

Daniele Bertini

Experience, language, justification. On *A Manual of Experimental Philosophy* (Dublin: Jeremy Pepyat, 2009) by D.Berman.

Private translation of “Esperienza, linguaggio, giustificazione. Su *A Manual of Experimental Philosophy* di D.Berman”. Please, do not quote without permission.

Contact details:

Daniele Bertini

Via N.Machiavelli, 211

55049 Viareggio (LU)

+39 349 4691471

daniele.bertini.73@me.com

Sometime happens that one of my friends shows an interest for my profession of philosopher. “What are you concerned with? Precisely, what does your work consist in?”, he asks me. In similar cases, I confess, I feel myself quite stupid. I try to explain that: 1) philosophy is not subject to a strict definition, since it is not a knowledge of a peculiar field of reality, insofar whatever argument potentially could be its very object; 2) rather, philosophy is a kind of thinking aiming at considering arguments in support of determinate views, in order to confirm or dismantle them; 3) philosophy cannot, nonetheless, be defined as a *method* or *style of arguing*, because philosophy hasn’t a method universally agreed by all philosophers; 4) this kind of *methodological pluralism* often induces philosophers to work within their own notion of philosophy, excluding all practitioners of alternative forms of the discipline; 5) beyond its equivocal nature, philosophy appears to be uncertain in respect of its results; 6) finally, philosophers working within the same standpoint too do not agree on common results as mathematicians or scientists, conversely, do. Consequently my interlocutor, being partially puzzled, usually tries to understand which interest philosophy can have, in respect to other disciplines treating the same objects in a more reliable manner. I normally agree with her: if philosophy is able to acquire knowledge concerning the same objects of sciences, then philosophy should be able to justify that knowledge too (this does not seem the case: philosophical propositions seem *always* subject to objections, because they can *never* incline reason to the degree of assent that knowledge is expected to promote); otherwise, this kind of discipline is a simple expression of first person beliefs (even when stated with a technical jargon). “Why do not apply to science, then? Or literature?”, my friend says. At that moment, my painful attempts in justifying philosophical knowledge to the non philosopher eyes end into a completely unreasonable claim (so it appears to me): to understand what philosophy is it is necessary *practicing philosophy*, since defining philosophy is to adopt a particular philosophical standpoint (definition of

philosophy is one of the topics treated by philosophy, that is, the object of one of those controversies peculiar to the discipline).

*A Manual of Experimental Philosophy* by David Berman tends an hand to people like me, which feels embarrass in this kind of situation (it is plain that others could have more positive answers than those of mine). It seems to me, indeed, that in few pages the book clearly shows *what is philosophy, how philosophers work and which kind of results philosophers can reach*. Consequently, the book is a kind of epistemological approach to philosophy and its results. Now, I believe necessary to highlight, even if this consideration is devoid of intrinsic philosophical value, that I can't find anything so boring and useless as meta-disciplinary discussions on what a certain discipline should be. Nonetheless, in this case, the reader has in her hands a very original and strongly important work (so that commenting on the book I will be forced to advance those metaphilosophical observations I usually find of so little interest).

That's why. As to originality, first. Despite contemporary philosophers usually choose treatises as default forms for publishing the findings of their researches, the author doesn't make use of this kind of text. Consequently the philosophical inquiry doesn't follow the standard method of clarifying the *status quaestionis*, discussing scholarly literature, introducing notions and principles, arguing for propositions and so on. Indeed, the book is the report of an experimental research. Therefore, it is a scientific communication of the methods adopted during the research and the relevant events emerging from the performances of philosophical experiments.

Berman's idea is that those intuitions by which philosophical analysis faces the ontology of the phenomenal realm, should be liable to be empirically confirmed or falsified, at least in principle. In order to achieve this end, the author has settled four situations able to isolate the constituents of determinate phenomenical occurrence, so that intuitions at work in them could be highlighted. He has then invited some people learned in philosophy, photography, psychology and neurology to form an experimental group. He has played the role of co-ordinator, the participants of experimenters. Phase one of the research has concerned the experimental data-gathering. The co-ordinator has communicated to the experimenters the instructions for performing the experiments. The task of the experimenters has been observing what happens when experience guided by co-ordinator's setting occurs. After the experiment the co-ordinator and the experimenters have exchanged their opinion on the observations (both by emails correspondence and one-to-one meetings). Phase two of the research was made up of debates among participants held in three seminars on the experimental method in philosophy.

The book has then been composed in this way: an introduction presents the aims and method of the inquiry. Four chapters communicating the performances of the experiments (instructions, reports, discussions, commentary) follow. The experiments are: seeing in the dark (developed by F.Galton), interrupting desire (by D.Berman), putting hands into three containers of water at different temperature (by G.Berkeley), visualizing mental images (by the British Empiricists). Sixth chapter consists of two essays. The first sets forth three criticisms to experimental method ("Experimental Philosophy: Some Reservations" by C.McGlynn), the second compares Berman's

approach to experimentalism with the recent rise of an experimental kind of philosophy within analytical philosophy, usually termed *X-Phi* ("Two Types of Experimental Philosophy" by B.Barrington). Finally the last chapter answers McGlynn criticisms, works out the notion of *experimental method in philosophy* presenting an interpretation of traditional approach to philosophy too, draws some inferences from evidences of experiments, displays consequences from these evidences in order to develop a general doctrine of the mind.

I will now pass to the importance of this book. Berman's work had an evident value: rather than theoretically proving that philosophy is this or that, it shows what it is in lively practicing it. Suggesting participants to observe their experience and to account for the elements constituting that, the author indeed highlights the most peculiar feature of the philosophical attitude to life: to question what appears trivial trying to justify its being so and so. History of philosophy, so I believe, is like a wide archive of arguments designed to explain how apparently trivial phenomenal occurrences are framed in a very different manner from those anyone would have *prima facie* supposed. The third experiment described in the book is an enlightening example of this way to proceed. Its purpose is to decide if hotness be or not a property of objects without the mind. Perform these instructions: take three containers, two of which big enough to submerge an hand into them, the last bigger than the others since both hands should be put into it simultaneously. The first container contains hot water, the biggest room temperature water, the last cold water. Now, put an hand into the first container, the other in the third. After a certain period remove your hands from the containers and submerge into the container filled with room temperature water. All philosophers commenting on this experiment agree that in a similar situation an hand should perceive a sensation of hotness, the other of coldness. This agreement would seem strongly intuitive: it is commonly experienced that in passing from an environment to other hotness sensation depends on the temperature difference among the two environments (when outside is really cold, if a person enter into a warm home she feels a sensation of hotness more intense than that she perceives as soon as she gets acclimatized to the new temperature). It is then reasonable to foresee that the experiment shows hotness to be a mental property: being impossible that the same water be both hot and cold for the *Principle of Not Contradiction*, it should be follow that hotness cannot be an objective quality (this conclusion is in my opinion false: suppose the experiment works. It wouldn't be proved that hotness is not a quality of objects exterior to my own body, but that human body is not an adequate tool to measure environmental hotness). Anyway, the experimental evidence of Berman's group denies that the two hands actually feel different degrees of hotness sensations; they feel different degrees of non thermal discomfort (see pages 48-50).

I think philosophy to be a method of observation of trivial events like this in order to show the importance of them in our understanding of experience. Consider one of the recurring images used to exemplify what kind of activity philosophy is: Socrates is walking through Athens' *agorà* asking to the presumed specialists some questions concerning their expertise. It is well known that he *constantly* receives unfair answers. The topic at issue should be clearly faced by the expert but this is never the

case. Driven into corner by the philosophical demand for providing reasons, Socrates' interlocutor generally ends to be defeated: the trivial shows to be not such a way.

Berman illustrates with his manual the claim that experimental inquiry in philosophy is nothing more than the methodical performance of the Socratic philosopher's activity. The *experiences observational method* indeed is the method of philosophy *tout court*. Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Schopenhauer, James, Bergson, all work in the same manner, persuaded that personal experience is *the* direct and immediate way to truth (page 102). The author vindicates this ideal of traditional philosophy explicitly facing the fundamental dogma of contemporary philosophical thought, namely *the belief in the logico-linguistic nature of (being's) truth*. The two essays constituting chapter six show the necessity to reject this dogma. C.McGlynn explains the conceptual difficulties endorsed in practicing philosophy as a kind of experimental observation: *prima facie* first person experience appears so vague and indeterminate to make language unfit to strictly and correctly express it. The use of a common terminology established by experimenters (p. 80), so as of a rigorously detailed one (p. 82), is not able to avoid obscurities in the introspective approach to the phenomenal realm (two persons feeling hotness and saying *I feel a certain degree of warm* are not necessarily experiencing the same sensation; suppose to introduce a graduate ladder of terms: the problem is not solved). Therefore, if experience is not completely conveyable by language, experience will show unfit to achieve the truth, insofar the fundamental dogma of the logico-linguistic nature of truth be held.

B.Barrington makes explicit as the assumption of the transcendence between experience and language implies that Berman's experimentalism is alternative to the analytico-conceptual approach: the *experiences observational method* "questions whether philosophy is ultimately about clarifying the meaning of concepts" (p. 90). The fundamental principle justifying the experimental research in philosophy appears denying *the belief in the logico-linguistic nature of truth*. "Exp  $\Phi$  suggests that unmediated, non linguistic observation of reality is the best way to attain philosophical truth" (*Ibidem*). Berman's work, then, seems to aim at overcoming the mainstream attitude of contemporary philosophy; recovering the methodological attitude usually agreed before the schism of philosophical thought into the two parishes of analytic and continental philosophy. That is to say: Experimentalism provides grounds for a rigorous practice of a radical kind of neo-empiricist philosophy, for which it could be used the label of *experientialism* (p. 91).

In order to understand Berman's answer to these reflections it is necessary to take into consideration the setting of the experimental work. Describing the method, the philosophical experiment is split into five stages: I) the instructions given by the co-ordinator; II) the understanding of the instructions by the experimenter; III) the performance of the experiment; IV) the observation of the experience the experimenter is experiencing; V) the communication of experimental evidences to co-ordinator (pages 8, 13-14, 105 and following). Phases (I) to (III) and (V) are essentially linguistic; conversely, phase (IV) is not. During the observation the experimenter is required, at least as she could, not to make use of propositional

thought (p. 8). In my opinion this means that in observing her experience the experimenter shouldn't experience the phenomenal occurrence by means of verbal overview; rather, she should try *being the thing itself, mingling with it*, showing the *mystical nature* of the relationship between mind and world (p. 109).

It's worth noting that Berman's arguments are shortly drawn, accordingly to the writing style of the whole book. For example: the setting of phase (IV) of the philosophical experiment, so as the discussion of the relation between experiences and the linguistic expressions of them, would seem indeed supposing the ontological claim that *the content of experience is not propositional*. Since this issue is extremely important in order to work out the method on a firm ground, I'm inclined to hold that an explicit and detailed treatment of the topic should be necessary, given the importance and the relevance of the epistemological contemporary *debate on content*. Nonetheless the author doesn't appear to share a similar ontological concern, avoiding a *systematical* inquiry on the principles implicitly required by his experimental attitude.

This choice is not completely without reasons. Since the book is the final report of an experimental research, its main purposes are the communication of results and the discussion of the most important difficulties raised by the actual performance of the experiment. Consequently, it would probably be out of place dwelling on logico-conceptual arguments for pages and pages for the aim of grounding the method (anyway, Berman highlights the preliminary nature of this volume: another larger one will follow. To this further work the present research provides empirical evidences, p. 105).

I now come back to the topic at issue. The method raises the following problem. Suppose, as Berman says, that it is possible to perform phase (IV) freely from language. If this be the case, direct observation would be preceded by a conceptual frame (the set of instructions) and followed by the conceptual expression of its occurrence (communication of the results to the co-ordinator). If the researcher intends to obtain experimental data (the purpose of the research) it is necessary for him to conform them to their linguistic expressions. Therefore, everything that remains without this verbal expression is something completely subjective and personal, scientifically irrelevant. Phase (IV) then acquires relevance insofar it could be verbally performed: as such it shouldn't be prescribed as non linguistic.

Berman's reply to this line of arguing is clear and plain (and, so I think, very traditional). From a conceptual viewpoint things stand exactly how the objection claims. Nonetheless human experience isn't to be simply reduced to its conceptual expression (the author quotes in support of his position platonic skepticism toward the possibility that propositional thought be able to grasp the truth, empiricist renewal of that kind of skepticism, Bergson and James radicalism in looking for the pure experience independently on language). Indeed, I am justified to hold beliefs concerning most of my first person experiences, even if I cannot provide conceptual reasons for these. Although this affirmation could be thought too naïve, at least in this formulation, according to me is actually true. For example, when I'm eating fried mushrooms I'm ordinary justified to hold the belief that *I'm eating something I like*.

Obviously in order to justify this belief I cannot provide different reasons from those my first person experience furnishes me with (namely, the fact that *I'm eating* and *I like what I'm eating*: justification for belief is the whole of pleasant subjective sensations attending my act of eating). Nonetheless I remain absolutely certain that my belief is true: so certain that my belief acquires a normative value (my relation to fried mushrooms depends almost completely on my own personal experience of their taste, of their smell, of the way they look, etc.; knowledge of their properties doesn't play any role here).

Now, the real problem appears the difficulty to account for the possibility that a non linguistic event (the experience) is to be expressed by a linguistic *medium* (transition from phase fourth to fifth). As to this difficulty Berman provides just some hints, suggesting images of the right way to face it. The following considerations, though, seem to me consistent with the kind of phenomena the book focuses on.

First person experience evidently is a subjective event: no linguistic *medium* could ever be able to make other persons feeling what I'm actually experiencing. Conversely, any concept is a public thing: when I say *my home is extended for sixty square metres* I communicate an objective knowledge on a given state of affairs to each person understanding the notions of *home*, *extension* and *square metre*. Differently from these two cases, the description of experiences has an hybrid nature: it is not a first person experience, neither a conceptual event. As to second part of my claim: usually defenders of the claim that the content of experience is conceptual assume that the necessity to give a linguistic expression of experiences in order to share first person experiences with others is the prove that such linguistic expression is the relevant element of the occurrence of a first person experience. According to them conclusion follows: the content of experience is conceptual. Unfortunately their assumption is false. For example: the day after a match among two rugby teams, newspapers publish a report of the game. Usually the report is preceded by a short list of the main events (tries, conversion kicks, drops, sin bins, etc.), which is a schema of the match (each event is reported as occurred at a given time from the referee's start of the match). However, this conceptual description of the match doesn't make equal with the experience of the match (they don't share the same ontological properties: the first is discrete, the second is continuous, the first is objective, the second is subjective, etc.). As to the first part of claim: when I communicate my first person experience describing it to other persons, I cannot ever make other persons to experience *my* first person experience. Nonetheless when I describe a first person experience whoever listens to me adequately *knows* what I'm speaking about, if she has already experienced something like my experience, because she understands that my relation to the object is *more or less* the same she would experience if similar phenomena occur to her. In this case the more I provide details of my first person experience, the more other subjects could be able to understand what that experience presents to me: when I say that *the fried mushrooms I'm eating are tasty, full of smell and crispy* a person listens to me never experiences the taste, the smell and the crisp I'm experiencing, but she understands the kind of experience she could do if she eat some of them. The understanding of the description of experiences rests then on the

fact that each person has experienced similar experiences: in this case the reference of words are not the determination of a given conceptual system, but simply a set of experiences (recalling which any subject understands what others say). Consequently, the search for truth appears like “to convey the experience of experience” (p. 108).

This focus on experience as the fundamental field of philosophical inquiry would apparently make Berman’s experimentalism similar to Husserl’s phenomenology. The absence of the German philosopher is a strange lack in the book. The non linguistic observation of the phenomenal occurrence of an experience in order to highlight its peculiar features yet makes the pair with the phenomenological principle of *bracketing prejudices concerning empirical intuitions*. Both the phenomenological motto “*back to the things themselves*” and the method of *epoché* appear to describe the work of the experimental philosopher.

A reason to explain why a similar lack is present in the book can be provided by the consideration of the context wherein Berman works. Even if he is not an analytic philosopher (the author is a well known historian of modern philosophy and a practitioner of an interdisciplinary kind of psychological philosophy, which is heir of the traditional philosophical attitude in his opinion, pages 7-8, 10-13, 51-55, 101-103) Berman conducts his activities in a philosophical world where this tradition rages almost without opponents. In this world phenomenology is sufficiently rooted and represented by important authors. Nonetheless it remains an extremely minority movement. This fact has maybe inclined Berman to underestimate the relevance of a comparison of his own viewpoint on the role of direct observation of experiences in philosophy with the phenomenological one (my claims is confirmed by the evidence that in proposing a kind of philosophy rooted in tradition, he opposes his experientialism to analytic philosophy but not to the continental one – the same reasons opposing experientialism and logico-conceptual approach result for the opposition of experientialism and philosophical tendencies raging on the Continent too -; implicitly assuming then that analytic philosophical is a kind of contemporary philosophical *koiné*).

Now, this consideration helps in understanding the author’s manner to proceed. Anyway it cannot excuse him from a scientific standpoint. The risk of confusing experimentalism in philosophy with a form of phenomenology is high and it should be avoided: Berman’s and Husserl’s method are radically different.

The issue stands in the following manner. Independently on the actual influence of Kant on Husserl, phenomenology appears throughout working by the use of the fundamental intuition of the critico-transcendental approach to philosophy (so as a wide part of contemporary philosophy, both analytic and continental). The grounding intuition of this (*justification of knowledge is given by a priori reasons which are necessary and universal conditions making those knowledge possible*) alienates to philosophy any kind of inquiry wherein experiences play a normative roles. Indeed, if tradition had conceived that the search for truth should be pursued accounting for the relationship between experiences and intuitions by means of empirical or conceptual analysis of these, transcendentalism denies epistemological citizenship to experiences, so that philosophy ends to consider just intuitions and concepts. The

transcendentalist thinks: no content of experience has an explanatory role in justifying knowledge, since while any knowledge is universal and necessary, no empirical content possesses these features (conceptual objections to the rationality of inductive generalizations are arguments in support of this claim). This means that when an empirical knowledge proves to be universal and necessary this doesn't rest on the properties of the content of this knowledge, but on the general form any experience acquires insofar it is a priori constituted by the pure kinds of intuition and conception. For example, if I say that *any physical body has a mass*, for the transcendentalist I do not refer to a properties of bodies inferred from the evidences I've experienced; rather, I do state that whatever phenomenon *qua* extended is *a priori* quantitative because relationship between mind and objects is constituted in a way that I could not experience anything which be given in a different form. For this reason transcendentalism ceases to be interest to the content of experiences for focusing on the general form of these. Consequently any consideration *a posteriori* on the human nature is usually characterized as psychologism, sociologism, anthropologism (these terms have for the philosopher, at least for the transcendental philosopher, a clear negative denotation).

This foundationalist approach to the issue of justification pursued by the phenomenological philosophy shows the real opposition of husserlian phenomenology and bermanian experientialism. While the first postulates the existence of transcendental regularities framing each experience (first person observation by phenomenologist should warrant for the possibility to grasp these regularities), the second researches each experience (not just that of the researcher) in order to find if those regularities outcrop; that is, the phenomenologist presumes to place himself *before* experience for observing the coming into being of experience, the experimentalist *after* for highlighting its forms.

The experimentalist is forced to this different manner of proceeding by the main findings obtained by her experimental researches. The phenomenologist claims that first person observation warrant the knowledge of the universal and necessary form of experience because she assumes that the belief in the ontological uniformity of subjectivity is true – *Typical Mind Fallacy* -: but this belief is proven false by philosophical experiments (see D.Berman, *Philosophical Counselling for Philosophers: A Confession of Images*, «Philosophical Practice», 3.2, 2008: “the variations in imagery powers shows that there are basic differences in the way that human beings think, and hence that the idea of typical human thinking or typical human mind is a fiction”).

By the way, the variations shown by the experimental evidences are not a *chaos* without rules: rather, human experiences can be classified in fixed typologies (pages 93 and following). Insofar as philosophy of mind wish to account for its object in terms of the notion of experience, experimental data would seem highlighting the necessity to overcome the assumption of the *Typical Mind Fallacy*.

Clearly, this doesn't entail that philosophy should come back to the psychological or sociological approaches so much fashionable in the period from the end of 1800 and the beginning of 1900. Indeed, it is not possible to reduce variations in opinions held



by human beings to the different typological constitutions of these (although Berman appears tempted to think so): the agreement among philosophers of mind on the notion of *typology* shouldn't imply more problems than the plain fact that some human beings show good skill in playing chess while others succeeded in solving riddles. All considered beliefs are propositional attitudes: their meaning and value refer to the truth of the propositions expressed holding them, independently on the fact that some of these are instantiated (should it be better saying *associated*?) by an imaginative experience and some others by a verbal one.

The larger work in progress by Berman will deal with the exposition of a general theory of mind in terms of the evidences achieved by the experimental work. My wish is that this work will keep the expectations generated by the present volume. In this case, it would actually be a substantial contribution to philosophy.