Author’s Response
Persevering with the Non-Trivial
Urban Kordes

> Upshot • The response starts with a clarification of certain points that commentators found insufficiently articulated and then goes on to discuss some of the suggested solutions, all of which are seen as welcome improvements to the original proposal. The need for establishing a research environment acknowledging and nurturing the non-trivial character of experience is emphasised.

Who needs whom?

« 1 » The central proposition of the target article is the idea that constructivism and empirical phenomenological research might complement each other. The former provides an epistemological framework, while the latter adds the area of research along with its methodological guidelines.

« 2 » Olga Markić and Toma Štirle question the strength of both sides of the proposition. In the target article, I refer to the pioneers of constructivism in order to demonstrate the high probability that their expectations actually strive towards the establishment of an empirical science (§§6–8). By analysing the overlap of radical constructivism and Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, I further show that (a) they agree in taking an agnostic stance towards the existence of an independent external world, and that (b) the research of experience manifests signs of unavoidable non-triviality, which is precisely where the stronghold of constructivism lies. This does not imply that the only way to continue theoretical research in the area of constructivism is its merger with phenomenology; however, I do hope that I have shown convincingly enough that such a joint venture might benefit both areas and allow a new research project, one that could, in my opinion, prove to be very interesting, if not necessary. Thus, rather than stating an absolute necessity, the claim points out parallels that imply a possible next step – one that might benefit both areas.

« 3 » Štirle does, however, make a very relevant point in §3 when he observes that the implementation of the “official” epistemological foundation could turn against the basic methodological directive of the proposed research project (the reduction of assumptions about the researched phenomenon). I see the proposed move towards the empirical research precisely as a remedy for the danger of rigidity that usually accompanies established schools of thought.

« 4 » Talking about progressing towards the empirical does not imply the exclusion of theoretical examination. One of the (many) challenges for the project of empirical phenomenology lies exactly in finding a point of intersection between reduction as a philosophical examination and reduction as an empirical introspective technique, the big question in this regard being where exactly is this point located and how both sides might inform each other. To use Davood Gozli’s distinction (§§2–5 and §§10f): empirical research has to have an ability to criticize philosophical claims (and vice versa). The remaining question is whether both sides (empirical and theoretical) have the potential to justify each other. Pierre Vermersch and Hanne De Jaegher seem to be optimistic in this respect. Personally, I share their opinion and expect constructivism to be able to make good use of empirical phenomenology as a gateway to empirical research, while at the same time taking advantage of it to re-examine and refresh its own concepts, as pointed out in my target article in §§21, 47.

What is being researched?

« 5 » Pierre Steiner and Gozli wonder what I mean by “experience.” Steiner is not sure whether I aim at a single-barrelled or double-barrelled view (Steiner §4), while Gozli (§5) poses a similar question from the point of view of distinguishing between a “wholesale” view of experience and the “phenomenological” view (i.e., are we interested merely in qualia and essences, or in the intentional character of experience as well?).

« 6 » I support a view of experience that is as “wholesale” as it gets, but – and this is essential – from the perspective of phenomenological reduction of beliefs about what is being experienced. The intentional character is one of experience’s most prominent features, so there can be no doubt that it is an area worth researching (where applicable); this does not, however, mean the research of objects that appear to be the cause of particular experience. Christian Beyer illustrates this point with the following example:

“If one is hallucinating, there is really no object of perception. However, phenomenologically the experience one undergoes is exactly the same as if one were successfully perceiving an external object.” (Beyer 2015)

For Husserl, even a hallucination is intentional, i.e., it is

“an experience ‘as of’ an object […] Therefore, the (adequacy of a) phenomenological description of a perceptual experience should be independent of whether for the experience under investigation there is an object it represents or not.” (ibid)

« 7 » Reporting on experience answers the question “what is it like?” and not “what is it?”. To quote Beyer again,

“Phenomenological description is concerned with those aspects of the noema that remain the same irrespective of whether the experience in question is veridical or not. Thus, our phenomenologist must not employ – he (or she) must ‘bracket’ – his belief in the existence of the perceptual object.” (Beyer 2015)

« 8 » Gozli describes the situation perfectly:

“Subjectivity tends to conceal itself in disclosing the objects of experience, and this includes concealment of a perspective, a set of assumptions and a set of skills. Objects and events appear as they do, not as achievements of subjectivity.” ($2)

What we do when taking up a phenomenological perspective is “bracket” our beliefs about the existence of the object of experience and focus instead on the observation of experience as it presents itself, i.e., on the process that our own subjectivity usually conceals from us.

« 9 » Francisco Varela sees the attitude of reduction as “a sudden, transient suspension of beliefs about what is being examined” (Varela 1996: 336). I disagree with the “sudden.” Rather, I see the adoption of the phenomenological attitude as an intent to pay attention to the “how” of experiencing, and a move away from the natural current of consciousness that tends to conceal this aspect. The gesture of reduction is probably
never entirely complete. What is of utmost importance, however, is the adoption of new research approaches that others, one observes how thoughts rise, are felt, etc.). As stated by Varela (1996) and Natalie Depraz, Varela and Pierre Vermersch (2003), and as emphasised in the target article, this is a gesture that is not very easy to acquire (it is, in a way, "unnatural") and needs to be trained. If we consider deepening the ability to bracket the natural attitude as an asymptotic process, one can expect that the results of research based on such technique can be very diverse: from the observation of "ephemeral" (Gozzi §5) quaia to – after a longer period of in-depth examination – a clearer view of the essential and invariant structures of consciousness.

« 10 » In his commentary, Vermersch points out the self-referential nature of research. Describing the training process, he emphasises the "coupling between the tool and the study," and the importance of reflecting upon it: "[O]ne cannot correctly study subjectivity, without studying the subjectivity deployed in the means of studying subjectivity" (§15; Vermersch 2009).

« 11 » Vermersch's insight highlights the circular interwovenness between the observer and the observed in the study of experience – the characteristics that have been addressed by several other commentators, in most detail by Martin Fultot. He writes about a "trade-off" between the level of training of the researcher and that which she is able to research. It seems that Husserl himself was already struggling with similar issues, which Beyer describes as a "two-horned" dilemma:

« 12 » Beyer quotes Husserl's three possible solutions to this dilemma, from which a version of the first one (recalling experience outside epoché; Beyer 2015) is methodologically analysed in works of Vermersch and Claire Petitmengin under the heading of "practical phenomenology" (Vermersch §3; Vermersch 2009, Petitmengin 2006). A detailed inspection of other proposals for solving the "dilemma" would go beyond the scope of this response, but what is essential (and what is mentioned in commentaries by both De Jaegher and Gozzi) is that it is precisely in handling this circular mutual coupling – which is inevitably encountered in the research of experience – that the constructivist framework is of most use.

« 13 » The circular relation (the virtuous circle) between observation and the observed, which is problematic from the realistic point of view (a dilemma or a trade-off), is expected, understood and fits perfectly in the constructivist framework. As stated in the target article:

« 14 » Fultot translates Husserl's “two-horned” dilemma into a problem of differences in research approaches of a naive and a phenomenology-trained observer. There is little doubt that the adoption of a phenomenological attitude changes experience: if nothing else, it changes the area of experience that is being attended to. As mentioned above, in a constructivist context, we can expect the properties of the observer and the manner of observation to influence the observed. While the difference between the experience of a naive and a trained observer is a good example of such an influence, one has to, in order to understand experience fully as a non-trivial process, realise that the described coupling can be found everywhere. When Fultot says: "[W]e can obtain the skill and inquire into our experience, but it is not the original experience anymore" (§5) the question arises: [W]hat exactly is the "original experience"?

« 15 » If a perfectly naive observer asks about her experience, this very act (an attempt at introspection) will influence her experiential landscape. The resulting answer (a given belief about her "original" experience) depends on the individual punctuation," the observer's anticipation connected to her conceptual framework and the concrete communication situation in which the question is posed (as demonstrated by the theory of participatory sense-making, e.g., De Jaegher 2015).

« 16 » To illustrate the dilemma, Fultot makes use of the analogy of the uncertainty principle. In the target article, my original intention was to refer to quantum mechanics merely as an example of how physics applied trivialisation strategy in order to tackle the elusive characteristics that came with the new research field. By contrast, in Kordes (2015), I offered an analysis of the solutions cognitive science could borrow from quantum mechanics, with one of the most prominent positions being given to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Kordes (2015) also uses the metaphor of the uncertainty principle to describe a trade-off, but not the one between "original" and observed experience. As mentioned above, constructivism does not view the observer's properties influencing results as a trade-off, but rather as a basic feature of the construction of the experiential realm (just as quantum mechanics decided to exchange the term "variable" – denoting a property of the world – with the term "observable" – which denotes a property of the observed). In my view, the trade-off emerging in the research of experience is connected to the necessary selection of the horizon of observation: the belief about what we are experiencing at a given moment is enacted, and in this enactment a given

4] The term "punctuation" attempts to convey the active role of observer in organising the experiential field. It is used here in a sense, similar to that introduced by Benjamin Whorf, later widely used by Gregory Bateson, and Paul Watzlawick, Watzlawick, Janet Bavelas and Don Jackson (1967: 56), of analysing how actors perceive "communicational situation," explaining that "punctuation organizes behavioural events" (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 56). In the case of enaction of experience, punctuation can be seen as individual and situation-specific way of organising experiential elements.
perspective is adopted at the expense of all other possible perspectives.

« 17 » Being aware of the difference between a naive observer of experience and a trained one is no more important than being aware of the difference between any two naive observers – a difference emphasized by Véronique Havelange. (Or even between two temporally diverse points of observation made by the same observer.) I share Havelange’s concern and see no assurances that even the trained observers would inhabit overlapping life-worlds with overlapping “ontological constitutions” (Havelange §5).

The participation in a community of active researchers of experience would, however, explicate the differences in members’ horizons (in the sense of adopted perspective of observation of the experience), which would in turn enable their alignment.

« 18 » The discussion about the non-trivial nature of experience reminds us once again of the sword of Damocles hanging over the proposed research project: the question of whether a research framework, fluid enough to accommodate non-trivial phenomena might lead to intersubjective science. It is the question as to whether empirical research of experience might eventually lead to intra- and inter-subjective asymptotes. Most of the authors from the broader area of phenomenology are confident that this will be the case. Varela (1996), for example, expects phenomenological inquiry to lead to invariants, whereas Vöros (following Zahavi) concretises this aspiration, expecting findings of “essential structures and conditions of possibility of specific types of experience” (Vöros 2014: 98).

« 19 » Discussing the target article’s proposal, Fultot and Gozli abandon the possibility of such an outcome, while Markić and Havelange are cautiously sceptical. As stated in the target article, it is quite possible that this might be an appropriate stance (at this point, such scepticism seems more constructive than presupposing invariants and the possibility of intersubjective verification in advance, which inevitably leads to trivialisation). Nevertheless, I would advise not to give up too quickly; not before thorough empirical research is attempted. Fultot notices that “the naive observer is as much constructing her perceptual realm as the trained phenomenologist” (Fultot §5). We could extrapolate this claim into an expectation that this construction of the perceptual realm is precisely that which – once we manage to identify it inside our experiential field – will represent the intra- and inter-subjective invariant structure.

**Which perspective?**

« 20 » When I speak about empirical phenomenology, I aim specifically at doing first-person empirical research. By this I mean the research of experience as it manifests itself through the gesture of epoché enriched by theoretical epistemological reflection. Usually, the adjective “empirical” refers to the natural sciences. By using it in the phrase “empirical phenomenology,” I emphasize the possibility of data-gathering research, but not within the framework that is based on the presupposition of triviality of the researched phenomenon. I argue that a different kind of empirical research is also possible – one that allows the space for the non-trivial characteristics of the researched phenomenon. I am thus basing the research project not within the framework that presupposes triviality of the research field. In the proposed research project, this means that exploration is based on phenomenal data and does not shy away from the self-referential (and other non-trivial) characteristics associated with the research experience, i.e.:

- the need for an individualized approach to training researchers (elaborated by Vermersch in his commentary, which – I hope – offers at least a partial answer to Stirel); and, even more importantly,
- the need to account for the fact that the results of the research are enacted in an interplay between the observer’s horizon, her expertise in detection and reporting, and – as De Jaegher rightfully remarks – the social interactional context.

« 21 » If the non-trivial nature of experience is acknowledged by resorting to constructivist epistemology, the adoption of the phenomenological attitude ensures that experience is perceived as a primary “ungohbehindable” milieu (De Jaegher quoting Thompson 2004: 394) into which we are existentially thrown without any chance of escape. First-person research explores experience in a way that does not imply the presupposition of an external world. Therefore, statements such as “if experience is confined to what individuals live, perceive and think in their heads” (Steiner §3) are meaningless from the perspective of phenomenological reduction. However, strictly insisting on the first-person perspective by no means implies negation of the existence or the outstanding importance of third-person research areas.

« 22 » Steiner remarks: “I do not see why first-person and second-person empirical studies on consciousness would have a privilege or priority over, let us say, anthropology …” (§7) The question of which perspective (first- or third-person) is more valuable for the understanding of cognition and consciousness is a major issue in cognitive science. So far, a majority seems to prefer third-person studies (because, if nothing else, they are based on a more solid methodological basis), and at this point I do not wish to argue against such a perspective. Undoubtedly, anthropological, psychological and, of course, neurophysiological studies of cognition are of utmost importance.

« 23 » The proposed empirical first-person research project does not share Husserl’s ambition to construct an underlying science that would present a basis for all other sciences but rather a desire to build a strong structure on the first-person side of the explanatory gap. In line with Varela’s neuro-phenomenology proposal, such a structure should be constructed in parallel to its third-person complement.

« 24 » This leaves open the question of the relationship with the opposite pole. Varela – it would appear – nurtured two ideas: continual exchange between both perspectives (as implemented in his project of enactivism) and parallel building from both sides of the explanatory gap with both sides potentially informing each other (both being methodologically completely independent, and neither determining the validation rules for the other). In the proposed project, I argue for the second option. It is important that the first-person research side be constructed independently of the third-person one. This is the only way to enable the acknowledgement and nurturing of the non-trivial character of the research field. Gozli’s reflections on the scope of this kind of research (critique yes, justification no) are very relevant, but perhaps they come a bit too early. In the “butterfly collection stage” of the development (De Jaegher §17) of the
research initiative, we should rigorously examine the collected samples and let the results of the analysis inform the direction and scope of the development.

Towards a community of empirical phenomenological researchers

« 25 » The proposed research project suggests that we should persevere in acknowledging and nurturing non-triviality as well as in maintaining the first-person perspective, with the phenomenological attitude as the basic mode of research. Collaboration in the interpersonal space of a research community, however, calls for a deformation from this attitude. Here, the adoption of the natural attitude is probably necessary. Nevertheless, a non-trivial science must approach collaboration in a way that enables research space for the non-trivial:

- It has to take into account the fact of differences between life-worlds of collaborators (Havelange).
- Entering the interpersonal field plays a major role in the enactment of results (as pointed out by Gozli, Steiner, and especially De Jaegher).

« 26 » In the target article, I call for an open attitude that also includes a continuous self-examination of the researchers’ own positions and agendas, and, even more importantly, presuppositions. Verviers, the inventor of the elicitation interview technique and a veteran in the area of second-person research offers an optimistic vision and a well-adjusted and elaborate system of this kind of work, the use of which I see as one of the building blocks for the proposed research project. Gozli ends his commentary by considering the possibility of re-evaluating the concept of justification, which would include changing the organisation of the scientific community. De Jaegher’s proposal puts this on firmer ground. Her reference to the TESIS initiative (§11) indicates that a similar undertaking might be underway already.

« 27 » I imagine the beginning of the proposed project as involving the establishment of a group of researchers, practicing phenomenological reduction, while at the same time aligning their skills in reporting phenomenological data. The theory of participatory sense-making (De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007) appears to be the ideal contender for understanding the role of the communication situation in the enactment of knowledge. On the other hand, the proposed research community working on the alignment of the horizons of exploring experience seems to be ideal for testing and complementing the theory of participatory sense-making.

« 28 » The social process of the construction of knowledge (and meaning) pointed out by this theory can be seen as an essential component of the proposed project at two levels:

- It would appear that any enaction of knowledge and/or belief (even one that does not occur in the context of interpersonal communication) might be perceived as a back-and-forth communication process. If this assumption is correct, the research community trained in the observation of experience should closely examine the process of enaction of knowledge and the role of the experienced communication situation in this process.
- The second level, where the participatory enaction of knowledge appears to be most prominent, is the enaction of (intersubjective) knowledge in the context of communication within the scientific community. Reflection of this process might be crucial.

« 29 » The ideal research environment would be able to acknowledge the non-trivial nature of the research phenomenon in question and at the same time allow the members to “become conscious differently” (Petranker 2003) as the research progresses. I agree with Gozli’s final remark that such an environment will have to avoid “attempts at eliminating the specificity of subjective viewpoints” but instead rely on “careful (and patient) attention to differences” (§11). This nurturing atmosphere, however, should be framed by relentless reflection and critical examination at every step of the way.

Received: 2 March 2016
Accepted: 5 March 2016

Combined References


