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Towards a Rigorous Praxis of First-Person Method

The subjective is intrinsically open to intersubjective validation, if only we avail ourselves of a method and procedure for doing so. (Varela and Shear 1999: 2)

We investigate conscious activity in so far as it perceives itself unfolding in an operative and immanent mode, at once habitual and pre-reflective. (Depraz et al. 2002: 1)

We are not determined by our contexts but rather make decisions based on reasons that are grounded in the way in which the world appears to us at any one moment. Whereas learning environment research tends to suggest that this or that aspect of the learning environment determines us, close analysis of interviews immediately provides us with evidence to the contrary. For example, in interviews with scientists we may find out that a particular individual became a marine biologist using as an explanation that her aunt had frequently taken her to the beach, where the biologist developed a liking for anything related to the ocean. In this case, the decision to become a scientist is grounded in the positive aspect that the social environment provided. But the converse is also the case: someone becomes a scientist *even though* the environment is adverse. Thus, in one of my studies, the scientist suggested that his parents wanted him to become a doctor, doing what they could to convince him. But he wanted to become a water scientist. In a biographical interview, he tells me how, despite and against his parents' wishes, he did become a scientist in his chosen field. Moreover, most of the researchers I know who do learning environment research and who use causal or correlational models to show the associations between learning environment and achievement measures do not understand themselves as determined by the social environment. That is, there is a considerable difference between theories such researchers use for modeling the learning of their participants and the theories they use to model their own learning.

My own take on the question of learning theories is that they need to be reflexive, describing our own learning as much as they are intended to describe the learning of people generally and students of all ages specifically. In this book I am interested in is the description of first-person methods that are employed to inquire

about knowing and learning by investigating our experiences, that is, in knowing and learning ‘right here at home’. But the kind of first-person method I am striving for is not contended with the reification of everyday, frequently mythical descriptions, but rather investigates phenomena critically in such a manner that more general conditions of knowing and learning are exhibited. This will show that the senses, movements, and our bodies are foundational to the sense we make of the ‘ten thousand’ things in and of the world and ourselves. Sense is not a something that can be understood through the development of metaphysical concepts but precisely by investigating how the senses of the body constitute the body of sense. It is not that we ‘make sense’ or ‘construct meaning’ as if it were something we do with minds disconnected from everything else, but rather, it is through sensory movements that become independent of the specific situation that object permanence and thought come about. And it is precisely through active movements that the senses of the body *are affected* (note the passive construction) and learn about the world. This relationship between movement, activity, and being affected, though already recognized by the ancient Greek – ‘Let us the first proceed on the assumption that to be acted upon or moves is identical with active operation’ (Aristotle 1907: 417a)¹ – has been lost to modern learning theories. The latter theories solely focus on the agential aspect of human experience, completely neglecting both activity (as in activity theory) and the passive and pathic aspects of life. In fact, Aristotle uses the term *páskhein* (πάσχειν), the present active infinitive of the verb *páskho* (πάσχω), to suffer, undergo. This relationship of agency and passivity, though a central idea in recent philosophical developments, remains to be explored in the educational research literature. Such an exploration occurs, among other things, throughout this book. In fact, Aristotle recommends using the term ‘suffering’ (‘impression’) not in a single sense but as both changing and not changing the individual undergoing the experience. It is a dialectical framing, whereby learning derives from active and passive syntheses (Husserl 2001).

Studying learning from and through a first-person approach requires two steps: bracketing of experience – also referred to as *phenomenological reduction* or *epoché* – and expression and validation. In the following, I focus on *epoché*, the cornerstone of the phenomenological method, because expression and validation are little different from those in other sciences. *Epoché* (from Gr. *ἐποχή* [epoché], suspension of judgment) is a systematic method for suspending judgment, a process of stepping outside of our usual, mundane, and preconceived notions about how the world works to gain greater insights and better understandings. There are three stages to *epoché*: (a) an initial phase, during which experiences are systematically produced all the while suspending one’s beliefs about them, (b) a conversion phase during which attention is changed from the content of experience to the process of experience, and (c) a phase of accepting experience (no-attention). The first stage requires an unprejudiced openness to the details of experience, whereas the second stage requires analysis of the processes that make experience possible in the first place. The third stage constitutes a systematic approach to a phenomenon that many scientists have experienced: after wrestling long and hard with difficult prob-

¹ This passage has also been translated in this manner: ‘Let us the in the first place agree to regard in our discussion the words “passive impression”, “movement”, and “activity” as identical’.

lems, the solutions come to them while engaging in very different activities (sleeping, exercising).

Inherently, as the name suggests, first-person methods require the experiences of the researcher. But the point is to make the first-person approach a rigorous method, which means, that it and its results can be and are shared by others. The point is to study, from the perspective of conscious activity, the activity of consciousness itself. The range of relevant phenomena is vast including ‘not only all the ordinary dimensions of human life (perception, motion, memory, imagination, speech, everyday social interactions), as well as cognitive events that can be precisely defined as tasks in laboratory experiments (for example, a protocol for visual attention), but also manifestations of mental life more fraught with meaning (dreaming, intense emotions, social tensions, altered states of consciousness)’ (Depraz et al. 2002: 2). In this book, I exemplify the praxis of first-person method by investigating a range of the phenomena that the authors of the quotation list. The first-person approach is required because the phenomena to be studied remain in a condition of immanence: they exist pre-reflectively. The point of the first-person methods is to study consciousness before reflection is setting in, and is perceptually and discursively articulated by what is at hand. The purpose of the approach is to study consciousness and conscious experience at the point of their emergence. It is only through a first-person approach that we can seek out among all the ‘acts of consciousness which remain in a condition of immanence’ ‘a form of pre-reflexivity on the basis of which consciousness is able to perceive its very self at work’ and which generally goes ‘unperceived’ (ibid: 2).

The term ‘first-person method’ does not merely mean, therefore, using the first-person *accounts* of one person or several persons, whom the researcher interviews. In the latter case, the *account* of experience is all that the researcher has access to, which, inherently, is constrained by the language available to the interlocutors – plus some other forms of expressions used in communication such as gestures, prosody, or body movements. In such a method, all we have available is text, and there is nothing that will allow us to get out of text. This is quite evident from a now almost infamous text on texts: ‘Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the methodological considerations that we risk applying here to an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above; as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. *There is no outside-text* [there is nothing outside of the text]’ (Derrida 1967c: 227). Text only leads to a doubling of the text, layers texts upon texts; the interpretation of text can only take us back to more text, unfolding text upon itself – to leave nothing but the text outside of which there is nothing left.² It is a world of its own: making reference only to itself. What Derrida

² The experience of texts layering themselves upon texts is actually a very common experience. Thus, in one of my research projects, a teacher asks a student during mathematics class, ‘what did we say that group was about’ while pointing to a group of cubes; and the student responds, after a period of silence, ‘what do you mean like’. The teacher utters in turn, ‘What was the . . . what did we put for the name of

points out is that anything that appears as thing, anything that is articulated as differing from other things in nature, is jointed to (verbal) articulation. Anything that appears as some thing already has this characteristic of a text: it is a means of making present again some other presence. From the very fact that we make use of a representation – word, gesture, or diagram – we can conclude that the thing for which the representation stands is *absent*. For reasons that I show in chapter 8, as one instance of realizing first-person methods, ‘the absolute presence, Nature, that which words like “real mother” etc. name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens sense and language is this writing as the disappearance of natural presence’ (ibid: 228).

When I use the term ‘experience’, I am writing about more than can be put into words – because much of our lives extends far beyond what we do or even can describe in words. When I say, ‘My hand hurts’, then nothing at all is communicated about the current carnal state in which I am, nothing about the intensity, nothing about the more or less extended limitations that this pain places on my action. Before I can say that I am in pain I experience pain at a pre-reflexive level, which I can do without having to conceptualize this experience. This conceptualization, consciousness always already is too late to capture the onset of what is happening to me before I become conscious of experiencing pain. Thus, when using the term ‘experience’, I ‘mean the lived, *first-hand* acquaintance with, and account of, the entire span of our minds and actions, with the emphasis not on the context of the action but on the immediate and embodied, and thus inextricably personal, nature of the content of action. 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”” (Depraz et al. 2002: 2). The interest of this kind of research is not only in that which a singular subject is subjected to but, more precisely, in the singular dimensions of the experience that only the first-person perspective can reveal. Thus, we may speak of ‘lived experience’ in the first-person perspective only when the lived ‘correspond[s] to an authentic and intimate contact of the subject with its own experience’ (Depraz 2009: 4). It is intended to understand the dimensions of experience that are more archaic, more carnal than what language can articulate. It is that which I feel rather than that which I can describe as feeling. What the first-person researcher aims at is producing and drawing on the pathic aspect of experience that have not yet been interpreted by language; these are experiences in the way they appear at the pre-noetic level, that is, the form of experience that precedes intellectual activity, intellectual intuition, knowledge, and cognitive engagement.

First-person methods have a lot of potential for identifying the ‘commonalities and isomorphisms between the practices found in different domains for different reasons’ (Depraz et al. 2002: 3). In fact, there is a ‘need for first-person data in the cognitive neurosciences, the need for reduction as a concrete and embodied *praxis* in phenomenology, the need for introspection in cognitive psychology, the need for

the group?’ In this instance, she uses a different way of saying the same, being instigated to do so by the student’s question what she has meant. Only another, different way of saying the same can be done, which therefore merely shifts the signifier without attaining some ‘meaning’. The student could ask ‘what do you mean?’ repeatedly, and all that we would observe is the production of further sentences on the part of the teacher – until the ‘game’ eventually would be ended.

various know-hows in a wide range of psychotherapies, and the needs of various spiritual practices which highlight the “examination of consciousness” and the “practice of effortless effort” (ibid: 3). First-person methods concerned with the description of the ‘authentic and intimate contact of the subject with its own experience’ may be of interest to neuroscientists attempting to correlate brain imaging techniques with the experience of the person, to philosophers accessing primary experiences rather than texts, to psychologists and educators concerned with understanding the subjective contents of mind in the course of learning, to therapists and educators interested in assisting others in dealing with their ailments or in arriving at sound decision making about their lives, and to any one interested in spiritual experiences.

The kinds of approaches I exhibit in this book are aimed at bridging the dichotomous framing of the inevitable dialectical tension of the ideal and the material dimensions of human existence. Those who are firmly grounded in the ideal and idealism – e.g., in constructivist approaches characteristic of I. Kant, J. Piaget, or more recent, radical and social realizations thereof; and ill-conceived and misconceived forms of ‘post-modernism’ or ‘post-structuralism’ – will claim that there is nothing we can add to experience that lies outside of text (constructions), that is, that all experience is always already framed by the particular discourses (ideologies) that we have available. The other extreme formulation would be that it is possible to have experiences that are raw, pure, and inexpressible. The first-person method explicitly acknowledges – in its approach that brings into contact the ideal (discursive, ideological) and the material (embodied, carnal) dimensions of life – a productive tension. Accordingly, anything we can articulate is a manifestation of life, which itself remains inaccessible (Marion 2010). Just as light *in itself* is inaccessible to physicists but manifests (reveals) itself *as wave* or *as particle*, we may study forms of experience that emerge from life itself even though this life in itself is ineffable (e.g., Henry 2000). Just as physicists have found ways of ‘talking about’ light that allow them to anticipate how light will manifest itself and under which conditions it will manifest itself in one or another way, those using first-person methods are concerned with finding descriptions that allow them to anticipate how life (consciousness) will manifest itself under given conditions.³ The point is not to find out how life or cognition *really is* but to arrive at descriptions of the processes that bring the phenomena of interest about. That is, there is an interest in the process of *phenomenalization*, that is, the process by means of which we experience this or that phenomenon. These descriptions are more general than the specific manifestations, because they allow us to anticipate what will be experienced; this exceeds research efforts that merely constitute catalogues of the experiences observed.

³ The Schrödinger formalism or Heisenberg matrix mechanics approach provide mathematical descriptions that predict the outcome of experiments (manifestations). Thus, for example, a light ray that falls through a narrow aperture will give rise to interference patterns, a wave phenomenon, but the interference patterns (in the old days) are recorded by means of photographic plates the blackening of which requires understanding light as a particulate phenomenon. Similarly, light entering a camera is bent in the lenses, a wave phenomenon, but the operation of the light meter inside the camera is a particulate phenomenon.

In the remainder of this book, I exemplify and comment on a praxis of first-person methods with respect to (a) sensing and sense, including vision and seeing, tact and touching, hearing and listening, and tasting and smelling (Part I); (b) mundane experiences, including memory, the process by means of which something becomes significant, crises and suffering as sources of learning, and the relation of thinking and speaking as interdependent processes (Part II); and (c) specific phenomena of ekstastic (i.e., consciously salient) knowing and learning, including problem solving, the relationship of work, primary experience and accounts, and reading (Part III). I conclude with some commentaries on publishing the results of research using first-person methods (Part IV).