

## La réduction phénoménologique à l'écoute de l'expérience : Réponse à François-David Sebbah

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### I. INTRODUCTION

#### Setting the tone

From the outset I want to thank Francois Sebbah for his insightful comments and interest in my work. This makes it really possible to engage further the dialogue in the contemporary encounter between the realm of cognitive science and phenomenology, a ground of interest to both of us.

#### Main difference: the uncompromising demand for an integrated view of phenomena

This reply is a plea for an integrated view of phenomena, the inquiry into a well-articulated stance that does not suffer from the apparent exclusion or claimed incompatibility between the transcendental and the empirical realms.

« Nous allons donc tenter de manifester le point où, nous en faisons l'hypothèse, l'exigence de réduction phénoménologique et l'exigence de naturalisation scientifique s'excluent réciproquement - pour ainsi dire "malgré tout" » (p.170).

My work in this domain has been entirely devoted to building the (necessary) case for a double perspective view of what is given, a perspective able to provide, as in a fused image, an in-depth view of phenomena. Sebbah makes of this tension the grounds for *exclusion*. But far from territorial claims, I believe we are confronted here with a creative modification on both sides of the dance. I concur with him that this new perspective is only possible on the basis of a re-examination of "reduction", of what it is and what we accomplish through reduction. It is precisely here that the heart of our disagreement lies, as will become clear below.

#### Clarifying misunderstandings

In order to have a productive exchange I have divided my response into two parts. First, I wish to provide clarifications of some important issues that are raised by Sebbah, and which are, in my eyes, in need of clarification stemming from misunderstandings. This kind of clarification is, of course, useful, but does not move us along. In a second part I retake the basic inquiry by examining the central question of our respective views on reduction; I will claim that Sebbah shies away just before delving into the heart of the matter.

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\* Note de la rédaction. Nous remercions Mme Amy Cohen-Varela pour la permission de publier le manuscrit de la réponse de Francisco Varela à François-David Sebbah (cf. pp. 169-188 de ce numéro). Le manuscrit original de Francisco Varela est reproduit pratiquement tel quel, seules quelques coquilles manifestes ont été corrigées.

## II. POINTS OF CLARIFICATION

### 1. *Views on naturalization*

#### **“Naturalization” means a generative passage**

It is first of all necessary to clarify the terms of the opposition Sebbah sets up between the so-called naturalization and the demands of phenomenological reduction (and ultimately the weight of the transcendental). Sebbah consistently interprets the term “naturalization” as a one-directional or hierarchical term: how phenomenology may contribute to set scientific “truth” once again in its solid right. For Sebbah the relation between cognitive science and phenomenology is more like that of an “analogie instructive” (p.4). Moreover:

« [...] pour [Merleau-Ponty] c’est en dernière instance le niveau philosophique qui vaut et signifie, qui dévoile ; pour [Varela], en dernière instance, c’est à la perspective scientifique que revient cette tâche. Il y a donc pour ainsi dire une hiérarchisation inverse dans l’ordre sinon de la fondation, du moins de la validation, entre les deux pratiques » (p.176).

#### **The route for a circulation between science and phenomenology has to be built progressively**

Part of the problem here is that throughout most of his commentary on my approach to the encounter cognitive science/phenomenology, Sebbah analyzes primarily *L’Inscription corporelle de l’esprit* (1991), the first of a series of publications that explore these issues much further. Perhaps a number of misunderstandings could have been avoided by taking into account other publications where some main issues are dealt with at more length in what I have dubbed for ease of use the *neuropsychology* research program (Varela, 1996; 1999a, 1999b). True, in his last few pages Sebbah does address a recent article that deals directly with the naturalization/phenomenology articulation (Varela, 1997), but he does not seem to draw the full consequences of what is claimed. For him the various developments in my approach introduced since *L’Inscription corporelle de l’esprit*

« ne remet pas fondamentalement en cause le diagnostic que nous avons essayé d’établir ci-dessus à propos de l’usage varélien de la phénoménologie » (p.184).

#### **Reciprocity does not mean a one-sided naturalization in the sole service of science**

Yet the line of inquiry I am seeking is precisely to *avoid* the instrumentalization of one discipline over the other. Sebbah has clearly seen this as the intellectual standard being pursued:

« Enfin, le rapport entre phénoménologie et sciences cognitives est clairement précisé comme rapport de « contraintes mutuelles », qui exclut toute absorption de l’une par l’autre. » (p.186).

since

« Varela s’attache à décrire une forme de *généralité* qui permettrait de *circuler* depuis le niveau neuronal jusqu’au niveau du vécu de conscience » (p.186).

In spite of this stated goal, and in spite of a detailed study on temporality where this generative strategy is *actually* deployed (Varela, 1999a, b), Sebbah

remains undaunted. Is this because of some settled assumption associated to the word "naturalization"? This polysemous term has, *inter alia*, the basic sense of including the phenomena disclosed by the social practice of science, but not in any sense being the "ground" of a foundational truth as Sebbah wants to believe (and this takes us straight to the question of the level of reduction, as I show below). He claims that the scientific side of the generative passage, dominated by a formal reliance on non-linear dynamics, inevitably gives the upper hand to science, the realm of the already constituted, in detriment to the constitutive pole, that is, the transcendental. Sebbah does not carry his analysis on this any further. But between the lines it is possible to detect part of his motivation by his views on science that we need to address.

## 2. Views on science

### **A defensive tone comes from a fear of objectivism, but this is a caricature**

In Sebbah's text there is an almost fearful perception of the heavy-handedness of science and its possible appropriation of the phenomenological task. He is, of course, not totally unfounded in his suspicion since the imperialistic stance of XIXth century science is still well and alive as the claim for the final ground of truth. Yet at the same time we must all be sensitive to the substantial transformations from the inside of science which has made it put into question its own objectivist stance. Sebbah speaks of science almost always as synonym of "objectivism", or else "le parcours varélien reste naturaliste ou positiviste" (p.180). This equivalence "naturaliste = positiviste" precisely reveals the *a priori* assumptions Sebbah has about what science is and does.

### **There is such a thing as a "reduction" of science via its own practice**

Yet science - or we should better say scientific research - is a living body, it moves and transforms itself with an ever-receding horizon. What is perhaps paradoxical in the received view of science is that it entirely misses how research itself takes us beyond what is at hand into an ever-growing question. In other words, there is an immanent reductive tendency in the sense that

« que le sens soit précisément cela même qui sans cesse s'annonce comme excès ou débordement depuis le donné. » (p. 182).

What animates my inquiry is precisely this constitutive incompleteness, but Sebbah will not have it.

« Non, ce qui est suggéré ici lorsqu'on considère ce qui est pour ainsi dire *in extremis* refusé par Varela, c'est l'idée beaucoup plus dérangement que c'est au plus intime d'elle-même que la perspective scientifique - en l'occurrence ici celle des sciences cognitives - est ouverte sur ce qui la déborde. Cette idée est dérangement parce qu'elle met en cause l'autonomie de la pratique scientifique, c'est-à-dire sa prétention à épuiser le réel comme tel. Or cette prétention semble bien constitutive de la science comme telle. » (p.182).

This paragraph contains in a capsule the prejudices that lead Sebbah to be able to attempt the jump beyond a fear of objectivism into the dialectical nature between phenomenology and science.

### **Science will transform itself in this encounter**

And yet science has already transformed itself in its cultural ecology a few times with radical consequences. The most famous one and still making its waves was the dramatic break with a traditional ontology introduced by Quantum Mechanics and more recently non-linear emergent systems - important philosophical challenges we cannot touch on further here.

### **The study of mind/consciousness is a unique singularity, not science “as usual”**

But for my purpose I claim that the scientific study of mind has also led science into an inevitable transformation due to the very singularity of the scientific study of mind: the mirror image of finding the constitutive side of the mental in the "positive" ground of biology. This singularity generates a unique oxymoronic tension in cognitive science, reflected in the enormous complexity of the current debate concerning consciousness. In brief, the dimensions most proper to phenomenological inquiry come in, in spite of the “positivistic” tendencies in science. We are not dealing with science “as usual”, even if there was such a thing as usual. As Sebbah himself says:

« L'hors-réduction se définit comme la conscience se méconnaissant elle-même. On ne peut par définition prétendre séparer l'être de la conscience de la réduction » (p.176).

That is to say: once we are engaged in a scientific study of consciousness, the domain of consciousness itself leads the way to its own reduction, since present in it as an always open possibility. It is here that the inevitable circulation starts, at this point of spark, at this “passage du nord-ouest”.

The bottom line for cognitive science is that there is, implicit in its own dynamics, a self-induced drive for change in the taking into account further precisely what phenomenological reduction opens up. Nobody will deny that taking into serious account first-person accounts such as phenomenological descriptions is not a challenge for science: it is an *earthquake* that puts its own traditional self-image and self-understanding into question (cf. Varela, 1996). Unless we take into account these possibilities implicit in current scientific study of mind, and allow the mutual enlightenment between cognitive science and phenomenology, in the reciprocity of “naturalization” as I am propounding, then the dialogue stops short at a diagnosis of exclusion. That would be missing the point.

### **Phenomenology will also be transformed**

Conversely, the modern usage of phenomenology is various and multifarious: it has come to touch on varied horizons, from theology to science, from anthropology to mathematics. Never before has phenomenology been subject to such an intense re-invention due to *its* own intrinsic dynamics. In the mutual enlightenment between these two disciplines, taking into account the detailed empirical level can move phenomenology away from its historical conditioning of having to fight *against* the solidity of objectivism and the foundational tendencies in science. A century has not passed in vain: Husserl confronted a scientific mentality that drove him to demarcate his newly found discipline which is long since gone. (For an extensive discussion of the changes in this scientific context since Husserl see Roy et al., 1999). It is thus time to create a new frame to work together in consort, a trend already beginning to take body from multiple sources in Europe, Japan and USA (for

examples for this non-defensive integrative turn, see e.g. Gallagher, 1998; Zahavi, 1999).

### III. POINTS OF INQUIRY

#### 1. Views on reduction

##### We agree on a main point

After the preceding clarifications of some important issues which constitute the background to Sebbah's remarks, let me now turn to the core question: the demands that follow the proper accomplishment of phenomenological reduction. It is clear that he puts his finger on the right core issue when he states that the acid test for a project of mutual circulation, as I am proposing, is whether the gesture that inaugurates phenomenology *finds its own place*, rather than being bypassed or simply flattened - as Sebbah claims is the case.

##### Missing the point in the mindfulness tradition

It is already interesting, in this sense, to notice that Sebbah has not fully grasped the role of the tradition of mindfulness and the *practice* of samatha-vispana in *L'Inscription corporelle de l'esprit*. We mobilized there this foreign or "comparative" domain in order to bring in a distant mirror of what seems to me to be still missing in western phenomenology: the strong explicit emphasis on the hands-on approach to the *practice* of reduction as an explicit know-how, always to be re-done and renewed in explicit learning paths. Thus when Sebbah says that "Varela n'emprunte pas la voie de la réduction" one wonders what he could possibly mean since not only it is taken (via the distant mirror) but deployed in its pragmatics -- which neither Merleau-Ponty nor Sebbah do. As *L'Inscription corporelle de l'esprit* shows, the mindfulness tradition is nothing but a sustained learning and stabilization of reduction in all its manifestations. Interestingly, Sebbah does not see this:

« Il faut préciser ici que le thème de la réduction phénoménologique était bien sollicité dès *L'inscription corporelle de l'esprit*, mais uniquement sur son versant existentiel, c'est-à-dire en voisinage avec la pratique bouddhiste de l'attention/vigilance. Pour Varela, la réduction est tout entière *mise entre parenthèse*, c'est-à-dire décelement d'un autre mode de présence que la présence substantielle, et jamais *reconduction*, retour amont vers la source de la donation de la phénoménalité » (p.185).

But it so happens to be that the samatha-vipassana tradition as precisely "la source de la donation" has been examined and charted extensively by the repeated use of reduction in its full form - on its own terms and for its own concerns of course. (For more discussion of "eastern" tradition in the interface with phenomenology see Loy, 1989; Laycock, 1994, Yamaguchi, 1998; Varela, 1999c).

##### *Sebbah remains vague regarding pragmatics*

As I said above, in recent work I have attempted a deployment of reduction on purely phenomenological terms, but this does seem to make a significant difference for Sebbah for whom it is

« Significative de ce point de vue est la description que F. Varela donne de la réduction phénoménologique, arrêtée à mi-chemin par

rapport à la réduction telle que nous la concevons : strictement comprise comme mise entre parenthèse de la croyance au monde » (p.185).

What is then this reduction that Sebbah claims is being mutilated? He cites no source in the above statement so I am hard put to see why does he claim I stop "à mi-chemin". But this is the crucial point: Sebbah suggests (but does not make apparent) what is the reduction he is referring to. At best we are told that the way "telle que nous la concevons" (and in this case the pronoun stands out as an interesting maker of a territory, does it not?) is something like this:

« la question est de savoir si accepter l'exigence de réduction, ce n'est pas accepter que le sens soit précisément cela même qui sans cesse s'annonce comme excès ou débordement depuis le donné. » (p. 182).

Is this the base from which we can say the gesture of reduction has or has not been accomplished in its completeness? Is Sebbah not stretching the phenomenological "tribal" language into the creation of an "inner" meaning that everybody "knows" what we are talking about?

I propose we proceed otherwise. It is incumbent upon the philosopher to give precedence to the role claimed for reduction by leaving behind the trails of how the gesture is to be accomplished, and the explicit pragmatics of its accomplishment. In fact, Varela (1996) and more explicitly Depraz, Varela and Vermersch (1999) provide a more explicit view of reduction as praxis, a core structural dynamics that emerges not only from within phenomenology, but from phenomenological psychology and mindfulness meditation alike.

In its core form, we claim, reduction (or in this context more specifically *epochè*) as a gesture is always complemented by a resulting intuitive evidence or understanding, a minimal self-sufficient cycle. In other words, *epochè* and intuitive evidence call to each other, the first finds its natural accomplishment in the intuitive evidence of a strong internal obviousness, prepared for and qualified by a gradual process of filling-in which is endowed with a characteristic property of suspension at the heart of *reduction*. Let us now elaborate three principal phases we are proposing to describe the unfolding of *epochè*:

**A.** A phase of *suspension* of habitual thought and judgement, the basic possibility of a change in the attention which the subject gives to his own experience and which represents a break with a "natural" or non-examined attitude.

**B.** A phase of *conversion* of attention from «the exterior» to «the interior».

**C.** A phase of *letting-go* or of reception of the experience.

We call *epochè* the *ensemble* of these three organically linked phases, for the simple reason that phases B and C are always reactivated by A and reactivate phase A. Note in passing that in this recursive movement, the suspending movement which begins the process, has a quality which is different each time around, at each step of the structuring of the reflective act.

It is in the above sense that I have claimed that the cognitive sciences will be modified by the necessary appeal to lived experience, in first person. This first person -third person *circulation* in no way bypasses the excess of meaning that reduction brings about. In any case, a mutilated form of reduction has not been what is at stake in the scope of neurophenomenology, Sebbah's remarks

notwithstanding. The obvious question follows: why is it that in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, he insists on throwing the entire project into an inevitable near miss, and an overt skepticism in regards to the ultimate heavy-hand of science? This is the question I want to answer last.

## 2. Pursuing the inquiry

### Keeping the polarity, working on a non-dual ground

Imagine none of the points of clarification I have developed above had been necessary, and that Sebbah and I found each other in clear consonance. Still, gaping questions would remain for *both* of us. These questions are best stated, not as an incompatibility, but as *tension between the empirical and transcendental poles in reduction*. This can also be formulated by seeing that the gesture of reduction itself is Janus-faced. On the one hand it opens up and pulls towards a radical form of lived experience which demarcates itself ever more from any expression, any linguistic form. On the other hands, it opens and pulls just as much towards the descriptive and thus the empirical. Reduction *is* this broad and ambivalent mixture, and nothing short of confronting its nature will do.

That these poles exist is only too clear since Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's work. Sebbah formulates this as follows:

« [...] rien n'autorise à conclure que quelque chose du transcendantal ne soit saisissable *dans* l'empirique : *préparant* à la phénoménologie la psychologie n'*empiète* pas sur elle. Sans doute la thématique husserlienne de la chair (*Leib*) signifie-t-elle précisément le caractère abstrait de toute séparation entre le transcendantal et le mondain dans la subjectivité humaine - mon corps constitué (*Körper*) est déjà - toujours déjà - constituant, chair (*Leib*) ; et, inversement, la chair n'est chair qu'à être toujours déjà corps, et par là inscrite dans le mondain » (p. 187).

### There a real tension better captured by a non-dual approach

It is because of this tension that Sebbah concludes that any attempt to naturalize - that is to build the mutual circulation rather than absorb one into the other - is bound to fail. Yet this is where Sebbah's view and mine deviate (and not on other grounds). The point is this: although it is clear that the tension between the empirical and the transcendental is at the very heart of phenomena, *this tension does not need to be resolved as opposition, but we can aspire to a non-dual stance where a generative circulation is possible*. Even if it would be foolish to claim that myself or anybody else has accomplished this, it remains a philosophical aspiration to seek. Now, I am painfully aware at this point that the very notion of generative circulation, as just stated, is little more than two words. In my mind it implies a truly new dialectics between scientific and phenomenological activities. This dialectics is not an abstract, logical one, but one based on a praxis that can only develop in its own movement. In other words, only specific local studies will advance this understanding, instead of some ready-made recipe. I do not have the space here, for example, to show how this view can apply to the study of lived temporality, but it is at that level of detail that the mutual circulation will speak fully (Varela, 1999b).

Sebbah does not offer any evidence to the contrary. Moreover, he even says it in so many words, which are worth citing *in extenso*:

« Mais le travail que nous avons mené à l'intérieur de la pensée varélienne, en tentant de cerner en creux ce dont ne pouvait pas parler cette perspective en tant que perspective scientifique naturalisante - et alors même que de l'intérieur des sciences cognitives elle est de celles qui se rendent *le plus possible* attentives à ce creux ; ce travail, donc, nous conduit à appeler de nos vœux une *pratique théorique qui ne se donne la facilité ni d'une séparation étanche entre la question naturalisante et la question philosophique, ni d'un confusionnisme ou d'une absorption de l'une dans l'autre (sans doute de la seconde dans la première!), mais qui éprouve le débordement du philosophique depuis le coeur du scientifique, comme le sens excède le donné depuis son coeur.* » (pp.182-3, my emphasis).

Beyond the inevitable misunderstanding, and the inevitable clarification needed to take into a fuller view of what I have been seeking to develop, the above "pratique théorique" corresponds *exactly* to my main point, that is, to a non-dual view of the tension at the very heart of phenomena and of human experience. That my work in this direction is limited, it goes without saying. That the challenge is a major one, risking overcoming both the modern scientific studies of mind and phenomenology alike, is also clear. Only a step by step search for a fertile conciliation between the richness of the empirical and the rigorous demand of the praxis of reduction will give answers, that is, the growth of a *transcendental empiricism* that is worth its name (cf Depraz, 1999). In the meantime we should not be swayed by an illusory fear of "naturalization" or loss of the "transcendental".

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