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COLLABORATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT. In the present paper, I examine the possibility of doing phenomenology in a collaborative manner. Faced with the fading of the ethos of "seeing for oneself" and the predominance of "meta-phenomenology" passing for "phenomenological work", Herbert Spiegelberg proposed the organization of "phenomenology workshops". After offering an analysis of the method of philosophical workshops exemplified by a contemporary proponent of "philosophical practice", Oscar Brenifier, I identify several problems such a workshop can face and several commitments that can help create the co-subjectivity necessary for sym-phenomenologizing.

***Keywords*:** Phenomenological attitude, Philosophical practice, Philosophy workshop, Dialogical phenomenology, Herbert Spiegelberg

1. The "Practical Turn"

One of the ways of beginning to talk about phenomenology is by examining its *ethos*: the attitude it embodies and uses as a guide for reaching the phenomena it seeks to grasp intuitively, analyse, and describe.

From its early days, phenomenology presented itself as a radical return to experience, taking experience as its starting point and touchstone –as *talk anchored in experience*, a form of talking that attempts to remain faithful to it.

One can quote various ways of expressing this commitment to experience by various phenomenologists, starting from Husserl's "back to the things themselves". One of the most poignant expressions is Wilhelm Schapp's formula at the end of the preface of his dissertation on the phenomenology of perception:

> Ich hoffe nur, dass ich nichts schrieb, was ich nicht selbst sah.[1]

"I hope just that I did not write anything that I did not see myself", writes Schapp, right after recognizing his debt to Husserl and his "idea circle". It is an

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[1] W. Schapp, *Beiträge zur Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*, Goettingen, 1910.

ethos of radical autonomy underlying even the acknowledgment of a master-disciple relation.

Schapp emphasizes this is a *hope*. Therefore, it goes hand in hand with anxiety, uncertainty and desire. The basic methodological orientation is toward *writing what you see and only what you see*, even if you see *based on* what the master – or colleagues in a circle – showed you. Phenomenological discourse is personal. Not just written in the first person, but also *legitimized* by personal seeing. It is seeing – the essential insight – that legitimizes what I write. If what I write is not based on what I see, even if it is true, it is not legitimate. Notice that Schapp did not write "I hope just that I did not write anything untrue".

There are two possibilities here. The first is that one *takes as true* something that has been told by someone else, without seeing for himself or herself – or seeing partially, unclearly, vaguely – and writes it down, without being able to anchor it in his or her own experience. The second is to write down something that one just thinks he or she has seen, without actually seeing it – of writing something while being confused about its way of givenness.

In both these cases, phenomenological discourse loses its legitimation – because it gains it not from the truth value of its propositions, but from the fact of actually having "seen" the thing you are talking about. In this sense, we can characterize phenomenological ethos as an obsession with the legitimacy of your discourse. Either what you write when you do phenomenology *should* be justified by your own seeing – or you are not "doing phenomenology", but something else. Commenting on a text. Interpreting what someone might have possibly meant. Or speculating.

Phenomenological discourse is thus haunted both by a certain *confidence* – "seeing is believing", the correlate of evidence is truth – and by a *doubt* about itself, by a suspicion that, upon closer examination, things might appear otherwise, that you, as the phenomenological writer, have neglected something that would have led you to a clearer insight.

The second aspect I would like to emphasize regarding Schapp's sentence is his use of the verb *to write*. Of course, he might be referring just to the fact that his dissertation is a written text, but the greatest part of phenomenological discourse seems to be linked to writing.

The paradigm is, of course, Husserl's *Nachlass*. For Husserl, the practice itself of phenomenology seemed to consist, first of all, in "monological meditations", in daily writing of page after page of description of what shows itself when the phenomenologist reflects on what was given. Husserl's stenography is a way of *capturing as fast as possible* what was immediately seen in phenomenological reflection, *writing it down while it is still retained*, at the speed of thought. We can

speak here of a similar anxiety –the fear of "not losing" what was seen, the desire of "fixating" the fleeting insight and making it available for a renewed making-intuitive. Solitary writing, that may be published, shown to others, used as a starting point for lectures, or left in the drawer because it has already generated the insight the phenomenologist was seeking.

This ethos of phenomenology, some of its practitioners claim[2], was lost when scholarship and exegesis of previous phenomenological text became the dominant mode of phenomenological discourse. An exegete is not anxious about this process of personal seeing-writing (did I see well enough? did I express well enough what I have seen? have I really seen?). She is concerned rather with the coherence of the text she is studying and the layers of meaning that can be discerned there. The anxiety of the exegete seems to be not overlooking an influence on the author she is studying or a factor of the author's immediate context – an anxiety of *not having enough information* (or having too much to process), rather than of *not seeing clearly enough*.

Accordingly, an apprenticeship in phenomenology conceived as a practice is more akin to a learning how to see than to a learning how to read (philosophy). To use an analogy of the same W. Schapp (which was also an insight of Merleau-Ponty), the phenomenologist must go to school with painters.[3] Or with psychologists and biologists, as the more recent work of Natalie Depraz, Francisco Varela, and Pierre Vermersch shows.[4] The "basic cycle" described by Depraz, Varela and Vermersch, for example, aims at offering a method of "seeing" that can be learned and used to produce phenomenological work. It consists of three phases: suspension of judgment – conceived as a break with the natural attitude – followed by the conversion from the object to its way of givenness and to the act in which the object is given, and by a "letting-go" that waits for the revelation of meaning. Varela[5] has also proposed a different three-step model: reduction (suspending habitual theories about the phenomenon), intuition (gaining familiarity and

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[2] For example, three former graduate students of Dorion Cairns at New School for Social Research – Richard Zaner, Fred Kersten, and Lester Embree. Each of them wrote an "introduction to phenomenology" as a *practical* approach, as something that can be *done*, not just talked about, and the mode of doing it is more urgent and preferable at the same time. A similar tone is expressed by Robert Sokolowski's well-known introduction to phenomenology – and also by Herbert Spiegelberg, to whom I will refer in the next section.

[3] W. Schapp, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

[4] N. Depraz, F. Varela, P. Vermersch, *On Becoming Aware: A Pragmatics of Experiencing*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003.

[5] F. Varela, "Dasein's brain: Phenomenology meets cognitive science", in D. Aerts (ed.), *Einstein meets Magritte: The white book*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999, pp. 185–197. Available at http://cepa.info/2030

intimacy with it in experience), and description (presenting the invariants for intersubjective validation).

These models attempt to "operationalize" phenomenological practice – to make it possible that various researchers/practitioners "do the same thing" and gain phenomenological insights that can be compared and validated. In a way, this fulfils Husserl's old dream of a phenomenological research community – a community dedicated to the study of "the things themselves", that would work together, using the same approach, and gradually achieve consensus. One variant of accomplishing this is teaching phenomenology *from the start* as a practical discipline of seeing / writing – before dealing with its classic texts – in order to be able to *use* phenomenology on one's own, eventually *checking with understanding* the insights of Husserl or Heidegger when one starts reading them already having a *working knowledge* of phenomenology as a method / practice. Such was the approach of the late Lester Embree – learning phenomenology by doing it while discussing with peers about intentional processes, reflectively observed.[6]

Usually, we learn a new discursive practice in dialogue with those who are already familiar with it. In conversation and experimentation. I would argue this is, also, the best way of learning phenomenology: as part of a community which is already doing it – talking about the ways things appear. A community that is doing phenomenology *dialogically*: not just by solitarily writing and then reading each other's texts, but by *thinking together while talking together*. This is the *workshop approach to phenomenology*, proposed by Herbert Spiegelberg in the sixties. A way of doing phenomenology that is constitutively open for intersubjectivity, because it is done in common. And after dialogue is learned, one can monologue privately on one's own – but always nostalgic for the possibility of dialogue.

2. The phenomenological workshop: Herbert Spiegelberg

Herbert Spiegelberg, known at that time mostly for his historical work on phenomenology, but also as a "living, breathing phenomenological philosopher"[7] that interacted with its founding figures, seems to be the first author that proposed, in the sixties, the idea of a phenomenological workshop. According to his own account of it, he developed it based on two main concerns. One was to "revive phenomenology as a fresh approach directly to phenomena in opposition to mere meta-phenomenology through textual and historical studies"[8], reawakening

[6] L. Embree, *Reflective Analysis: A First Introduction Into Phenomenological Investigation*, Zeta Books, 2006.
[7] G. Psathas, "In Memory of Herbert Spiegelberg and the Phenomenological Workshops", in *Human Studies*, no. 15(4) / 1992, p. 399.
[8] H. Spiegelberg, *Doing Phenomenology: Essays on and in Phenomenology*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, pp. 24-25.

the ethos (or "spirit") of the first generation of phenomenologists. The second was "to free phenomenology from the seemingly utter privacy and subjectivity, if not solipism, to which according to certain interpretations of the Husserlian conception it is doomed"[9].

Thus, Spiegelberg designed an environment in which phenomenology can be practiced from the start1) *as phenomenology* and 2) *in collaboration, intersubjectively*. According to him, it was working in groups that is "particularly suited to the doing of first-hand phenomenology".[10] He held five such two-week workshops, at Washington University, St. Louis, between 1965 and 1972[11]. In what did they consist? We have his own account[12] and also the accounts of several participants[13] that can help us reconstitute what was happening during these intensive workshops.

During the morning sessions, the group gathered for examining together a phenomenon, proposed at first by Spiegelberg, later by the participants themselves. One favourite strategy to start the first session of a workshop – giving the participants a first hands-on training in phenomenological attending, describing and questioning – was to have them plug their ears and listen to "silence". They were supposed to write a short description, using a questionnaire prepared by Spiegelberg, which helped them focus on certain aspects of the experience. Afterwards, they read their texts, in turn. After each text, its author was subjected to a questioning session by the members of the group, before passing to the next participant. The rule for this type of session was "to the things first, then to the books": no book was to be consulted before writing the account of the phenomenon and discussing it. After the session was finished, the participants were allowed to study in Spiegelberg's personal library, have more informal discussions, revise the texts they wrote during the first session in the light of the questioning, others' contributions and subsequent reading. Sometimes, in the afternoon, the participants were invited to field trips during which they examined particular phenomena. In the evenings, invited lecturers gave talks and led discussions.

Among them were Eugene Gendlin, Erwin Straus, Richard Zaner, etc. The next day, the process started again by presenting the supplementary insights on the phenomenon, followed by the common examination of a different topic, assigned to the participants the day before. The participant had to examine by himself and

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[9] *Ibid.* p. 25.
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] *Ibid*. p. 24-34.
[13] G. Psathas, *op. cit.*; E. Casey, "Sym-Phenomenologizing: Talking Shop", in *Human Studies*, No. 20(2) / 1997, pp. 169-180.

prepare a text for the next group session (thus, a mix of solitary and group work for the whole period of the workshop) on topics like phenomenology of spatial perception, the phenomenon of air, perceptual perspective in impressionist painting, etc.[14]

Sometimes, the second week focused on a single topic, explored in depth. What can be accomplished, phenomenologically, in a workshop of this type? In doing phenomenology, we attempt to find invariant structures of experience. In solitary work, we do this by variation in imagination until an invariant is found. Intersubjectivity is implied even in this solitary phenomenological work – we take our own mental life as just an example of a possible subjectivity, and the account we produce is intended as intelligible in principle. In Spiegelberg's phenomenology workshop, though, intersubjectivity is present and operative from the start in the nature itself of a common session. More than that, the variation is not *in imagination*, but in the plurality of *concrete accounts* of the participants. The examples are not invented by the same phenomenologist that examines them one by one; every account differs, either in detail or radically, from the others, and stems from each subject's concrete, lived experience. The invariant is the direct product of intersubjective collaboration.

This can help with the anxiety of "not seeing enough" that haunts solitary work. The burden of seeing the invariants is not on the solitary subjectivity, afraid of not having had enough experience or of bringing her own bias, but on the group as a whole: the group sees *more* than the individual member can, because it is not stuck to a single perspective. Another aspect of group work that helps deal with this anxiety is the process of questioning, right after reading your initial description. According to Spiegelberg's injunction, when asking questions the questioner should avoid, as much as possible, referring to her own parallel experience of the same phenomenon. The questions are strictly based on *the other's experience* and aim at clarifying it or bringing her attention to aspects of her experience that are presented in a too sketchy or misleading fashion. This kind of questioning is helpful both for the questioner and for the author of the description. From the perspective of the questioner, it means training in empathy – in being able to enter the other's expression – and attentive examination of the phenomenon *as presented by the other*, which are important requirements for *reading phenomenology in an understanding manner*. For the author of the description, the other's questions lead her back to her own experience, make her reflect, purify, and question again what was seen and whether it was actually seen.

[14] G. Psathas, *op. cit.*, p. 408.

The members of the group rely on each other in order to avoid "becoming stuck in their own subjectivity", as the leading contemporary proponent of philosophical workshops, Oscar Brenifier, uses to say. By paying attention in a critical fashion to their own subjectivity and presenting it to the others, by listening to the others and questioning them, one becomes aware of one's own habits of thinking *as habits* and of one's own perspective *as a perspective,* while still seeking to intuit and describe the phenomenon *as experienced* in its essential structure. In this "co-subjectivity", as Spiegelberg finally calls it, the subject is decentered and "thinking together" can happen without the usual friction between opposing points of view to which the persons entering dialogue are attached. Instead of trying to convince the other of "one's own "idea, the structure of this kind of workshop allows exploring ways of seeing *the same thing* that can help the participants experience that thing in a more complete fashion – a practice particularly suited for finding invariants. As one of the participants to the workshop puts it,

> By doing phenomenology together in this way we began to understand the phenomenological and the eidetic reductions much better and see that Plato and the Scholastics had been doing exactly this with their philosophical methods all along. As we went to the things themselves we began to see that there could be many perspectives of them as Nietzsche would say. Once these several perspectives were described in a phenomenological reduction we could begin to hunt for the essence. We could try to see how the perspectives were perspectives of a common essence which perhaps we could not fully know. As a result of doing phenomenology together and seeing how differently we might each experience the same thing I began to really appreciate not only the dialogical nature of Plato's philosophy and of the Scholastics but I saw this in other philosophers.[15]

The effect of this dialogical practice was transformative on the participants. Among the consequences of the practice of phenomenological workshops, such as the constant control of the subjectivity and the intersubjective checking and extension of each member's perspective, Spiegelberg also counts a certain kind of attunement:

> Co-operative phenomenology is not merely a matter of exchanging views, of "swapping" reports, as it has been called, or even of registering and, as far as possible, understanding one another's different perspectives. Such an outcome need not be the

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[15] D. Goicoechea, *Agape and Bhakti with Bataille and Mark at Loyola and St. Francis: From the Hindus to Today*, Pickwick, 2016. The quoted passage is present in the google books preview of the book, that was not accessible to me in full:
https://books.google.md/books?id=2BRoDQAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=ro#v=onepage&q&f=false

> "end of the story," it can be the beginning of a new one, the attempt to attune dissonances… Mutual exploration may reveal that the instruments of description are out of tune, i.e., that the disagreements among the describers are merely verbal, and that a readjustment of the linguistic tools can clear up some discrepancies. But "attunement" is also possible at a deeper level if the dissonances should be in the prelinguistic experiences. Here it is possible to direct and redirect our viewing by "drawing attention" to factors previously overlooked, by pointing out unconscious preconceptions and the like. In the pursuit of such attempts at attunement one of the most meaningful and revealing occurrences may be when one of the partners suddenly exclaims "aha" in a tone of voice indicating that he has not only just become aware of something new but also realizes that he has discovered what the other partner meant all along. Such episodes were among the most rewarding of the workshop experiences. The phenomenology of what is going on in such experiences may throw important light on the process involved in genuine attunement[16].

According to the participants' testimonies, the workshop experience influenced their perception of philosophy in general and their way of *doing* it, leaking into their habitual teaching. But no one did what Spiegelberg expected them to do: take up the same approach and organize workshops in their own institutions.[17] There seems to be, still, little to no *sym-phenomenologizing*.

3. The workshop approach in "Philosophical Practice": Oscar Brenifier

Oscar Brenifier is a contemporary French philosopher, active in the field commonly called "philosophical practice". According to his views[18], philosophizing, as an activity, is anchored in a set of attitudes – learned ignorance, availability, openness, distance, etc. – and expresses itself by the means of three sets of competencies, in "deepening", "problematisation", and "conceptualization". The fundamental source of inspiration for his work is the model of Socrates: his practice is carried by the means of relentless, radical questioning, done at first *live* and later internalized for written work that reproduces the same dialogical model.

As with Spiegelberg's approach, with whom, as far as I know, Brenifier is not familiar, but would regard as a kindred spirit, the presence of the other facilitates the co-subjectivity needed in order to avoid becoming stuck in oneself and to take

[16] H. Spiegelberg, *op. cit.*, p. 32-33.

[17] E. Casey, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

[18] For an extended account, *v.* O. Brenifier, *La pratique philosophique,* 2015.Available at http://www.pratiques-philosophiques.fr/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/La-pratique-philosophique-last-version.pdf

the distance necessary for exploring the phenomenon. It is done in the format of one-on-one dialogue, reminiscent of the classical approach of Socrates, but also in group workshops, with adults of children. Brenifier's workshops have the same dual function envisioned by Spiegelberg. They are both a training environment for "doing philosophy" *and themselves already* a collective *practice* of philosophy.

Along with workshops and lectures in various universities, Brenifier organizes, for more than a decade, at least two international intensive one-week seminars in philosophical practice per year. I had the opportunity to participate in two of them, so my account is based on what I experienced there.

The ethos that infuses itself in the community that participates in these seminars is similar to the phenomenologist's desire to "see for himself" the things talked about, but the practice is dialogical from the start. Socratic questioning is taken as the default mode of examining a topic – usually starting from a question – but Brenifier offers various "skilful means", to use the Buddhist term, for accomplishing the task of making the participants think: working on a text, writing a story, talking about a physical object, etc. The usual format of a group session is taking a short written output by a participant as a starting point – as short as a sentence or two, sometimes even a word – and subjecting it to a process of problematisation, of questioning and objecting, extending this process to the questions and objections that are raised themselves.

Brenifier's process has definite analogies with phenomenology, although he does not present himself as a phenomenologist (still using, sometimes, phenomenological tools such as the reduction). The main task of the participants is to be able to examine thinking *as thinking*, looking for the presuppositions of a thought, questioning its general applicability (or eidetic necessity, as we would say), finding concrete examples for a general idea or the essential in an example. Brenifier's style of doing philosophy involves a slow process of step-by-step questioning the other about an initial idea he or she proposes. The answers are as short as possible. The questioner continues to question every answer, regarding its presuppositions, consequences, and grounds, and to problematize the other's ideas in order to become able to formulate eidetic necessities and conceptualize the aspects of the examined phenomenon. The other aspect of the questioning process is guiding the personal reflection of the other, making him or her aware of their own habits of thinking, of the way their subjectivity colours the way they are looking at a certain topic and the topics themselves that appears as interesting. Thus, the practice is complex, involving a set of interdependent aspects: a reflective examination of the participant's being-in-the-world, accomplished by the means of conceptual clarification of her thoughts and the

examination of her thinking process, creating at the same time tools for further conceptual clarification.

Every day, from early morning to almost midnight, participants attend a series of workshops, on various topics, with small breaks between them. They also spend time in informal mutual questioning even during these breaks – the discourse and attitudes exemplified in the formal session infuse themselves in the everyday manner of interacting. Usually, the last session of the evening is a public "philosophical consultation", with Brenifier questioning a volunteer and the whole group observing the process. Brenifier himself leads most sessions, but any participant is welcome to lead a workshop, in Brenifier's manner of working or using an approach with which she is more familiar. So, beside the *implicit* phenomenological aspect of Brenifier's practice, there are moments of sym-phenomenologizing becoming *explicit*. I would argue that the teaching – and doing – of phenomenology can only benefit from this format.

The limits of the present paper allow me just a short analysis of a segment of one such workshop. The leader of one of the sessions, M.G., a Russian professional dancer and philosophical practitioner trained by Brenifier, announced it as dealing with "phenomenological reduction". The first task we were proposed was to observe attentively as she performed a couple of times a series of dance movements, and then to repeat it. Most of us were especially tense and anxious – doing complex movements while seeing them for the first time tends to absorb most of the attention and create performance anxiety.

The first step of the workshop was thus already something that we *performed* or *enacted* bodily: performing a set of movements while being attentive to what we were doing. This fits nicely with a suggestion of Natalie Depraz about the initial phase of the *epoche*:

> an external or existential event may play the role of triggering the suspending attitude, e.g. aesthetic surprise the mediation of others can also be decisive.[19]

The sheer uncanniness of performing dance movements at the start of a philosophical exercise was also a factor in suspending the natural attitude: we were taking what was appearing to us *as it was appearing*, as the requirement itself of watching in order to perform was taking us out of our habitual expectations.

[19] N. Depraz, "What about the praxis of reduction? Between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty", in T. Toadvine and L. Embree (eds.), *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002, p. 123.

After returning to our places, the facilitator offered a short presentation – literally a couple of sentences – of what phenomenological reduction can accomplish. The type of reduction that she proposed us can be described, in more technical terms, as "empirical transcendental reduction" – a reflection on what is actually lived through in the moment of living it through. We were to write three sentences about "what was going on in our minds" during the performance of the dance movements.

The practice seems to accord well with the model proposed by Depraz and with the intrinsic tendency of Husserlian phenomenology: to start from observing an object, to suspend the habitual preconceptions regarding its existence and your previous convictions about it, then to reflect on the mental process in which it was given – "turn the gaze inward". The formulation "what is going on in your mind" seems intentionally vague: especially in the context of a workshop of this type, where "missing the mark" seems to be as useful a learning experience as "hitting" it, as the course of the workshop has shown. We can also notice that the facilitator's proposal resonates well with Spiegelberg's practice: creating an experience, observing it, minimally guided by another, and writing shortly about it.

After (again literally) a couple of minutes of writing, the first text that was read (and transcribed on a flip-chart) was:

> I looked at [the facilitator's name]. I memorized the steps. And I repeated what I memorized.

One of the specific aspects of Brenifier's method of conducting a philosophy workshop is that the facilitator does a minimal job in evaluating the participant's output. Rather, he or she guides them, by his or her questioning, to evaluate by themselves the relevance of what they are writing or saying. This was what the facilitator did, faced with this minimal description: turn to the group. After an initial discussion about whether the text counts as three sentences or one, she asked the most typical starting question in Brenifier-style workshops: "Who sees any problem in what [the participant] has written?" The main purpose of this question is to stimulate problematisation, anchored in the critical attitude of "not taking for granted" what is presented to the attention of the group, and not being afraid to question or object to it.

The answer one of the participants offered was "The problem is that you did not describe what was happening in your mind." I.e., that the output did not fit the task. Commonly, this is one of the first evaluation criteria in Brenifier's workshops. The facilitator passed to another typical move in Brenifier's method of

philosophizing: conceptualization. The question she asked was “Can you name the problem?” and the answer was “irrelevance”. The next question was “Do you have an argument for that?” – another basic ingredient of the style of questioning practiced by Brenifier and his disciples: each statement a participant expresses that is not immediately obvious should be grounded by an “argument”, taken in a wide enough sense to include distinctions. The answer was “[The participant] described an activity, but that’s not saying what was going on in her mind” – so, an answer by making a distinction, which is one of the basic tools in doing philosophy in general and phenomenology in particular.

This is part of the philosophical dialogue culture promoted in Brenifier’s workshops: looking in a detached manner at a statement – initially by the other, later at one’s own “monological meditations” – and learning to see what is problematic about it. In the workshop framework, this is done in a co-subjective mode, with clearly defined roles: the facilitator asks questions that help deepen, problematize, and conceptualize, the participants providing the “content” by thinking together about each other’s contributions. The dominant conversational culture is one of fearless objecting, of not hiding behind “I understand the point, it can also be taken in this way, this is one of the possible perspectives” – the typical relativism of our times – and at the same time *trust* in the group and in the process, that can show an objection as grounded or not. The answers are kept short and to the point, in order to make the connections between ideas more clear to follow and to avoid “shifting” as a defensive strategy.

The facilitator then turned to the author of the description: “[Participant’s name,] is it true that this is actions?” (another typical move in the dialogic game of a philosophy workshop: continuous intersubjective checking with one participant if the other’s proposal is acceptable). After an affirmative answer, the facilitator concluded “so you didn’t do the task”. After the statement was accepted by the participant, the facilitator continued with another intersubjective check: “Ok, do you agree that what you did is irrelevant?” This is another common aspect of the workshops conducted in the style of Brenifier: the insistence of admitting the problematic character of one’s own statements – a habit that seems especially useful for philosophers.

The inquiry then shifted in a personal reflection mode, the facilitator asking “Do you know why it is difficult for you to distinguish what you did and what you think?” After a long pause and a negative answer of the participant, she asked “Do you want to know?” and, when the proposal was accepted, she turned to the group, in order to ask for hypotheses about the reasons of this difficulty. This is also typical for the dynamic of Brenifier’s workshops: a continuous shift between the individual subjected to questioning and the co-subjectivity of the group, with its detachment and distance that put each individual perspective in a

larger context. The first hypothesis, proposed by another participant, was "She has difficulties to conceptualize." After a demand for explanation, the participant clarified his statement in the following fashion: "Well, there's a question about what's happening in the mind, that's a concept, and then you have to give an example of that concept, and you didn't make a good relationship between the concept and what you wrote." After a follow-up question, the facilitator turned again to the author of the description, checking whether the other participant's explanation made sense for her.

4. Final remarks

The analysis in the previous section can be used to justify several general statements about the functioning of a philosophical workshop, and its implicit and explicit phenomenological aspects.

1) A dialectical observation: any initial starting point is problematic, and the movement of philosophizing consists in transcending it. This is consistent both with Husserl's description of progress in phenomenology as a zig-zag motion[20] and with Strasser's remarks about dialectical phenomenology[21] and, as well, with Brenifier's intrinsically dialectical conception of philosophy. Working in a group makes this dialectical character of thinking obvious.

2) The main difficulty in transcending a given starting point is the perception of it as "one's own", the fact of being stuck in a perspective that is taken as legitimate because it corresponds to the immediate, impressionistic account we would give of what we experience in the natural attitude. Phenomenological thinking attempts to go beyond natural attitude and its convictions, questioning the things it takes for granted and struggling to gain access to a more originary dimension of the phenomena. Still, the solitary phenomenologist risks remaining stuck in a perspective taken for granted because it is based only on his or her own experience, prematurely generalized and taken as "valid for everyone". The workshop model prevents this by anchoring discourse in co-subjectivity, rather than subjectivity. The participant learns to take distance from himself or herself and recognize the intrinsic limitations of his or her philosophical expressions.

3) A language game is learned in interaction. As a language game, it is more natural that philosophical discourse be learned in this way, rather than in solitary struggle with texts, both others' and one's own. In saying this, I do not attempt to diminish the value of solitary work in philosophy, of "monological

[20] E. Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1969, p. 125.

[21] S. Strasser, *Phenomenology and the Human Sciences: A Contribution to a New Scientific Ideal*. Duquesne University Press, 1963, p. 270-275.

meditation", but to propose that it is both better anchored and learned in a dialogical context.

4) A quality and a skill needed for accomplishing the work of thinking together is the availability to question. In a truly Socratic (and phenomenological) fashion, this comes together with a certain *naïveté* and trust in the capacity of a thinker to make sense, either in dialogue or by himself, of the phenomenon that he or she is trying to make an account of. Another quality required for this is the relentless availability to see the problematic aspect of both one's own and others' expressions.

5) The workshop model is an equal playing ground both for accomplished philosophers and for novices. They make do with what they have: their presence together and mutual exploration of ideas, in a spirit of friendly challenge, without reference to authorities or to erudition: *hic Rhodos, hic salta*.

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