

Russell T. Hurlburt and Eric Schwitzgebel

Describing Inner Experience: Proponent Meets Skeptic
Cambridge, MA: Bradford/MIT, 2007, 322 pp.

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Compulsive *JCS* readers, who devour each issue before the next arrives, will have read at least three articles by Schwitzgebel (in 9:5–6; 11:7–8; 14:3) and one by Hurlburt (11:7–8). They'll know about Hurlburt's Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) beeper methodology. Recognizing that introspection is neither easy nor infallible, it nevertheless requires subjects to report on whatever is in their minds whenever a beep sounds at random intervals. As avid readers will also know, Schwitzgebel is a sceptic about persons' accuracy in even *knowing* — let alone *reporting* — their inner experience, and has used Hurlburt's beeper method to determine whether inner experience is (using a 'soup' metaphor) 'rich' (that we are constantly experiencing background input from each sensory modality) or 'thin' (that we only experience the things in sharp focus).¹

At the 2002 Tucson conference, Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel 'presented opposing papers on the matter and instantly became friends, arguing over dinner, then over margaritas, then again the next day, then in the airport waiting for flights home'. While at Tucson, Schwitzgebel became a beeper subject. Then they undertook a joint project, using the DES method that Hurlburt has been developing since 1974, with a young college graduate in philosophy and psychology named 'Melanie' as subject — which led to this book.

In the opening and closing chapters, they present their respective views and methods. They maintain that in the 1990s 'introspection has re-entered' psychology and philosophy 'with little examination'. While 'without introspection, we might not even know that we *are* conscious in the relevant sense' (p. 53), introspection, they say, is used less carefully in modern consciousness science than in the heyday of the 'introspectionists' over 100 years ago!

Hurlburt lists guidelines for a controlled use of introspection such as: be sceptical; introspect with little delay; target specific natural brief episodes; disturb the experience as little as possible; don't ask participants to infer causation; separate reports from interpretations. He believes that DES reports generally mirror inner experience

[1] After hearing Schwitzgebel use these metaphors at the recent Tucson conference, David Chalmers commented to me that these are strange opposites — for example, Paris Hilton is

because the method is sophisticated. Interviewers become proficient in bracketing presuppositions, while leading the witness is less problematic with reports about actually occurring events. Subjects in general are sceptical yet say they give accurate and complete reports; they show no reluctance to report on whatever they think is in their minds, and there is more variability in reports than would be expected if people were merely uttering implicit folk theories.

Schwitzgebel 'inverts' Descartes' view that knowledge of ones own mind serves as the basis of ones knowledge of the world. Instead, according to Schwitzgebel, people spend most of their time thinking about the outer world. 'The "inner world" of conscious experience is reflected on only rarely and is known only poorly' (p. 53). This leads to introspective error: experience is fleeting, we're not in the habit of attending introspectively to experience, the concepts and categories to characterize experience are limited and derivative, and reports of experience are likely to be distorted by pre-existing theories and situational demands. As mentioned above, Schwitzgebel holds that self report is hampered by an intrinsic difficulty in even *knowing* what one is thinking — let alone translating it into language!

Melanie wore a private easily-detectable unambiguous beeper, as she went about her normal daily business, for 3+ hours a day for 6 days. When she heard the beep (in random sequence six times per day), Melanie jotted down notes about her inner experience *just before* the beep. Within 24 hours after each beeping day, the three of them held an expositional interview, in which Melanie gave more detail and the interviewers raised questions to clarify her report. Hurlburt defends his method against Schwitzgebel's objections that the episodes of reporting are too-few and too-sketchy, and that there can be considerable memory failure and confabulation because of the delay between beeps and interviews. In some previous experiments, Hurlburt varied delay times and lengths of notes made after beeps. He contends that interviews seem very similar. The middle six chapters present verbatim selections and summaries of these interviews.

Hurlburt took the lead and interviewed Melanie in person, with Schwitzgebel on speaker phone. Interspersed among the verbatim reports and other chapters, are 88 'boxes' in which one or both write comments about the verbatim, with titles such as 'doubts about Melanie's "inner thought" voice', 'Melanie's and Eric's believability as subjects ...', and 'Consolidating Melanie's sense that she is self-analytical'. I experienced a ping-pong effect reading along in a verbatim and then stopping to read a referenced box in which Schwitzgebel said he had no confidence that Melanie was reporting her experience

accurately, or such. But this is a great alternation between the careful parsing of first-person experience and a debate involving Locke, Berkeley, Wundt, Dennett, and Tye. Unlike most, *these* verbatim chapters are anything but boring.

Hurlburt shows an almost flawless use of a Rogerian-Husserlian interpersonal phenomenological dialogue which takes self-report very seriously, probes the participant's reported experience, and helps the latter 'bracket' her implicit folk-psychology assumptions. The authors acknowledge that these verbatim reports must be quite different than if Eric had not been involved with Russ — with Eric being relatively untrained in DES, having a disembodied presence, and having a free license to probe Melanie's report as often and almost extensively as he wished. But this trialogue is great! In my own soundless inner-speech, I kept saying, '*This is so good!*'

I especially appreciated the many times Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel discussed the topic 'Are people mostly alike?' (as in Box 7.4) Hurlburt comments that Schwitzgebel has problems accepting some of Melanie's reports because of the 'if-I-don't-do-it-then-others-must-not-do-it-either' syndrome. Schwitzgebel partially concedes, but assumes that 'people are probably mostly similar if there are no gross differences in behavior or physiology'. This argument, of course, is why people did not accept the reality of synaesthesia for so long. Hurlburt counters: 'it is a large mistake to think that there's prima facie reason to suppose that people are mostly similar', and then describes some of the range of mental life that has been 'sampled' using his technique — in which people report very different mixes of inner speech, inner hearing, images, sensory awareness, thinking without words, images or other symbols, indeterminate images, 'feeling fact of body', kinesthetic imagery, and feelings. Hurlburt concludes: 'so, yes, I think people are importantly different when it comes to inner experience'.

I just *had to be* the reviewer of this book. You recall Schwitzgebel's and Hurlburt's opposing papers and margaritas at Tucson? Well, while I missed out on the dinner and margaritas, I *also* gave a paper at that conference. All three of us heard each others' papers, over two concurrent sessions. In the Q/A of my paper on mental imagery, both Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel challenged my *knowledge* of my self report that I am a mental non-imager! Hurlburt even made a vague offer to 'put me on the beeper'. I was writing the Tucson 2002 conference review, so did not follow through on his offer. So, Schwitzgebel gets the great book with Hurlburt and dinner and margaritas — and I just get a lousy tee-shirt and two reviews!