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Towards a Dynamic Ontology

The Philosophical Scope of Micro-phenomenology

Abstract: *Micro-phenomenology, a research method dedicated to the study of lived experience, starts from the observation that a large part of it ordinarily remains invisible, concealed by tensions directed towards its objects. After describing the techniques used by the method to loosen these tensions, the article presents a surprising result: this gesture tends to soften or ‘subtilize’ the structures that characterize our ordinary experience, in particular the separation between a subject pole and an object pole that usually appears essential to it. In other words, the very process of becoming aware makes the dual structure of ordinary experience more subtle. The correlate of this result is that this dual structure is not simply given, but created and sustained from moment to moment by usually unnoticed micro-tensions — a process that micro-phenomenology allows us to investigate. Exploring this double process leads to what we describe as a ‘dynamic’ ontology.*

Keywords: micro-phenomenology; subtilization; structure of experience; subject; object; ontology; microdynamics; non-duality.

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'He evoked the memory of the hour, in this other southern garden, where there was, outside and inside of him, and putting one in tune with the other, a bird call which, in a way, did not break at the frontier of the body and reunited both sides in a single uninterrupted space where only remained, mysteriously protected, a single place, of the purest and most profound awareness.' — R.M. Rilke (1989, 'Instant vécu', *Proses, in Lettres à un jeune poète*, pp. 118–19)

1. Introduction

This article falls within the scope of a research programme whose objective is to describe human experience as precisely and rigorously as possible, in its microdynamics, without starting from *a priori* theories or concepts about experience. The micro-phenomenological interview (Petitmengin, 2006) has been developed in the framework of this research programme, as an empirical method making it possible to become aware of the succession of singular lived moments that constitute an 'experience' and to describe them with great precision. The premise of the method is that lived experience is singular: there is no lived experience 'in general', an experience which is not singular is not an experience (Vermersch, 1997). And only the concrete exploration of singular concrete experiences makes it possible to free ourselves from our preconceptions and theorizations about experience in order to become aware of its actual unfolding.

However, the focus of micro-phenomenological interviews on singular experiences does not mean that the method is exclusively restricted to singularity and limited to collecting individual tokens of experience. On the contrary, beyond the infinitely varying *contents* of singular experiences, the micro-phenomenological analysis method makes it possible to detect generic characteristics which constitute the *structure* of the described experiences. Micro-phenomenology has been used to describe lived experiences and detect experiential structures in various domains, from the anticipation of epileptic seizures (Petitmengin, Navarro and Le Van Quyen, 2007) to the experience of surprise (Depraz, Gyemant and Desmidt, 2017), from mathematical intuition (Van Quynh, 2017) to artistic creation (Julliard, Roy and Botella, 2025), from the experience of pain (Valenzuela Moguillansky, 2013) to that of being affirmed (Branlat *et al.*, 2026), from textile selection in clothing design (Petreca, 2016) to the experience of museum spaces (Weisen, 2023), from the experience of lucid dreaming (Alcara-Sanchez, 2022; Demšar *et al.*, 2025) to psychedelic (Timmermann *et al.*, 2025; Sanders *et al.*, 2025) and

contemplative experience (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2017; Przyrembel and Singer, 2018; Suhr, 2020) — to give a few examples.

Unlike these studies, this article does not focus on a particular type of experience, such as the experience of surprise or the experience of pain, but on the very process that allows us to become aware of them. Based on singular experiences of becoming aware, the article describes this process and the way it unexpectedly leads to the proposal of a particular ontology. The micro-phenomenological method was not created on the basis of this ontology. Nor was the method designed with the objective of highlighting any one ontology. The method was limited to designing devices enabling one to become aware of singular experiences, while freeing oneself as much as possible from preconceptions about them, and to detecting possible structural regularities in these experiences. But surprisingly, repeated application of these devices to different types of experiences has revealed a ‘subtilizing’ effect of the process of becoming aware on experience, the description of which informs us about the fundamental structures of consciousness, and thus leads to this ontology.

In summary, the process of becoming aware starts from the empirical observation that a large part of our experience remains ordinarily unrecognized, invisible under our eyes. This blindness is due to the absorption into objects of experience, created and sustained instant after instant by subtle tensions (which we will return to later). For example, I immediately recognize a smell as the smell of a cup of coffee, a focus that conceals my olfactory experience itself. Becoming aware of this invisible part of experience requires releasing such tensions.

This gesture has the effect of softening, of ‘subtilizing’, the structures that characterize our ordinary experience, in particular the separation between a subject pole and an object pole that seems essential to it. In other words, the process of becoming aware is in itself a process of subtilization of the dual structure of ordinary experience. When we become aware of our experience, we do not find this structure, because the very process of becoming aware dissolves it. The correlate of this observation is that this dual structure is not given, but created and sustained from moment to moment by micro-tensions ordinarily unnoticed, a process that micro-phenomenological descriptive devices allow us to study. This double observation leads to an ontology which we qualify as ‘dynamic’. After detailing in the next part of the article the process of becoming aware and the subtilization

it induces, we will describe in the following part this dynamic ontological vision.

We would also like to underline that the aim of the article is not to fuel a theoretical debate on the fundamental structures of human experience. In particular, a conceptual comparison of the structures resulting from our empirical investigations with the structures highlighted by the classic Husserlian phenomenology would lead to a debate that seems to us to be fruitless.

Both approaches start from a fundamental act. In both cases, this act consists of a disengagement from absorption in the objects of experience. The founding act of the phenomenological process, the *epoché*, consists in suspending the tacit belief in the absolute existence of an objective world independent of our mind, an implicit preconception that underlies our very way of relating to the world, which Husserl calls the 'natural attitude'. This *epoché* is an essentially conceptual act, the suspension of the *belief* in the mind-independent existence of the world. According to Husserl, this act allows direct conceptual access to the essential structures of consciousness, notably to the structure of the 'mind–world' or 'subject–object' dyad. Even if the conceptual structure is sometimes illustrated by an experiential situation, the latter is limited to illustrating the *a priori* structure. Classic phenomenology is therefore an approach of conceptual and *a priori* detection of the structures of consciousness.

The fundamental act that underlies the empirical approach that we are developing and presenting in this article is not a conceptual act, but a quasi-bodily *gesture* of releasing tension towards objects. This gesture has an effect on the structure of experience, in particular on the 'subject–object' dyad. Although it is a concrete gesture, its fulfilment and its description lead to an understanding of the process of constitution and dissolution of this dyad, and therefore to an ontological vision.

The article does not aim to compare the two approaches and their results, but focuses on a meticulous description of the impact of the empirical process of becoming aware on the structure of experience. We defend this description because research has so far provided few means to put it into practice, and it leads to a little explored vision of this aspect of human experience, a vision presented as an hypothesis. The article does not aim to defend a particular method, but to draw the reader's attention to the ontological scope of the very process of becoming aware and the stakes of its experiential investigation. Rather than a theoretical discussion, the article invites adjustments, verifica-

tion, or refutation of this hypothesis by refining the description of the process of becoming aware and the empirical devices that allow it to be aroused, in other words, a programme of empirical research.

2. The Unrecognized Character of Experience and its Origin

Micro-phenomenology was initiated in the 1990s by the neurobiologist Francisco Varela, who argued for the urgency, in order to progress in understanding the human mind, to develop a rigorous practice for describing subjective experience, in the spirit of phenomenology (Varela, 1996). Micro-phenomenology is an adaptation to research of the '*entretien d'explicitation*' initially developed by Pierre Vermersch to collect the implicit know-how of experts, thus essentially focused on the description of actions, and inspired by the phenomenological approach (Vermersch, 1994/2010).

The first attempts to describe lived experiences were marked by a striking discovery, that of the unrecognized nature of experience: our most immediate, most intimate experience is difficult for us to access. To live an experience does not necessarily mean to recognize it, to be fully aware of it. The work carried out by Vermersch and his team first highlighted a lack of awareness of the precise unfolding of our actions (Vermersch, 2000). For example, while writing these lines, I am of course aware that I am writing, but the rapid succession of micro-acts, images and inner discourses, slight emotions, which constitute my writing activity, escape my awareness. Fine-grained descriptions of actions suggested that this lack of awareness is due to the absorption of attention into the objective, the result to be achieved, which obscures the 'how', the microdynamics of actions (Petitmengin, 2006).

The purpose of the interview method is precisely to help interviewees recognize, through 'how' questions, the succession of micro-acts which they are performing without being aware of it. For example, I discover a micro-activity which I was not aware of when I was writing: subtle inner adjustment to get in touch with 'what I want to say', slight tension to 'hold on' to what I want to say until a word or phrase emerges to say it, rapid confrontation of the verbal expression with 'what I want to say' to assess its accuracy, relief of having found the right word, which allows me to take a micro-break in my writing activity, etc. In doing so, I discover a dimension on which my writing process was based, without me necessarily having recognized it: the

‘felt meaning’ of the idea before it was expressed. What does what I want to say look like before I have said it?

Extending from the description of action to all types of phenomena — perceptions, ideation, emotions — micro-phenomenological investigation showed that the absorption into the objective of action is only a variant of the absorption into the object or content of experience, the ‘what’ — to the detriment of the ‘how’. For example, when an idea appears, all interest is usually focused on its content, very little attention is paid to the process that allowed it to emerge (Petitmengin, 2007). When a sound occurs, the immediate reaction is usually to identify the physical object that is the source of the sound: in a split second, I recognize this sound as the song of a blackbird, whose image surreptitiously replaces the sound, the experience of which becomes in some way transparent (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2009). If I experience a feeling of joy, absorbed into the event that is the origin of the joy — the ‘object’ of the joy — I pay very little attention to the feeling of joy itself, its texture, its location, and how it arises, develops, and disappears. This ‘natural’, ‘spontaneous’ movement towards the object to the detriment of my experience of it was described by Husserl as characteristic of the ‘natural attitude’ (for example Husserl, 1983, §27), the reverse movement being very precisely described by him as a passage from the ‘what’ to the ‘how’ (for example Husserl, 1999, §2).

The consequence of this ignorance of experience is the superimposition of representations that make its recognition even more difficult. For example, the absorption into the content of the idea expressed in verbal form, and the ignorance of its genesis, have the effect of reducing our understanding of ideation to a disembodied cognitive mechanism. We represent our ideas as thought processes taking place in a ‘mind’ located in the head and separate from the body (Petitmengin, 2016). Or to take again the example of sound, absorption into the object that produces the sound creates a distance between ‘me’ here and the object there, which contributes to maintaining a representation of space as divided between an ‘inner’ and an ‘outer’ space (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2009).

It is important to note that, in this perspective, it is not the representation that is at the origin of the misconception of experience, even if it reinforces it. The misconception originates in the tension towards the object, which prevents us from recognizing the experience for what it is. The process of becoming aware does not therefore consist in suspending the preconception, for example the interior/exterior

separation, in order to access the experience — how can we suspend a preconception whose very existence we are unaware of? Becoming aware consists on the contrary in releasing the tension towards the object, which by obscuring the process of separation creates a representation of this separation as pre-given.

3. Micro-phenomenological Devices Used to Foster the Loosening of Tensions on Objects of Experience

To elicit the gesture of releasing tensions towards the objective of action or the object of experience, the micro-phenomenological interview uses three main complementary means: evocation, description of the microdynamics of the experience, and the particular relationship created between the interviewer and the interviewee, which are the three keys of the method.

3.1. Evocation

Micro-phenomenological interviews can explore experiences lived in the past (for example the emergence of a new idea), or fresh experiences provoked just before the interview (for example listening to a sound). The interview method consists in helping the interviewee to retrieve this past or just past experience, to ‘evoke’ it, until it becomes more present than the interview situation is.

This process plays an essential role in loosening tensions on objectives or objects. Indeed, in the evocation state, the goal has already been reached, the object has already been identified. This allows interviewees to relax their attention on them more easily than in the initial experience. For example, when exploring in the evocation state the microgenesis of an idea, you can relax your absorption into its content, because this content has already emerged, you cannot lose it. When exploring in evocation your experience of listening to a sound, you do not have to identify its source, because it is something that you have already done at the initial moment. This allows you to relax your attention on this source to become aware of unnoticed dimensions of the experience. Moreover, evocation enables you to revisit the experience several times, while becoming aware of more and more subtle elements each time.

Making an effort to remember might, however, introduce a new tension that would once again conceal unrecognized dimensions. But in fact evocation is based on a form of recollection which is involuntary:² the memory cannot be targeted voluntarily and directly, but it springs up unexpectedly, unpredictably, beyond the control of the interviewees, thanks to a sensory trigger — of which Proust's 'madeleine' (Proust, 1913/1922) is a famous example. All that it is possible to do is to encourage the spontaneous emergence of the memory by rediscovering the spatio-temporal and sensory context of the experience, until the past situation becomes more vivid than the interview situation.

The interview technique therefore consists in freeing the interviewee from the objective of remembering by arousing a receptive, passive attention, through interventions such as: 'I suggest, if you agree, that you take the time to let the moment when you [heard the sound] come back.' The words 'let the moment come back' are (contrary to 'retrieve this moment') an invitation to relax any effort. The words 'take the time to' authorize an absence of immediate response, and therefore the time of silence, of latency necessary for the emergence of the memory. They divert the interviewee from the temptation to fill this vacuum hastily with something known and not lived, with the expression of knowledge *about* the experience which would once again be superimposed on it. The slowing down of the verbal flow and the presence of moments of silence are then signs that the interviewee is actually in this receptive, passive position.

While the natural, ordinary attitude is an attitude of tension towards the realization of an objective or the recognition of an object, evocation, through its very structure, elicits the relaxation of the projective, intentional structure of temporality. It has the power to relax, to soften the protentions that ordinarily create and maintain the 'thread' of time, to undo in some way the pro-tentional structure of time consciousness (Husserl, 2003). The possibility offered by the micro-phenomenological interview to experience this mode of temporality often arouses in interviewees a feeling of relief, even wonder. As Gusdorf, a French philosopher and specialist of concrete memory, wrote, evocation

² This process is based on 'passive memory' (Husserl, 2001): we are always in the process of memorizing passively what we live, in the form of traces or 'retentions' which can be 'awakened' later through an equally involuntary process.

provides experience with ‘a whole new value of enchantment and liberation’ (Gusdorf, 1950/1993, p. 133).

3.2. Exploring the microdynamics of experience

The release of tensions towards goals or objects, elicited by evocation, allows the microdynamics of experience to emerge into awareness. But conversely, the invitation to explore these microdynamics contributes considerably to disengaging from goals or objects and loosening focused attention.

In the interview, this exploration is guided by a non-intrusive accompaniment, which does not aim to arouse the reorientation of a focused, effortful, and inquisitive attention on the different moments of experience, but to foster their spontaneous unfolding into awareness, in the state of receptivity and attentional openness characteristic of evocation. This technique of ‘mild’ unfolding has been applied not only to experiences that visibly unfold over time, but to experiences ordinarily considered as instantaneous, allowing the recognition of usually invisible microgeneses. Among them we can cite the microgenesis of an insight (Petitmengin-Peugeot, 1999), of a brief auditory experience (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2009), of an illusion (Valenzuela Moguillansky, O’Regan and Petitmengin, 2013), of an encounter (Ollagnier-Beldame and Coupé, 2019), or of an episode of lucid dreaming (Demšar *et al.*, forthcoming).

For example, let us imagine that, in the context of a project on the experience of natural spaces, I invite you to choose a moment when you first discovered a new landscape, and to explore this moment through a micro-phenomenological interview. It is probable that you would first describe the elements of this landscape (for example ‘a stream, three big oaks’). The main part of the interview would then consist in helping you release the fixation of your attention on these visual elements by becoming aware of the microdynamics of this encounter, from the very first contact until the moment you were able to recognize and perhaps name objects: what happened in the meantime? To explore this gap, I would ask non-inductive questions such as: ‘Take your time to let the moment when you first discovered this landscape come back. What happens first?’, ‘When this happens, what happens?’, ‘What happens right after?’ The same type of question would then be reiterated for each moment, and then for each sub-moment, in order to allow the experience to unfold with increasingly fine diachronic granularity. The typical micro-phenomenological

questions used to elicit this unfolding — ‘When you do this, what do you do?’, ‘When you feel this, what do you feel?’ — are designed to be very focused, helping the interviewee stabilize her attention on a subtle micro-event or feeling which is emerging into awareness in order to refine its description, while being completely ‘content-free’, non-inductive. Another type of questioning involves collecting a ‘backwards’ description of this encounter, from the recognition of objects until the very first moment of the encounter. Whether the microdynamics are explored forwards or backwards, their unfolding has the effect of fostering the disinvestment from objects.

Another micro-phenomenological means sometimes used to induce the release of tension towards objects consists in stopping the micro-genetic process, in the spirit of Heinz Werner’s *Aktualgenese* method (Werner, 1956). For example, the experiential protocol used in Julliard, Roy and Botella (2025) consists in gently interrupting an artist while painting a canvas and conducting an interview immediately afterwards to help her become aware of what she was experiencing just before the interruption.

3.3. *The relationship with the interviewer*

The evocation process and the exploration of the microdynamics of experience are thus complementary means to release tensions on objects. The relationship created during the interview is essential in this process. Indeed, by agreeing to perform this gesture of releasing, the interviewee gives up the control she (thinks she) has over her experience, takes the risk of discovering a dimension of herself that she does not know yet, and even of feeling her sense of self waver. In order to enter this state of vulnerability and to do this intimate work with the help of the interviewer, it is essential that she feels the latter is totally present, attentive, and benevolent. The relationship of trust that is created is thus one of the keystones of the interview (Heimann *et al.*, 2023). The break of eye contact with the interviewer, while being a sign of evocation, is a clue that the interviewee feels confident enough to agree to leave the present situation in order to immerse herself in a past situation.

Micro-phenomenological interviews have an iterative structure consisting in helping the subject repeatedly evoke the experience to be described, while guiding her attention towards a progressively finer diachronic and synchronic mesh. The resulting description is very fine-grained, with the description of just a few seconds of experience

usually requiring about one hour of interview. Throughout the interview, specific means are used, on the one hand to guarantee the reliability of the descriptions produced, such as the great care taken by the interviewer to avoid any inductive verbal, para-verbal, or non-verbal intervention, and on the other hand to verify this reliability, such as the attention paid to verbal, para-verbal, and non-verbal clues of evocation. The consistency of the description, despite the iterative structure of the interview, is a strong complementary criterion of its authenticity.

4. The Gesture of Loosening and its Impact on the Structure of Experience

After describing the micro-phenomenological devices used to foster the gesture of loosening tensions on objects of experience, we are going to examine this gesture itself and its impact on the structure of experience.

4.1. Sources

To examine this gesture and its impact, we relied on existing corpora of descriptions collected in the context of previously published micro-phenomenological studies, mainly devoted to the emergence of thought and the emergence of perception. These descriptions were collected using the interview devices presented in the previous section of this article, within the framework of protocols that are described in each publication. These descriptions were all analysed using the micro-phenomenological analysis method (Petitmengin, Remillieux and Valenzuela Moguillansky, 2018; Valenzuela Moguillansky and Vásquez-Rosati, 2019).

The key stages of the investigation which, on the basis of these micro-phenomenological descriptions and their analysis, led us to the hypothesis that we present in this article are the following. The first stage was the highlighting, within a generic dynamic structure of the experience associated with the appearance of an intuition (innovative idea, psychotherapeutic insight, or artistic intuition), of a gesture of 'letting go' — opening of the attentional span and descent into the body — conducive to the perception of subtle feelings characteristic of a nascent intuition (Petitmengin-Peugeot, 1999). The collection of descriptions of the process of verbal expression (Petitmengin, 2007) as well as of the process of emergence of a scientific idea (Petitmengin, 2016) enabled us to bring together descriptions of a gesture close to

the previous one of liberation from fixation on the content of the idea or words, and of the transmodal ‘felt meaning’ to which it gives access. A subsequent study devoted to the experience of listening to a sound enabled us to discover that three different attentional dispositions — depending on whether the attention is directed towards the object which is at the origin of the sound, the sound itself, considered independently from its source, or the bodily ‘felt’ sound — results in three different structures of the experiential space (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2009). This study notably enabled us to collect descriptions of the gesture of releasing fixation on the object, of the softening of the border between interior and exterior space it induces, and of the transmodal characteristics of the felt sound. In the same vein, in the context of a study on tactile experience, the recognition of two attentional modes, the ‘touching’ and the ‘being touched’ modes, allowed us to move from a ‘flat’ inventory of descriptive categories of tactile experience to the recognition of two multidimensional experiential spaces with contrasting architectures (Petitmengin, Remillieux and Valenzuela Moguillansky, 2018) induced by these modes. More recent studies have allowed us to focus specifically on the transition from the ‘touching’ mode to the ‘being touched’ mode, by asking subjects to perform this gesture and describe it (Petitmengin, 2021a). These studies also gave us insight into the gesture of radical release achieved in meditative practice.

The present study, on the basis of the descriptions and analyses carried out in the previous studies, and still using the micro-phenomenological analysis method, consists in identifying the generic characteristics of the gesture of releasing absorption into the object of experience and the generic structure of the induced experiential space.

4.2. The gesture of loosening tensions on objects

A very ordinary experience can give a taste of the gesture of releasing tensions towards objects of experience. It consists of actively exploring an object (such as a stone or a piece of fabric) by touch, in order to recognize it and identify its tactile properties, and then stopping this exploration, which amounts to letting yourself ‘be touched’ by the object. This shift can be experienced in any sensory modality, for example in the auditory modality when I stop actively seeking to identify the source or characteristics of a sound (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2009). What does this subtle, but nevertheless very precise, gesture consist of?

According to the numerous descriptions we have collected,³ this gesture consists first of all in remaining still, in stopping the micro-movements that we usually make without our knowledge to locate and explore an object, whatever its modality. This immobilization is accompanied by a demobilization of the area usually perceived as the source of attention: the head, and in particular the gaze — even in experiences that do not seem to be visual. This disinvestment of the gaze has been repeatedly described to us as fostered by a subtle ‘stepping back’, a tiny adjustment towards the back of the skull:

‘I’m going to put my consciousness a lot more towards the back of the skull. (...) I think it’s a kind of sliding process. I’m sliding backwards. The whole body is involved in this adjustment... It’s tiny, very subtle.’ (Judee) (Petitmengin-Peugeot, 1999)

This adjustment causes densification of the area at the back of the head and back of the body:

‘It’s as if I demobilize the gaze, I demobilize this area. I feel the back of my skull more, it becomes denser. And at the same time, quickly, this density goes down over the back of the whole body, along the spine.’ (Lise) (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2017)

The demobilization of the gaze and ‘descent’ into the body is accompanied by a widening of attention, which from focused, becomes panoramic, peripheral, diffuse.

‘As soon as I have done it (this sliding backwards), it’s the feeling that if I open my eyes, I will have a much wider vision, it will be less sharp, less directed towards what is immediately in front of me. It’s as if by placing myself at the back, I have a vision that extends until the corner of my eyes, it’s much more peripheral.’ (Judee) (Petitmengin-Peugeot, 1999)

This widening is accompanied by a movement of welcoming: the movement of stretching towards the object gives way to an attitude of ‘letting come’, of receptivity, allowing one to be impregnated by the phenomenon, like when breathing a perfume. It has been described as follows:

³ Strikingly, although to our knowledge no study had previously been devoted to describing this gesture, and there is no pre-established vocabulary to describe it, participants with varied profiles in terms of age, gender, and cultural and professional background described it to us with similar words, which allowed us to identify a sketch of a generic structure for this gesture.

‘Suddenly, I felt what it was actually to see. To see isn’t casting your gaze towards something, projecting it, holding it out, but really it’s letting the thing imprint itself in you. You are completely passive, and you let the color, the landscape, come to you. You aren’t going to look for it, you’re going to gather it in. You’re there and you receive it. And you have the impression that the color or the landscape imprints, imprints inside you.’ (Monique) (Petitmengin, 2007)

This open and receptive attention does not mobilize a particular sense — vision, hearing — but the whole body, or rather a ‘transmodal’ dimension where the distinction between the senses dissipates.

‘It is another way of looking, of apprehending, than visual. It is no longer only visual, it is something vaster than the only visual. It is as if I was looking with the back of my body. (...) It is a gaze that is a kind of *feeling* of the space.’ (Lise) (Petitmengin, 2021a)

The gesture of releasing tension towards objects does not therefore consist in changing the direction of attention, in reorienting it from the outside to the inside, in ‘converting’ it, but in loosening its intentionality. This gesture calls into question the very concept of attention, which is usually represented as characterized by a source, a target, and a direction, and of which intentionality seems constitutive.

4.3. The subtilization of the word

According to the testimonies we have collected over time, the gesture of releasing tensions towards objects has an impact on lived space, whose ordinary structure softens. Indeed, concomitantly, the object pole, the subject pole, and the boundary between the two lose their solidity. On the object side, objects perceived as solid fade away to make way for subtle transmodal feelings which are difficult to locate in an interior or exterior space. The loss of solidity of the object has the effect of diluting the subject’s ‘point of view’ on the world, which induces a weakening of the feeling of identity.

4.3.1. What the gesture of releasing does to the object

Loss of solidity and sensory modality.

Suppose that, during a walk in the countryside, a bend in the path reveals a new landscape, and that instead of scrutinizing objects over there, I let colours, shapes, movements, sounds, etc. come to me. What I perceive of the landscape is no longer solid objects, but a world of

fleeting impressions of rhythms, contrasts of densities and intensities, in other words its ‘ambience’.⁴ Unlike the objects of the landscape, which are seen, heard, touched, or smelled, these feelings do not fall within a specific sensory modality. The vocabulary used to describe their ‘texture’ indeed calls simultaneously on several sensory registers: the visual register (we speak of shape, brightness, shadow, blur), the kinaesthetic or tactile register (we speak of vibration, pulsation, pressure, density, weight, texture, temperature), the auditory register (we speak of echo, resonance, half-tones), sometimes even the olfactory or gustatory registers. These subtle feelings are thus strictly speaking neither visual nor kinaesthetic, tactile, or auditory sensations. However, they have specific precise sensory *submodalities* such as intensity, direction, density, and rhythm, etc. which have the characteristic of being ‘transmodal’, that is to say transposable from one sensory modality to another.⁵ In these subtle feelings, the border usually perceived between the different sensory registers dissolves somehow. It is as if the five senses condensed themselves in it.

The divestment of the content of ideas, by disclosing their microgenesis, highlights this transmodal dimension at the very source of thoughts (Petitmengin, 2007; 2016). Before an idea is expressed in verbal, mathematical, pictorial, or musical form, it emerges as a direction, an inclination, a rhythm, a ‘line of force’, which unfolds in a moving ‘landscape’ endowed with a ‘texture’ which is entirely specific to this idea. This microgenesis is punctuated by subtle transmodal clues informing the thinker about the unfolding of the idea: feeling of sudden ‘cohesion’ between elements previously scattered, of ‘encounter’ between several paths, of ‘completeness’, of ‘penetration’, of filling a ‘gap’. Even when the idea has been expressed, this gestural and vibrant dimension remains, beneath the words it seems to constitute the very dimension of meaning. It is in this transmodal dimension that our intersubjective relationships also seem to be played

⁴ Bruce Bégout’s remarkable book entitled *Le concept d’ambiance (The Concept of Ambiance)* is entirely devoted to the description of this subtle experience, beyond the split between subject and object, interior and exterior, physical and psychic, revealed during ‘pauses of jectivity’, ‘temporary suspensions of intentionality’ (Bégout, 2020, p. 279).

⁵ Unlike, for example, temperature which is specific to touch, and colour which is specific to vision, intensity may indeed characterize a visual, auditory, as well as a tactile sensation. Transmodal feelings belong to the ‘common sensibles’ already identified by Plato (*Théétète*, 185a–186a) and Aristotle (*De l’âme* II 6, 418a12 and 418a18–20).

out.⁶ Beneath the verbal and visual interactions that usually absorb us, the particular ‘atmosphere’ that emerges from the other person, the very particular way she approaches you, moves, the variations in the intensity of her gaze, the rhythm and melody of her voice, to which you unwittingly tune in, form the very texture of the encounter. Our language has no word to designate this pervasive transmodal and quivering dimension of experience, where the separation between ‘mind’ and ‘body’ seems to vanish. As Merleau-Ponty wrote, ‘What we call flesh has no name in any philosophy’ (1984, p. 193).

Loss of location.

While softening the boundary between sensory modalities and between ‘body’ and ‘mind’, releasing tensions towards objects has the effect of softening the border usually felt between an ‘inner’ and an ‘outer’ space, which makes transmodal feelings difficult to locate.⁷ For example, while the elements of the landscape are located in the space over there, at a distance from myself whose ‘point of view’ is located here, transmodal feelings are difficult to situate in an interior or exterior space, it is as if these feelings were dissolving the boundary between the landscape and myself. Here is a description of this experience:

‘In such moments, there are no longer any barriers between myself and things. It is as though I no longer had a skin. For example, that poplar over there, it is as though something was radiating from it, a quivering, a diffuse light, a very quiet and very fine sound, which comes right up to me and touches me in an indescribable way. Everything becomes incredibly touching. It is as though the space between things became denser, more luminous, more vibrant, and as though there was nothing else left except this space.’ (Lara) (Petitmengin, 2007)

In this experience, the vibrations of light, the ebb and flow of water, the texture of trees and stones, the breath of the wind, etc. do not break at the border of the skin, but unite inside and outside into one

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- ⁶ For example, loosening her absorption into the vision of a smile on her brother’s face enabled Salma to become aware of its microgenesis from a ‘felt’ smile, coming from very deep inside, which had something ‘sunny’, a quasi-visual quality, but also a tactile quality of ‘lightness’ (interview of Salma Sharmouby conducted by Maysara Kamal in the context of the ‘Hearts opening’ project; see Suhr, in preparation).
- ⁷ The recognition of the dissolution of the interior/exterior separation in transmodal experience could renew the epistemological question, recurring since the discovery of ‘common sensibles’, of knowing if these common properties are properties of the senses or of external objects (a debate related in Marks, 1978).

uninterrupted space. The bird song is not over there in the throat of the bird, it is not here in me either, but resonates in a space where the boundary between here and there dissipates.

‘This vibration abolishes the limits of my body. There is no interior and exterior, there is only this vibration. (...) It is as though the exterior became denser and the interior more vibrant, less dense, and gradually the texture becomes identical. (Lara) (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2009)

When the ‘touching’ mode is completely released, it is not my skin which touches the bark of the tree, but only one uninterrupted space remains where the tree has vanished.

In this experience, there is no tree. I feel the tree, but I would not call it a tree, it is a subtle quality of bright existence, which I can sense.⁸

In the same way, the specific ‘landscape’ that characterizes an idea cannot be situated inside or outside. Although the thinker may sometimes feel immersed in it and move within it (Petitmengin, 2016), this quivering landscape is perceived neither outside of her nor within her, but as a space where the boundary between outside and inside vanishes.

Whatever the experience, this uninterrupted space is characterized by a kind of transparency, luminosity, which has even been qualified as ‘incandescence’ (Vion-Dury *et al.*, 2013), and the phenomena that unfold there by a kind of liveliness, of clarity and freshness.

4.3.2. *What the gesture of releasing does to the subject*

Dilution of the perceptual position.

In this process of softening of the solidity of the object and of the border between inside and outside, the ‘perceptual position’ of the subject, usually lived as a dense ‘point of view’ localized at the level of the eyes, becomes more difficult to locate in space, it diffuses, it dilutes. The following excerpts are attempts to describe the experience of no longer ‘facing’ things, but rather being ‘enveloped’ in sensations.

‘There is more a sense of being enveloped by visual images, rather than having them in front of me.’ (Anna) (Petitmengin *et al.*, 2017)

‘I feel like I am in a *bath* of sensations.’ (Dan) (*ibid.*)

⁸ Excerpt from an unpublished interview done in the context of the 3rd Mind & Life ENCECON workshop in Austria (10–14 September 2025).

Weakening of the feeling of identity.

This loss of location and density of the ‘point of view’ is associated with a weakening of the feeling of individual identity, the feeling of being a solid ‘I’ or ‘self’, which becomes lighter. This weakening is marked by the dilution of the ‘feeling of ownership’, the feeling that this experience is *mine*. It is as if the phenomenon was detaching itself from its ‘mine-ness’. For example, the feeling that this idea is *my* idea fades. Interviewees do not say ‘I have an idea’, or even ‘an idea is coming to *me*’, but: ‘*there is an idea*’ (Petitmengin, 2007).

In these descriptions another dimension of the feeling of identity, the ‘sense of agency’, that is ‘the sense that I am the one who is generating the experience’, weakens. The release of tension towards the object being characterized by a gesture of putting oneself into receptivity, of passive waiting for the phenomenon to occur, means that the latter is often perceived as emerging by itself, without the intervention of an acting subject. Such a sense of passivity, of lack of control, is described in many interviews: ‘I hear my mouth asking the question’, ‘My hands have their own will’, ‘It happens to me’, ‘It does not depend on me’, ‘It is given to me’. ‘This is so to speak *contemplating the own* development of this idea’ (Arnold) (Petitmengin-Peugeot, 1999). This loss of control of the acting subject is also reflected in the interviews by an increase in the number of descriptions of *events* to the detriment of descriptions of *acts*.⁹

Feeling of liberation.

In the course of a micro-phenomenological interview, the dilution of the sense of identity may sometimes be perceived as frightening. But according to most testimonies, it is associated with a feeling of relief and liberation. The resolution of tensions, by fluidifying and dis-obstructing lived space, provides interviewees with a sense of relief. While losing their points of reference, they paradoxically experience the feeling of retrieving their unity, their entirety, their integrity, of feeling safe and protected. Releasing tensions towards objects ‘over there’ in order to stay ‘here’, as close as possible, instead of narrowing space, allows it to expand widely. In this fluid space that opens up, a

⁹ We can note that the descriptions we have collected of the weakening and disappearance of the characteristics of the sense of identity support Millière’s hypothesis that none of them is necessary for consciousness, and moreover that some states of consciousness lack all of them (Millière, 2020).

kind of gentleness, warmth, tenderness arises, recognized as the hallmark of the interview situation (Heimann *et al.*, 2023).

5. Towards a Dynamic Ontology

5.1. *Becoming aware as a process of subtilization¹⁰ of experience*

We can summarize these findings as follows: 1) Becoming aware of experience requires releasing tensions on objects. 2) This releasing has the effect of softening or ‘subtilizing’ experience, in particular the separation between a subject pole and an object pole. In other words, the very process of becoming aware has the effect of subtilizing experience. It would be even more accurate to speak of one and the same process: the very gesture which enables one to become aware subtilizes experience. The very process of becoming aware of experience *is* structurally a process of ‘subtilization’, of ‘de-substantialization’ of experience.

To fully understand this process, let us examine again the act of releasing tensions on objects. This act is certainly not an intellectual, conceptual operation of suspension of the belief in the mind-independent existence of the world. But it is a *gesture* of disinvestment of the object, of stepping back, which operates in a non-conceptual dimension of experience, and has the effect of dissolving the mind/world structure.

This gesture does not consist either of redirecting a focused attention emanating from a solid point of view from a layer of substantial and coarse phenomena towards a layer of more subtle and elusive phenomena, layers which would be co-existent. But the very gesture of releasing tension on the object softens its solidity, its density, makes it lighter, weakening in the same movement the point of view of the subject. It is not a matter of redirecting attention from a

¹⁰ This little-used word, which designates the action of making a solid or dense substance more fluid or volatile (*Oxford English Dictionary*), seems to us the most appropriate to name the softening process triggered by becoming aware. We believe it is better suited than the terms ‘refinement’, which designates the action of making a substance finer by ridding it of its impurities, or ‘distillation’, an operation of extraction of the volatile parts of compound substances. More generally, we believe with Gendlin (1962) that the paucity of our vocabulary to describe lived experience is not inherent to our language, but that it is possible and indeed necessary to enrich it, either by using little-used words or by creating new ones, to designate characteristics of experience for which we have no term.

solid level to a subtle level which would pre-exist this reorientation, but rather the very act of loosening has the power of subtilizing the world.

We lack words to describe this process of softening of the solidity of experience, and the terms we have do not help us to think it. For example, the term ‘unveiling’¹¹ of experience is inappropriate and subtly misleading. Indeed, it suggests that the gesture of loosening the grasp on objects unveils a more subtle level of usually hidden phenomena. But this gesture does not unveil a more subtle level, where ordinary separations such as the subject–object separation are blurred. It attenuates, subtilizes these separations. The expression ‘becoming aware of’ is also misleading because it surreptitiously introduces the idea of something that one becomes aware of, which was already there, and of a subject who discovers it, whose identity or substantiality is not affected by this uncovering — while the releasing of the tension towards the object weakens the existence of the object as well as of the subject.¹² The vocabulary of ‘introspection’ is not appropriate either (Bitbol and Petitmengin, 2016). The gesture of releasing tension towards objects indeed does not consist of ‘turning one’s eye’ inward, because not only does this gesture suppose demobilizing the gaze, but it has the effect of dissolving the distinction between inside and outside. When the active exploration of an object stops, the boundary between inner and outer space disappears: how could one reorient attention inside?¹³

In summary, the release of tension is not an attentional, cognitive, ‘mental’ act, but a quasi-bodily gesture of un-grasping, of relaxation of effort, endowed with the power of weakening or softening the very texture and structure of the world. ‘Becoming aware’ is not a cognitive process of reorientation of attention, but an ontological process

¹¹ I found this term helpful, however, in designing the structure of a previous article (Petitmengin, 2021a).

¹² When this process of desubstantialization is pushed to its extreme, as is the case (with much training) in some meditative practices, one cannot say that ‘I’ become aware of something, because at the moment when awareness occurs, ‘I’ and the thing have disappeared.

¹³ This is why in the process of becoming aware described in Depraz, Varela and Vermersch (2003, chapter 1.2) we do not retain the phase of ‘conversion of the direction of attention from the exterior world towards the interior world’. We only keep a phase of releasing the tension towards the object — whether this object is perceived as exterior, like a sound, or interior, like a thought.

of subtilization of being, which consists in reversing the ordinary process of solidification of the world.

5.2. The process of solidification of experience

Micro-phenomenology allows us to refine our understanding of the process of subtilization by exploring its correlate, the gesture of tension, which has so far been little explored due to lack of suitable methods. Our investigations suggest the following: in the same way that the gesture of release does not consist in reorienting attention from a coarse level of experience to a subtle level, but rather subtilizes experience, softening the separation between the subject and object poles, the gesture of tension does not consist in diverting attention from a subtle level to focus it on a coarse level, but solidifies experience, creating and sustaining a separation between the two poles. This gesture does not veil experience but solidifies, petrifies it just as frost transforms water into ice.

In an attempt to test and refine this hypothesis, we began to identify, based on concrete experiences, the essential parameters of objectivity — the structural characteristics that make it possible to experience an ‘ob-ject’ (Petitmengin, 2017). Then we conducted micro-phenomenological interviews to identify and describe possible micro-gestures intended to elicit the corresponding experiences. We thus collected, in all sensory modalities, the description of a micro-gesture of ‘distancing’, usually unnoticed, intended to elicit and sustain the experience of distality — the perception of objects as being ‘out there’, distinct from me here (Petitmengin, 2021a). In the tactile modality, this gesture seems to involve tiny movements of the fingers, required to create and maintain a boundary between the touching body and the object being touched, without which this boundary vanishes.¹⁴

‘To create a separation, I have to make tiny movements with my fingers... that I barely feel. I feel that if I don’t make small movements,

¹⁴ An interesting (both phenomenological and experimental) study of the genesis of the experience of distality (Lenay and Sebbah, 2001), relying on a minimal visual-to-tactile substitution device, also highlights usually invisible micro-movements that elicit and sustain the experience of distality moment to moment, an experience that ceases immediately when these movements stop. This study is reminiscent of the finding that vision is made possible by ‘micro-saccades’ of the ocular muscles — the perceived scene vanishing within a few seconds in the case of immobilization of the image on the retina (Ditchburn, 1973; Steinman and Levinson, 1990).

there is no object, I don't feel the object outside me. There has to be an exploration.' (Lise) (Petitmengin, 2021a)

These tiny movements are accompanied by a tension at the level of the gaze:

'There is a very slight tension at the level of the gaze, as if I see or try to see something. I feel a very small tension in the eyes, the eyeballs, maybe a very small frown, probably it can't be seen from the outside.' (Lise) (*ibid.*)

These subtle visual and kinaesthetic micro-movements seem to elicit the emergence and stabilization of the perception at the level of the skin of a border between an 'inner' space and an 'outer' space, contributing to separating a subject and an object pole.¹⁵ A similar distancing process, supported by the gaze, seems to occur when a bodily feeling emerges. A subtle effort is described to 'go towards' the feeling, a micro-movement which is 'led by the gaze':

'It's like I was watching the feeling, it is my eyes that lead me toward [the feeling in] my hands. It's like I was going to fetch my hands with my vision.' (Michel) (Petitmengin, 2021a)

This micro-tension has the effect of distancing the feeling, initially experienced as deprived of location, and situating it on a kind of bodily 'map' inseparable from a 'point of view' located at eye level.

Such descriptions suggest that lived space is not given, but constantly created and sustained by micro-gestures of 'spatial protension', as time is by micro-gestures of temporal protension. But it is possible to relax these gestures, to stop keeping objects at a distance. As a micro-phenomenologist discovered with surprise: 'I don't need to push the trees away.'¹⁶

Micro-phenomenological descriptions enabled us to refine our inventory of these micro-gestures and the corresponding parameters of objectivity, by distinguishing, for example, micro-gestures of

¹⁵ Ataria, Dor-Ziderman and Berkovich-Ohana (2015) describe 'The SB (sense of boundaries) default state', characterized by a clear separation between 'inside and 'outside', as closely associated with a sense of location, namely 'our ability to locate other objects in space in relation to our own position as a center of reference'. And this sense of location is described as generated by the level of sensory activity: 'The more sense I use, the more exact the boundaries are.'

¹⁶ Excerpt from an unpublished self-interview by Anne Klein after a walk in the forest (Workshop on 'Micro-gestures', Monceaux sur Dordogne, 10–15 March 2024).

distinction, of distancing, and of localization, respectively allowing us to perceive an object as distinct, distant, and localized.

To go further in the description of these micro-gestures, a promising possibility would be to design ‘experiential protocols’ which, by unfolding objectifying processes in time, or on the contrary by interrupting them,¹⁷ would make them more easily accessible and describable through micro-phenomenological interviews. A third possibility would be to investigate the unexpected ‘freezing’ of the objectifying process by external events, for example in the experience of surprise, and the microdynamics of reappearance of the subject–object distinction that follows — as Michel Bitbol (2017) proposes.

5.3. Hypothesis of a dynamic ontology

The recognition of these subtilizing and solidifying gestures results in a dynamic ontology, that we can describe as follows: the structure that seems the most essential to experience, the separation between a subject pole and an object pole, is not pre-existing, but created instant after instant by micro-tensions.¹⁸ When these tensions soften, this apparently essential structure becomes more fragile and may even vanish.

In other words, we do not have a pre-given world, made of different layers of more or less subtle phenomena, and different attentional modes giving us access to these different layers. Instead micro-gestures solidify or subtilize the world, creating different experiential architectures. In this perspective, instead of two separate poles, subject and object, we have rather one dynamic spectrum of increasing solidity or density of the experience of the subject–object couple.

Since it is from these micro-gestures that the very distinction between subject and object arises, they cannot be considered either as a subjective process or as an objective process. Micro-phenomenology, in setting itself the task of studying them, therefore adopts neither a subjectivist or idealist position, nor an objectivist or realist

¹⁷ In the spirit of Werner’s *Aktualgenese* method (Werner, 1956), or of the experiments conducted by the psychiatrist Arthur Deikman (Loy, 1988).

¹⁸ As developed in Petitmengin (2017), this dynamic ontology is a verification in lived experience of the theory of enaction according to which ‘cognition is not the representation of a pre-given world by a pre-given mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs’ (Varela, Thompson and Rosch, 1991, p. 9).

perspective, but a perspective that lies below the scission between subject and object. It is not because it starts from an analysis of lived experience that it remains locked in subjectivity.

Let us add that in this dynamic approach, awareness of experience inducing a subtilization of reality, and blindness to experience a solidification of reality, the border ordinarily drawn in philosophy between epistemology and ontology is attenuated or even disappears. This is why we use the term ‘onto-logy’ in the broadest sense, as the study of ‘what is there’, independently of the scission between being and knowing, of which micro-phenomenological devices allow us to investigate the emergence and vanishing, thus undertaking a ‘dynamic ontology’.

5.4. Avenues for further investigation and refinement

As stated in the introduction of this article, this dynamic ontology is an hypothesis emerging from a collection of empirical descriptions, which can therefore be verified, contested, or refined through other empirical investigations. Several avenues of investigation are emerging.

The descriptions we provided of the particular experience consisting in becoming aware of one’s experience show that it is not a random event, but a definite process that can be reproduced, thanks to specific devices. Other research teams can therefore verify and refine descriptions of this process, and test its subtilizing effect on the structure of experience, either by reproducing the studies we have conducted — for example, of the microgenesis of a thought, of an auditory or tactile experience — or by studying other types of experiences. The description we have outlined of the process of solidification of experience could also be verified and refined. Such studies could be carried out using micro-phenomenological devices, or by refining these devices, or by designing different devices to elicit variations of this gesture. It would be essential as well to verify whether the processes of solidification and subtilization of experience have a generic intercultural structure, or if there are variants.

Another avenue is to compare the process of becoming aware and its resulting ontology in different traditions of empirical investigation of experience. In this vein, Petitmengin (2021a) attempts to compare this process, the devices for eliciting it, and the effect of this gesture, in micro-phenomenological practice and in Buddhist meditative practice. Both practices start from the observation that our lived

experience escapes us. We do not see it as it is, we need training to recognize what is there, invisible under our eyes. In the Buddhist tradition, this lack of recognition (Sanskrit *avidyā*, Tibetan *marigpa*) is considered as the root of suffering. Usually, when a phenomenon emerges, its essence is not recognized. From an initial tiny split, a succession of tensions rigidifies the separation between a grasping subject (*grāhaka*) and a grasped object (*grāhya*), creating and sustaining the dual world we usually consider as real. Liberation from suffering comes through refined meditation practices aimed at noticing and releasing these solidifying tensions and ultimately recognizing the essence of phenomena.

Our attempt to compare meditative and micro-phenomenological practices highlights striking affinities in the ‘skilful means’ used in both practices to release tensions on objects. In particular, it shows a kinship between the disinvestment of the content of thoughts and the slowing down of their microgenesis induced by *śamatha* — a founding practice in the Buddhist tradition aiming at stabilizing attention — and the exploration of the microdynamics of phenomena through the micro-phenomenological interview. Both have the effect, by fostering the release of tensions towards objects, of lightening, aerating, and fluidifying experience. Moreover, in the rarefied experiential landscape fostered by *śamatha*, the practice of *vipaśyanā*, by enabling practitioners to refine their awareness of the game of emergence, stiffening and vanishing of the subject–object couple¹⁹ and to release the micro-tensions it brings into play, has also strong affinities with the exploration of the microgenesis of phenomena and its subtilizing effect through micro-phenomenological interviews.

The comparison of the two practices, however, shows a significant difference between them in the amplitude of the gesture of releasing tension towards objects. While in micro-phenomenological practice this gesture is partial and temporary, in meditative practice it is radical and definitive. In micro-phenomenology, the gesture of loosening tensions towards objects has been compared to a shift between the ‘touching’ and the ‘being touched by’ mode. However, this shift still implies the expectation of *something*, a ‘filling in’, and what is

¹⁹ This awareness may be fostered by questions of the meditation teacher (typical of ‘analytical *vipaśyanā*’), to which the practitioner is invited to answer not intellectually but from her experience, such as: ‘Where do thoughts come from?’, ‘Where do they disappear?’, ‘Where are they located?’, ‘What are they made of?’

received can in turn be taken as an object. For example, stopping ‘listening out’ to the source of a sound to let the sound come to you does not prevent you from apprehending the felt sound as a subtle object of investigation and description. Many micro-phenomenological investigations take place at this subtle level of the ‘felt’ dimension of experience (for example Petitmengin, 2007). On the contrary in meditative practice, even the subtle tension consisting in letting oneself ‘be touched by’, in making oneself receptive, dissolves. Ultimate meditation instructions of the Dzogchen and Mahāmūdra traditions of Tibetan Buddhism prescribe to stop everything, to do nothing. When a phenomenon occurs, do not pursue it, do not elaborate it, leave it ‘without support’.²⁰ This radical loosening has been compared to the movement of a bale of straw when you cut the tie that binds it (Wangchug Dorje, 2009).²¹ It is the ‘exhaustion’ of any effort down to the most subtle.²²

The process of release thus pushed to its end results in a radical subtilization of experience, in particular of the subject–object structure.²³ When any tension is released, vision sees, hearing hears, without a seeing subject and a seen object, a hearing subject and a heard object being constituted. Only a pure self-cognizant quality, a pure lucidity (Sanskrit *svasamvedana*, Tibetan *rang rig*) remains, completely devoid of relation to a knowing subject and to a known object. All phenomena, whether ordinarily perceived as subjective or objective, are recognized as made of the same luminous transparency: ‘Relax evenly and look at the way of self-appearance of the perceiver. In this way, realize its nature to be mere lack of true existence, clarity appearance, emptiness without distinctions, and self-clarity having no basis’ (Longchen Rabjam, 2014, p. 210).²⁴

²⁰ A ‘pith instruction’ given in Jigme Lingpa’s commentary on Longchenpa’s *Seven-fold Mind Training* (Dahl, 2016), quoted in (Klein, 2023, p. 68).

²¹ Wangchug Dorje (1556–1603) was an important master of Tibetan Buddhism of the Karma Kagyu school. He is especially known for his teachings on Mahamudra, a central meditation practice in Tibetan Buddhism.

²² The subtle processes involved in ‘effortless’ Dzogchen contemplative practices are described in Germano (2025).

²³ ‘Body–mind duality, as well as body–space duality, softens and disappears’ (Klein, 2025, p. 8).

²⁴ Longchen Rabjam, also called Longchenpa (1308–1364), was a great Tibetan Buddhist master of the Nyingmapa school. He is especially known for systematizing the teachings of Dzogchen (‘Great Perfection’), a central contemplative tradition in Tibetan Buddhism.

The question of the ontological status of the dual reality we ordinary consider as solid — conventional or ‘virtual’ reality (*samvṛti satya*), as opposed to non-dual ultimate reality (*paramārtha satya*) — has been the subject of heated debates between Buddhist schools over centuries. Describing these debates would go far beyond the scope of this article. However, we note that, since early Buddhism (Johansson, 1979), the ontological vision that emerges from meditative practice is a dynamic one. On the one hand, phenomena are not perceived as belonging to different orders of reality, subjective or objective, but as phenomena of the same nature situated on one scale or spectrum of decreasing (or increasing) density or solidity of the subject–object couple. On the other hand, this spectrum is not given but dynamically created and maintained instant after instant by micro-tensions, each degree of density of the couple, as well as its temporal persistence, being proportional to the intensity of the tensions that generate it. As these tensions ease, the world of appearances, first comparable to a drawing engraved in stone, becomes similar to a drawing created by a stick in the water, then finally to a drawing created by a stick in the air — to use a metaphor which illustrates this dynamics in a particularly illuminating way (Wangchug Dorje, 2009).

This dynamic vision, which the different philosophical schools of Buddhism have refined considerably over 25 centuries on the basis of meditative practice, while providing an initial confirmation of micro-phenomenological results, seems to us extremely precious for understanding, questioning, and refining the dynamic ontology which is beginning to emerge from the young micro-phenomenological practice.

Importantly, in the unobstructed space created by Buddhist practice, and to some extent in the protected space created by micro-phenomenological interviews, a kind of sweetness, tenderness arises. According to Buddhist texts, the subtilization of lived space is inseparable from love, like the two wings of a bird. Another line of research would therefore consist in exploring empirically the impact of the processes of solidification and softening of experience on the ethical level: what is their effect on our relationships with other human and non-human beings? More generally, a better understanding of the process of becoming aware and its subtilizing effects, and a refinement of the devices for eliciting it, could have a huge impact in

many areas of human existence, notably in the educational, clinical, therapeutic, and ecological²⁵ domains.

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²⁵ Petitmengin (2021b) is a preliminary step in this direction.

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