nature and a waste of life. But at the same time, our second observation is that human beings have many capacities to get closer to life, in its creative and emerging dimension, *via* their experience. With others (Abram, 2013; Fischer, 2013; Bendell, 2018; Petitmengin, 2020), we affirm that the environmental and humanitarian crisis is partly due to our way of life that depletes the earth's resources, and that this way of life and the disasters it generates are profoundly related to forgetting what is closest to us: our own lived experience. We maintain, in line with (Petitmengin, 2020) that regaining contact with our lived experience is the prerequisite that would allow us to regain our lucidity and find the courage to change our model of society. Thus, in line with Fischer's work⁴ (2013) and the development of a radical

ecopsychology, we challenge the idea that the current systemic crisis stems from a violation of the life process as it unfolds in us and around us (Gendlin, 1962/1997, 1978) and that we need to root scientific investigation in lived experience, contributing to the shift "from ego to eco". In this context, the practice of *epoché*, widely speaking, can be seen, beyond the key concept, as a practice of life and can help reducing the ordinary violation or waste of life. We hope that this paper can modestly help to re-think the inscription of human beings in a Nature that they would no longer seek to control while destroying it, but of which they would be a part of, and with which they would be constantly in touch *via* their lived experience.

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Footnotes

¹ This approach can be distinguished from those studying experience as a synthesis act of already temporalized phenomenal configurations, which can be related to the German concept of *Erfahrung*.

² According to (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch, 2003 p. 25), “one accomplishes the *epoché* in three principal phases:

A0: Suspending your “realist” prejudice that what appears to you is truly the state of the world; this is the only way you can change the way you pay attention to your own lived experience; in other words, you must break with the “natural attitude.”

A1: Redirecting your attention from the “exterior” to the “interior.” [SEP]

A2: Letting-go or accepting your experience.” [SEP]

³ For (Vermersch, 2012), this fundamental property of experience, *i.e.* being situated in time, means that it can only be approached from the study of a peculiar and specific moment. Otherwise, one is instead dealing with a class of experiences, or with generalizations.

⁴ According to Andy Fischer (2013, p.83), *From my point of view, a large part of the work of ecopsychology is to move towards clarifying the connection ... between this morbid state of our experiential life and our ecological problems.*