

Exploring the notion of “from-within” through the concept of event

Leticia Renault 

Adaptive Behavior

1–5

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/10597123221094361

journals.sagepub.com/home/adb

Abstract

The target paper presents the foundations of the Course-of-Experience Framework, discussing a theoretical and methodological tool appropriate for addressing cognition in the wild and from-within. This commentary considers the meaning of from-within in this context. By relying on the enactive paradigm, the Course-of-Experience Framework focuses on singular experiences but does not take individuals as its starting point. Thus, from-within gains a very particular meaning that will be explored here through the concept of event, in Deleuzian terms, the event is neither subjective nor objective in the usual meaning of these words, even though it is a singularity, capable of producing both individual and collective effects. This concept prevents considering subjective experience as a property of individuals. The concept of event is valuable to elucidate the notion of “common experiential ground.”

Keywords

Enactive approach, first-person methodologies, event, Gilles Deleuze, subjectivity, experience

The target paper presents the foundations of the Course-of-Experience Framework, discussing a theoretical and methodological tool appropriate for addressing cognition in the wild and from-within. This commentary considers the meaning of *from-within* in this context. By relying on the enactive paradigm, the Course-of-Experience Framework focuses on singular experiences but does not take individuals as its starting point. Thus, from-within gains a very particular meaning that will be explored here through the concept of event, (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005): in Deleuzian terms (Deleuze, 1969), the event is neither subjective nor objective in the usual meaning of these words, even though it is a singularity, capable of producing both individual and collective effects. This concept prevents considering subjective experience as a property of individuals. The concept of event is valuable to elucidate what Varela and Shear (1999) call “common experiential ground.”

The target article presents the course-of-experience framework as a relevant contribution to cognitive science, which proposes an original approach to some of the central questions in the cognitive sciences, including psychology. One of these central questions is the notion of *from-within*. The course-of-experience is presented as a contribution to a study of cognition in the wild and

from-within, relating the latter to a consideration of subjective experience, or at least of an experience as it is given to a subject, the only one capable of describing it in its singularity.

However, this notion of subjective experience carries with it several assumptions and difficulties that arise in specific ways within the different disciplines in the cognitive sciences, including psychology. For psychology, the mainstream notion of subjective experience is often contrasting with that found in the theoretical-methodological framework of the enactive approach (which integrates the course-of-experience framework). A core point of the enactive approach is to understand cognitive experience as giving rise, simultaneously, to subject and object. Such notion of co-emergence of subject and object challenges the tendency present in different currents in psychology to substantialize the subject or to consider subjectivity as having an existence in itself, independent of experience.¹

Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

Corresponding author:

Leticia Renault, Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Colégio de S. Jerónimo Apartado 3087, Coimbra 3000-995, Portugal.

Email: lerenault@gmail.com

Such contrast between the notion of subjective experience that can be found in several currents of cognitive psychology and the notion of experience in the enactive approach is not only a conceptual or theoretical problem. It also poses methodological questions, concerning the design of research devices and the analysis of their results. This problem does not find its solution merely in a certain technique or method. The reification of experience reproduces in the very field of the so-called first-person methodologies an investigative attitude analogous to the third-person position, that is, it reproduces a *from-outside* gaze, which turns to objects supposedly independent of observation itself. In this way, even experimental devices that are interested in someone's lived experience can be quite distant from a truly enactive approach to cognition.

In this regard, the course-of-experience framework, by relying on semiotics and to what "makes a sign" in experience, may contribute to conjure the risks of substantializing the notion of subject in psychology. Understanding the articulation between experience and meaning may allow an enactive treatment of subjectivity and, consequently, the development of research devices able to look at the experience from within.

Thus, it becomes relevant to elucidate the meaning of *from-within* in this context. Without intending to exhaust the topic, a brief comment can be made about this notion for the enactive approach (and consequently, for the course-of-experience). Given the risks for psychology in particular, it is worthwhile to turn to the concept of event, developed by the Stoics and later taken up by Deleuze in his own work and also in association with Guattari. The Deleuzian perspective of the event seems to be attuned to the notion of experience guided by Francisco Varela's approach.

In the enactive approach, lived experience plays a crucial role. This approach seeks to react to the tendency, in the history of psychology, to consider the third-person point of view as the only legitimate position in the production of knowledge. The history of psychology has been marked by the adoption of methods of the natural sciences, which would allow psychology to establish itself as a discipline independent, for example, from philosophy. This history marked the development of different strands of psychology, leading to attitudes of distrust or even abandonment of subjective experience in the production of knowledge, attitudes that persist even today.

The absence of experience in current studies of cognitive psychology is remarkable: it is not unusual for the research to abstract from everything that can be experienced by someone in favor of data considered as objective, linked to behavioral and measurable aspects of the studied phenomenon. So, many experiments in psychology disregard essential aspects of what they intend to study. In memory studies, for example, many experimental protocols are dedicated to measuring

scores of correct responses to a performance test, while the very meaning of remembering something remains neglected. The use of first-person methodologies in cognitive psychology is one possible answer to this tendency, configuring an attempt to restore lived experience and take it as irreducible to observable data.

However, first-person methodologies are not sufficient in themselves to guarantee a solution to the problem of the loss of experience. With it, there is the risk of reification of the subject and the consequent neglected of the co-emergence that Francisco Varela (2000) refers to. For Varela, subject and world emerge together, within a cognitive experience. The risk of reifying subjectivity is also rooted in the history of psychology, which, for the sake of a supposedly precise definition of its research object, ends up understanding the subject as a substantial and independent entity. Thus, in psychology, currents that abstain from subjective data and those that stick to experiential accounts may suffer from a very similar basic understanding: both share a reified conception of their object (subjectivity or mere cognitive/neural processes), either seeking the best way to control it (employing third-person methodologies) or taking it as their privileged object (employing first-person methodologies). That is why the risk of substantializing subjectivity is present in psychology regardless of the type of methodology being employed.²

Such risk is especially sensitive in the understanding of the notion of from-within. One may take this expression in different senses: as the expression of the interiority of a subject, an entity pre-existent to the experience itself; or, in a sense closer to the enactive one, it could be understood as the expression of a face not immediately accessible to an outside perspective, as a fold of the experience itself. Thus, it becomes relevant to ask: when one speaks of from-within, it is *within* what?

Understanding subjective experience as a fold of experience itself refers to the work of philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1969). His work resonates with crucial aspects of the enactive approach and 4E Cognition (as indicated, for example, by the work of Protevi (2010)). The concept of event brings an important contribution to the problem being addressed. One way to answer about what is meant by *within*, in a Deleuzian perspective (and related to the enactive approach), would be to answer *from within the event*, in both subjective and objective faces.

The event is a concept taken up by Deleuze from the Stoics and re-elaborated in his work with Felix Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005) and in his own work (Deleuze, 1969). It is particularly interesting to note that the event is understood from its articulation with language (which brings us back to the course-of-experience in its approximation with Peirce's semiotics). For Deleuze, event and meaning are inseparable notions. Hence, its interest for the enactive approach,

for which cognition is, primarily, sense-making (Weber & Varela, 2002).

In the course-of-experience framework when something “makes a sign” for someone, we can also say that something *makes sense*. There is an event, in the Deleuzian perspective. The event does not correspond here to external facts that impose themselves on a pre-existing individual; nor is it explained, on the other hand, by a subject who actively creates meaning and projects it into the world. On the contrary, experiencing an event is much closer to feeling touched or affected by something that is beyond us than to the feeling of being the agent of what happens.

The emergence of subject and a correlative world is described in the enactive approach as sense-making (Weber & Varela, 2002). A frequent way to describe the enactive approach is to oppose it to a representational conception of cognition, since, according to the enactive assumptions, meaning is not embedded in a supposed information coming from a pre-existing world. Knowing is not representing a given world, out there, but making it emerge from its own activity.³ However, this is a circular process, in which the agent is produced in and by the action itself. Thus, sense-making activity cannot be adequately described as centered solely on the agent (acting organism), necessarily taking him as the starting point.

From this perspective, the enactive approach is close to the Deleuzian understanding of meaning and event. Let’s take the already classic example that Deleuze and Guattari present in *One Thousand Plateaus*: in an airplane, when a hijacking is announced, there is a qualitative, precise, and radical change for all involved. If, on the one hand, the declaration of a hijacking is itself an action, in the most usual sense of the term (so that we can roughly locate its origin), the transformation of the passengers into hostages is of another order. Instantaneous, such transformation is, according to Deleuze, incorporeal—a sense expressed in language and that completely modifies the set of relations between bodies, without there being any activity in the strict sense on the part of the passengers-hostages.

The emergence of this new meaning (the transformation of passengers into hostages) is an event—something happens—but the meaning was not properly produced by the individuals. Individual identities emerge thanks to the event and have no existence of their own outside of it. Meaning lies on the border between various pairs that are usually taken as opposites: passive-active, language-materiality, inside-outside—meaning is *in between* (Tucker, 2012). One of the fundamental dimensions to understand this idea is the difference pointed out by Deleuze between actuality and virtuality—the actuality corresponds to what is given, determined, to the set of forms that appears to us; the virtual, a concept inspired by Bergson, refers precisely to what, although real, does not have actuality

and cannot be determined.⁴ It corresponds to what Deleuze refers to as an intensive dimension, which coexists with the actual and makes it differ. The virtual corresponds to the dimension of genesis of forms, in which there is no individuality, but singularities. Thus, virtual and actual differ in nature. Meaning, as Tucker indicates, is *between* the actual and virtual dimensions and is always processual, that is, meaning cannot be located in something actual or in fixed identities.

In this way, the event is a carrier of meaning, but it cannot be adequately described only through the active or passive voices,⁵ that is, in terms of a meaning produced by someone or, conversely, as a meaning that is imposed on someone from outside. The meaning can be better expressed by what Latour (2010), in reference to the Greeks, calls *middle voice*: it is a voice that is neither fully active nor fully passive: as when one says that “an idea came to my mind” or “I was led to do such and such a thing.” In the middle voice, it is much more about “being captured by a verb”⁶ (to retake an expression of Despret (2021, p. 89)) than to situate oneself as the agent of an experience.

This way of referring to meaning is close to what, in the course-of-experience, appears as that which “makes a sign.” The micro-phenomenological interviews described in the target article (those that are interested in lived experience from the point of view of those who live them) have this starting point: something makes a sign. The appeal to Peirce’s semiotics is used here in favor of an intermediate position, between activity and passivity. What is called in the target article as the “fundamental asymmetry” of structural coupling is not neglected, but neither is the organism erected as an absolute meaning-producing agent, the starting point of the analyses of the micro-phenomenological interviews. Such a position allows one to avoid the risk of reifying subjectivity, in which one would take the from-within as an expression of an already given interiority.

This possibility of a middle way in the approach of the course-of-experience is close to a description of subjectivity in line with a Deleuzian understanding, as being able to express “subjectless subjectivities” (Bains, 2005), an idea very close to the “meshwork of selfless selves” that Varela (1991) uses to describe organisms.

For Varela (2000), the self or the subject of cognitive experience is an emergent effect. That is, for an enactive approach, the point is not that there is no subject or that there is no dimension experienced as an interiority; however, this dimension is not primary or fundamental. The same is true from the perspective of the concept of event: the subject emerges as a face of the event itself, as one of its possible effects. Identities—both of subjects and objects—are not given and can change and differ.

A description of cognition from-within, mediated by microphenomenological interviews in the course-of-experience, takes as its starting point not the subject, but the verb that captures and traverses him/her. The

one who speaks (the I) is not an agent of meaning but emerges as an effect of the event. Hence, the descriptions of internal states, feelings, affections, are not taken as representative of an interiority, but as an effect of the coupling that takes place (also) at the very moment of speaking and that refers to elements from outside, as its other face. As Eirado (2005) indicates, "(...) the return on the self is not a return to the intimacy of the subject, to his private experiences, but the encounter with the self as a process that is in the way of being done."⁷

From a methodological point of view, thus, the hexadic sign can be a strategic tool for microphenomenological interviews to approach a subjectivity in process, turning to the emergence of a subject through an experience understood as event. The interviewee's pre-reflective experience encompasses moments of subjective transformation, rupture or emergence of a self, where this ongoing process can be accessed.

However, there are few elements in the target article regarding the use of the hexadic sign in the interview device. There are elements about the role of the hexadic sign in interview analysis, but not about its role in the way questions are asked or in the design of the interview itself. In the section on self-confrontation and micro-phenomenological interviews (p.14), the target article discusses operational indications of conducting interviews, aimed at favoring the expression of the interviewee's pre-reflected experience. In some passages, when dealing with this operationalization, the authors refer to procedures that emphasize a concern with not interfering in the interviewee's experience,⁸ but the reasons for such concern in the context of the course-of-experience framework are not totally explicit. In representational perspectives of cognition, this type of methodological procedure is generally associated with a precaution on the part of the researcher not to contaminate the meaning of what is being said. In an enactive perspective, however, such contamination is an inherent aspect of experience, an expression of the fact that meaning is neither in the subject nor in the world (that is, that meaning is not entirely actual, in a Deleuzian sense). For an enactive approach, the research device composes the structural coupling and participates in the continuously ongoing processes of subjectivation. Thus, it is worth exploring how the course-of-experience framework conceives the role of the research device itself in the study of cognition from-within.

This question also raises the problem of the relation between singular and collective in the course-of-experience framework. If the description of cognition from-within can be understood in the light of the concept of event, the individual subjective experience is not the only possible perspective (although it is one of the faces of the event). Since it is an effect of a relational process, the individual subjective experience contains aspects that go beyond itself. That is, adopting again a

Deleuzian perspective, one can say that impersonal dimensions of the event are expressed from within the experience, not individual and not determinable or locatable in specific identities. This is an a-subjective dimension, which can also be understood as "a common experiential ground" (Varela & Shear, 1999). This is because this impersonal dimension does not correspond to an outside position of experience (as in a supposed third-person position), but neither does it entirely coincide with the experience of a self. Varela and Shear point to this impersonal dimension of the event when dealing with musical learning: the practice of a performance develops in a non-arbitrary way, which can be shared with others. It is non-arbitrary because it is not to be confused with social conventions or the result of an intersubjective agreement. The experience of learning music is that of accessing a more basic dimension of meaning. Thus, a *from-within* account of cognition takes up the event in the flow of this impersonal dimension, in an "in on it"⁹ experience. As Tucker (2012, p. 781) indicates, "If life is conceptualized as a continuum, then attempting to analyze any part of it involves entering its flow, rather than claiming to be able to stand back and gain insight from outside." The course-of-experience framework, in its use of semiotics and focusing on practice as the unit of analysis, is promising for contemplating such an underdeveloped dimension in psychology, in a potentially fruitful dialogue with the cognitive sciences.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to André do Eirado and Eduardo Passos for their valuable comments on a previous draft of this commentary.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Leticia Renault  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8170-5851>

Notes

1. This is true when subjective experience is explicitly considered by researchers. Often the declared object of study is cognitive and/or neural processes, without any mentions to subjectivity. However, cognitive/neural processes are also reified in this case.
2. Also taking Deleuze as an interlocutor for the cognitive sciences, Protevi (2010) indicates that both idealist and

realist positions neglect the dimension that Deleuze refers to as virtual, assuming, respectively, that subjectivity or the world are entirely actual. The difference between actual and virtual in Deleuze will be discussed further below.

3. In the target article, this idea is described as a “fundamental asymmetry” in the interactional domain (p.6).
4. See also (DeLanda, 2000; Eirado & Passos, 2004; Protevi, 2010).
5. For Deleuze, the active-passive poles describe what takes place on the level of the materiality of bodies, not what is expressed in language (incorporeals). Bodies and language are inseparable for Deleuze, but they do not respond to causal relations and one level does not take precedence over the other.
6. My translation.
7. My translation.
8. “to record as neutrally as possible to avoid influencing participants while they are commenting” (p.14); “The participants thus express as naturally as possible what they aimed for, did, expected, felt, thought, and perceived during the past experience and practice.” (p.15)
9. The expression “In on it” refers to the title of a play by Daniel MacIvor in which three stories that intersect in different perspectives.

References

- Bains, P. (2005). Subjectless subjectivities. In B. Massumi (Ed), *A shock to thought: expression after Deleuze and Guattari*. Routledge.
- DeLanda, M. (2000). Deleuze, Diagrams, and the Genesis of Form. *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 45(1), 33–41.
- Deleuze, G. (1969). *Logique du sens*. Éditions de Minuit.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2005). *A Thousand Plateaus*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Despret, V. (2021). *Autobiographie d'un poulpe*. Actes Sud.
- Eirado, A. D. (2005). Sentido e experiência no âmbito da atividade cognitiva. *Revista Do Departamento de Psicologia -UFF*, 17(2), 35–43. <https://doi.org/10.1590/s0104-80232005000200004>
- Eirado, A. D., & Passos, E. (2004). A noção de autonomia e a dimensão do virtual. *Psicologia Em Estudo*, 9(1), 77–85. <https://doi.org/10.1590/s1413-73722004000100010>
- Latour, B. (2010). *On the modern cult of the factish gods*. Duke University Press.
- Protevi, J. (2010). Adding Deleuze to the mix. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 9(3), 417–436. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-010-9171-1>
- Tucker, I. (2012). Deleuze, sense, and life: Marking the parameters of a psychology of individuation. *Theory & Psychology*, 22(6), 771–785. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354312442787>
- Varela, F. (1991). Organism: a meshwork of selfless selves. In A. I. Tauber (Ed), *Organism and the Origins of Self*. Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Varela, F. (1999). Steps to a science of inter-being: unfolding the dharma implicit in modern cognitive science. In G. Watson, S. Batchelor, & G. Claxton (Eds), *The psychology of awakening: buddhism, science and our day-to day lives* (pp. 71–89). New York: Rider/Randol House.
- Varela, F., & Shear, J. (1999). First-person Methodologies: What, Why, How? *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6(2–3), 1–14.
- Weber, A., & Varela, F. J. (2002). Life after Kant: Natural purposes and the autopoietic foundations of biological individuality. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 1(2), 97–125. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020368120174>

Author biography

Leticia Renault is a collaborator researcher at Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal. She has a PhD in Psychology (UFF, Brazil) and has developed works in the area of cognitive psychology, with special interest in the enactivist approach and embodied cognition. She also worked in the area of mental health. Her research interests are: enactivist approaches, participatory and collaborative research methodologies, first-person methodologies.