

“[T]he usual opposition of first-person vs. third-person accounts is misleading. It makes us forget that so-called third-person, objective accounts are done by a community of concrete people who are embodied in their social and natural world as much as first-person accounts.” (Varela 1996: 340)

« 12 » What is problematic is that this double-natured embeddedness (in a scientific culture and life-world) of inferring has remained *unreflected* and *not researched* in cognitive science. But if we are to radically embody cognitive science, as Martiny argues (e.g., in §§9, 11, 20, 66), we cannot stop at systematic research of experience or at uncovering correlations with third-person accounts of mental phenomena, the “mild” neurophenomenology promises (see Petitmengin 2017 for the distinction between light or mild and deep or radical neurophenomenology). What is required, is (systematic) reflection upon and research (see, e.g., Kordeš 2016 and Petitmengin 2017) into our own theoretical stance(s), presuppositions and practices (whatever they are: third-, first- or second-person). Namely, theories, research and findings are structured around and constituted by presuppositions, practices and values of the research community and the life-world we are embedded in.

« 13 » If we do not try to understand and research how our own practices, values and viewpoints bear upon the findings and conclusions we draw from our research, and if we do not try to understand how the world we inhabit bears upon the very practices, values and viewpoints we passionately defend, we cannot understand (or claim to be endorsing) the full scope of the circularity that is intrinsic to any research and understanding of the mind (and, possibly of the enactive view of *cognitive science*). As is succinctly put forth by Maurice Merleau-Ponty towards the end of his *Phenomenology of Perception*:

“The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject who is nothing but a project of the world; and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world that it itself projects.” (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 454)

« 14 » The hard question of course is, whether endorsing such a seemingly end-

less circularity of knowledge emergence means that we, in the end, cannot reveal “invariants of the mind” (see also Strle 2016b). For instance, “invariant phenomenological structures, such as that of the embodied nature of cognition” (§50) that Varela (1996) seems to hope for (but see Petitmengin 2017) in his neurophenomenological programme. And, would we not, by presupposing that such invariants do, in fact, “exist to be discovered,” end up behaving in a similar way to the way third-person sciences do?

« 15 » What is more, is it not that cognitive science is, in fact, about “variant entities of the mind” that, to use the language of Ian Hacking (quoted from Brinkmann 2005), change according to the classifications, descriptions and actions pertaining to them? That is, are not “entities” that cognitive science tries to understand actually much more “fluid” and “unstable” than we would want to admit, possibly ever changing according to how we approach them? I am not sure whether the author is willing to endorse such a radical opening up of cognitive science and it would be interesting to hear what he thinks about the possibility of such an endless “looping” of understanding the mind that has been, in somewhat different words, already described by Varela in, for instance, his 1984 article “The Creative Circle: Sketches on the Natural History of Circularity.”

« 16 » Admittedly, even though the intrinsic circularity of trying to understand the mind, the world and their relation is, arguably, unavoidable, and awareness of it possibly necessitates a kind of existential uncertainty, we should not try to escape from it by remaining in the “safe” grounds of third-person sciences or, nowadays, in “mild” neurophenomenology. For, only by allowing uncertainties to remain a part of our life-world, can we, in fact, claim to be opening up cognitive science and, to quote Varela, allow for ethics to be “the very foundation of knowledge, and also its final point” (Varela 1984: 323).

« 17 » All said, I strongly sympathise with Martiny’s call for opening up cognitive science. His take on what it means to be an embodied *cognitive scientist* is, in my view, a welcome illumination and critique of cognitive science.

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## Varela on the Pragmatic Dimension of Phenomenology

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**> Upshot** • I examine Varela’s relationship with Husserl’s phenomenology, highlighting Varela’s acknowledgment of the pragmatic dimension of its phenomenological reduction. I argue that Varela sees, in some developments of phenomenology, a deconstruction of the subject-object duality and an embodied view of the mind. I also highlight the existential dimension of Varela’s radical proposal, which contributes to further opening up and embodying cognitive science.

« 1 » Kristian Martiny’s target article successfully shows how to “open up” and “embody” the cognitive sciences. Drawing on his research on cerebral palsy, Martiny argues that the cognitive scientist must question the objectivist and observational premises that are present in most of the classical cognitive sciences, by working simultaneously with first-, second- and third-person approaches and by the rethinking of the concept of what a laboratory is by, e.g., engaging with subjects in the everyday world and working with audio-visual media and theatre. Martiny argues that these strategies for opening up the cognitive sciences were first introduced by Francisco Varela more than 25 years ago, with his radical proposal of an enactive approach to cognitive science

and the subsequent development of neurophenomenology and the second-person method.

« 2 » I consider Martiny's development of Varela's project effective and fruitful. However, I will focus my commentary on an aspect that is only briefly touched upon by Martiny: the relationship between Varela's proposal and Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, especially in §§17–19. Here, Martiny takes up Varela's opinion that Husserl's phenomenology lacks a pragmatic dimension, without investigating Varela's later comments to the contrary. In addition, I would like to highlight a further, existential dimension of Varela's radical proposal that is not mentioned in Martiny's article, one that contributes to further opening up and embodying cognitive science.

« 3 » According to Martiny, a crucial aspect of Varela's radical proposal consists in *embodying cognition*, in contrast to the disembodied aspects of classical cognitive science. In §17ff., Martiny parallels these disembodied aspects with similar ones that are present in Husserl's phenomenology and that are criticized by Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (VTR) in *The Embodied Mind* (EM; Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991). Notwithstanding the fact that Husserl's phenomenology is an essential source of inspiration for the development of the enactive proposal of EM, VTR argue that, in the end, it was “entirely *theoretical*” and that it “completely lacked any *pragmatic* dimension” (ibid: 19). Martiny stresses this firm judgment, which sees in Husserl's phenomenology an example of “disembodying philosophical practice” (§21). However, I would like to point out the fact that the relationship between Varela and Husserl's phenomenology is more complex than what can be seen in these passages. This is an aspect of Varela's proposal that is easily overlooked but is important in order to understand the development of Varela's view and the enactive approach as originally formulated in EM. The issue is: in what way does phenomenology lack a pragmatic dimension for VTR? In addition: why do VTR contrast phenomenology with the living pragmatics of mindfulness/awareness meditation in the Buddhist tradition?

« 4 » Martiny claims that the criticisms addressed by VTR to Husserl concern not

“what” he described but “how” he did it (§18). VTR acknowledge the fact that, especially in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Husserl 1970), Husserl acknowledged the practical and lived aspects of experience by developing the notion of “life-world,” but he did so in a purely theoretical way, developing a disembodied reflection on the embodiment of the mind. However, if we look at the development of both Varela's and Thompson's philosophies after EM, we become aware that the criticism that they had in mind concerned not only the “how” but also the “what” of the phenomenological analysis of experience. These authors thought that, apart from some elements in Husserl's later works such as the notion of life-world, most of the phenomenological analyses present us with an abstract and disembodied conception of subjectivity. In the words of Thompson:

“In *The Embodied Mind*, we asserted (i) that Husserl was a methodological solipsist (p. 16); (ii) that his theory ignored ‘both the consensual aspect and the direct embodied aspect of experience’ (p. 17); (iii) that his theory of intentionality was a representational theory (p. 68); (iv) that his theory of the life-world was reductionistic and representationalist (that he tried to analyze the life-world ‘into a more fundamental set of constituents’ (p. 117) consisting of belief understood as mental representations (p. 18)); and (v) that his phenomenology was a purely abstract, theoretical project lacking a pragmatic dimension (p. 19, 117).” (Thompson 2007: 413)

Thompson devotes appendix A of his *Mind in Life* (Thompson 2007: 413–416) to explaining in detail his “change of attitude” toward Husserlian phenomenology. Thompson claims that “our earlier interpretation of Husserl was mistaken” (Thompson 2007: 413) and that:

“Husserlian phenomenology has far more resources than we realized for productive cross-fertilization with both the sciences of mind [...] and Buddhist thought [...]. In particular, I now believe (i) that Husserl was not a methodological solipsist; (ii) that he was greatly concerned with the intersubjective and embodied aspects of experience; (iii) that his theory of intentionality was not a representational theory; and (iv) that his

theory of the life-world was not reductionistic and representationalist.” (Thompson 2007: 413f)

« 5 » Thompson details the reasons why he and the other authors of EM were mistaken, admitting that, when they wrote EM, their knowledge of Husserl was limited and that they were misled by Martin Heidegger's “largely uncharitable [...] reading of Husserl” (Thompson 2007: 414) and by Hubert Dreyfus's influential interpretation of Husserl as a “representationalist and proto-cognitivist philosopher” (Thompson 2007: 414).<sup>1</sup>

« 6 » This reappraisal had already been made by Varela, whose reference to Husserl's phenomenology became more and more central after the publication of EM. Martiny (§31) acknowledges that the subsequent development of neurophenomenology (Varela 1996) and the second-person method (Varela & Shear 1999) are essentially based on the phenomenological analysis of experience. In contrast to the hasty dismissal of Husserl's project in EM, considered a “failure” (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991: 19), Varela (1996) considers the method of *neurophenomenology* to be in accordance with the phenomenological method. I would like to stress the fact that this reappraisal concerns both the theoretical *and* pragmatic dimensions of phenomenology. Varela takes the concept of *phenomenological reduction* (PhR, ibid: 336) and places it at the core of his neurophenomenology. We should note that the PhR has been pointed out by Husserl's critics as being responsible for the abstract and disembodied nature of phenomenological investigations. The typical example of this kind of criticism can be found in Heidegger (1992: 109ff.). Varela, on the contrary, sees in the PhR the “how” of the phenomenological inquiry, which has significant theoretical *and* pragmatic implications.

« 7 » Varela likens PhR to mindfulness/awareness meditation (Varela 1996: 331, 346), which constitutes the “living pragmatics” that lies at the basis of the enactive approach of EM. Varela considers the PhR to be a “capacity for becoming aware” (ibid: 341), through which one can shift from the

1 | These claims are reiterated by Thompson in his introduction to the revised edition of EM (Thompson 2016).

natural, ordinary attitude of everyday life to a new, phenomenological attitude that looks at the same ordinary experience in a reflexive way. The method of PhR allows us to investigate the nature and the structural invariants of mental processes, by changing the unexamined experiences of the natural attitude into reflexive ones (ibid: 336). The ensuing phenomenological descriptions constitute an “embodiment’ that incarnates and shapes what we experience” (ibid: 337). So conceived, the method of PhR is very similar to mindfulness/awareness meditation. This is a method for examining experience by becoming present with one’s mind (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991: 23). Through mindfulness/awareness the meditator can interrupt the ordinary state of unmindfulness, cutting the chain of habitual thought patterns and preconceptions (ibid: 27), in order to become acquainted with her experience and to examine the nature of both cognition and the objects of cognition.

« 8 » Varela considers the PhR a skill and a discipline that requires sustained training and that must be cultivated (Varela 1996: 346). He also complains about the lack of pragmatic elaboration of the phenomenological method, whose potentialities for the investigation of the mind are yet to be fully utilized. Martiny (§31ff) shows well the subsequent successful applications of Varela’s proposal made by him and his followers to open up and embody cognitive science. However, I would like to stress the fact that these developments and applications are based on a pragmatic dimension that Varela sees as already present in the phenomenological method.

« 9 » Furthermore, Varela points out some aspects of Husserl’s phenomenology that call into question the idea that it amounts to an abstract and disembodied view of subjectivity. Such a view would be based on a hypostatization of the duality between the cognizing subject and the cognized object. On the contrary, according to Varela,

“[PhR] does not sustain the basic subject-object duality but opens into a field of phenomena where it becomes less and less obvious how to distinguish between subject and object (this is what Husserl called the ‘fundamental correlation’).” (Varela 1996: 339).

« 10 » Varela clearly sees that a certain line of development of Husserl’s phenomenology is the foundation of an embodied view of the mind, which converges with and complements the enactive approach. In Pace Giannotta (2016) I have argued for this convergence and complementarity between Varelian enactivism and Husserlian phenomenology, especially in its genetic development. In particular, the genetic analysis of the intentionality of the mind reveals a primordial process of *co-constitution* of subject and object in reciprocal dependence. This notion converges with that of *co-dependent arising* that is at the heart of the enactive approach of EM (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991: 110ff, 220ff).

« 11 » This way of understanding Husserl’s phenomenological project allows us to disclose its embodied aspect. As argued by Rudolf Bernet (2013), the investigation of the living and lived body as *flesh*, which is developed by phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas and Michel Henry, is first introduced by Husserl himself in his analysis of *bodily consciousness* (especially in Husserl 1989). Claire Petitmengin also highlights the continuity between Varela’s neurophenomenology and Husserl’s genetic phenomenology (Petitmengin 2017: 146), arguing that both investigate the “*process of co-constitution*” (ibid:142) of the “objective and subjective poles [...] within lived experience” (ibid:141).

« 12 » However, having stressed the continuity between the theoretical and pragmatic aspects of both Varela’s proposal and phenomenology, we can detect an important difference between Husserl’s phenomenology, including its most “embodied” developments, and the pragmatics of mindfulness/awareness meditation that plays such an important role in Varela’s view. I would like to refer to it as the *existential dimension* of Varela’s radical proposal. A large part of EM is devoted to describing how the practice of mindfulness/awareness leads the meditator to acknowledge the emptiness of the notion of a substantial, permanent and independent reality of both the self and the world. In its stead, the meditator becomes acquainted with the impermanent nature of all phenomena, both subjective and objective, and their co-dependent origination.

The pragmatics of mindfulness/awareness meditation embodies these theoretical achievements in a lived experience and a practice that is cultivated and shared by a vast community of practitioners. The pragmatic and existential implications of this practice are stressed by VTR: it allows the meditator to progressively free himself from the existential suffering (*dukkha*) that characterizes the human condition on many levels. This condition derives from the “grasping” attitude of the mind, which is naturally inclined to conceive of phenomena as permanent and substantial. In his turn, the meditator sees the groundlessness and the emptiness of the notion of a substantial reality of all phenomena as a source of freedom, joy, and compassion (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991: 122f, 248). VTR point out the profound implications that the pragmatics of mindfulness/awareness meditation has on the life of practitioners and of the transformative potential that it can have on Western societies and culture at large. I would like to highlight this aspect of the enactive approach of EM and of Varela’s proposal, because it is often overlooked in subsequent discussions of “enactivism.” It is an “existential” dimension that addresses the fundamental issue of the meaning of the human condition.<sup>2</sup>

« 13 » Concerning this existential question, Husserl’s phenomenology does not appear on the surface to have much to say. Notwithstanding this, its deconstruction of the subject-object duality is consistent with the notions of selflessness and co-dependent arising. This applies also to some implications of the cognitive sciences that point toward the fragmentation or disunity of the self (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991: 48ff) and of some strands of Western philosophy, such as Hume’s deconstruction of the notion of a substantial self (ibid: 59ff). However, according to VTR, in these views there is also at play a refusal to confront the existential implications of the discovery of selflessness. On the contrary, the pragmatics of mindfulness/awareness meditation

2| The central role of this existential aspect in Varela’s work is highlighted by Bitbol and Elena Antonova (2016: 356), Bitbol (2017: 151), Petitmengin (2017: 146), and Sebastjan Vörös (2017: 150).

consists in facing this discovery in order to find within it the source of existential transformation.

« 14 » At the same time, these existential implications have repercussions on a theoretical level, loosening the “grasping attitude” that is at the basis of the search for an absolute metaphysical ground beyond the all-pervasive impermanence and emptiness of phenomena. Michel Bitbol (2008, 2012) refers to this crucial aspect of Varela’s view as the “Varelian” or “neurophenomenological” stance.<sup>3</sup> This stance leads us to dissolve the so-called “hard problem” of consciousness (Chalmers 1995), by dismantling the foundationalist attitude that gives rise to it (see Bitbol & Antonova 2016: 355, Vörös 2014: 104) and by experiencing the dissolution of the subject-object duality (Pettimengin 2017: 145). In my opinion, this existential stance is a crucial component of Varela’s radical proposal and constitutes a further dimension of its way of embodying and opening up cognitive science.

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3 | The Varelian stance also leads us to highlight the anti-foundationalist and anti-metaphysical orientation of the original enactive approach of *EM*, in contrast to some contemporary forms of “domesticated enactivism” (Vörös, Froese & Riegler 2016: 198) that are characterized by a “*shift towards realism*” (ibid: 194).

## On the Second-Person Method: Considering the Diversity and Modes of Subjects’s Descriptions

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> **Upshot** • Varela’s description of how first-, second- and third-person positions are inserted in a network of social exchange forms a central ground for using a second-person position as a mediator in a phenomenological exploration of lived experiences. Based on Martiny’s arguments that we should expand the notion of the lab, I suggest that the fundamental circularity of the scientist and the first-person experiences investigated needs to be considered in an extended form when involving a second-person method taking place in the conditions of the world of everyday life.

« 1 » Kristian Martiny’s target article about ways to conduct cognitive science does not only present a very welcome overview of Francisco Varela’s proposals on how to open up and develop the way in which cognitive science is performed. He also, in the second part of the article, argues for how to use interviews – or “second-person methods” to generate descriptions of experiences as lived. As my own research is based in the interdisciplinary field(s) of combining short-term ethnographical fieldwork/qualitative research methodologies with phenomenological analysis, in the following, I will primarily focus on outlining interdisciplinary considerations related to the latter part of Martiny’s article. Drawing on the manner in which first-, second- and third-person positions are described as inserted in a network of social exchange – and change – in Varela and Jonathan Shear’s article (1999), I will specifically focus on how the use of the second-person position constructively mediates explorations of the circulation that unfold between first- and third-person descriptions of phe-

nomena. I will argue that if the purpose of a second-person method is to contribute to the promotion of new and sustainable forms of collaboration (as claimed in §1), the fundamental circularity of the scientist and the investigation of lived experience need to be considered in an extended form that:

- involves methodological considerations on how the samples of the “cases” (the subject’s experiences of a phenomenon/class of phenomenon) are selected and how relational conditions of the interview situation are handled;
- clarifies the different communicative modes that can be at play when opening up the lab to involve the lived experiences of subjects in a direct and/or performative way.

« 2 » Firstly, Martiny presents an informative account of how Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Elanor Rosch (VTR) (1991) find it necessary to go back to the particularity of experiences as embodied and lived by the subject. Subsequently, he argues for the necessity of expanding the notion of the lab and involving explorations of phenomena as they unfold in and as part of the world of everyday life. In that sense, Varela’s insistence on including thorough exploration of first-person methodologies in cognitive sciences is aimed at being radically extended by involving the second-person method of interviewing. Pursuing this aim, Martiny, however briefly, makes a reference to Bent Flyvbjerg’s work. Without embarking on a further description of Flyvbjerg’s methodological discussions, it seems fair to ask for considerations of the *strategies of the enquiry* when dealing with “the detailed examination of a single example (or case) of a class of phenomena” (Flyvbjerg 2011: 301). Flyvbjerg very explicitly connects the characteristics of the *design* of such a study to how the different types of design influence the way results of analysis can be interpreted and contribute to general theoretical knowledge. Absolutely central to his work, and of specific relevance for the ambition of combining the second-person method with phenomenological analysis, is that Flyvbjerg presents four different strategies related to the information-oriented selection of cases (all quotes are from Flyvbjerg 2011: 307):