

Penultimate version of

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Comment on BBS Target Article

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Unsymbolized Thinking, Sensory Awareness, and Mindreading

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Abstract

Carruthers views unsymbolized thinking as “purely propositional” and therefore a potential threat to his mindreading-is-prior position. I hold that unsymbolized thinking may involve (non-symbolic) sensory aspects and therefore poses no threat to mindreading-is-prior. Furthermore, Descriptive Experience Sampling lends some empirical support to the view that access to our own propositional attitudes is interpretative, not introspective.

Unsymbolized Thinking, Sensory Awareness, and Mindreading

Section 8 of Carruthers’ (this issue) target article considers my Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) work, particularly its finding of unsymbolized thinking (Hurlburt, 1990, 1993, 1997; Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006; Hurlburt & Akhter, 2008). Carruthers implies that I characterize unsymbolized thinking as being purely propositional: “many subjects also report the presence of ‘purely propositional’, unsymbolized thoughts at the moment of the beep.” As a result, he supposes that my claim that unsymbolized thoughts are introspected (Hurlburt 1990, 1993) might present a difficulty for his mindreading-is-prior view, which holds that purely propositional events are not introspected but are, instead, interpreted.

Against this supposition, Carruthers argues that the introspection of unsymbolized thinking is an illusion; what is mistaken for introspection is a swift but unconscious interpretation of external events (1996) and/or internal events such as images (this issue). As a result, he concludes (this issue) that DES is neutral regarding Carruthers’ mindreading view: “although there is no *support* to be derived for a ‘mindreading is

prior' account from the introspection sampling data, neither is there, as yet, any evidence to count against it.”

I think Hurlburt and Akhter (2008) successfully rebutted Carruthers' (1996) claim that the introspection of unsymbolized thinking is an illusion, and the target article does not change my mind. However, I agree that unsymbolized thinking does not threaten Carruthers' mindreading-is-prior position, not because unsymbolized thinking is an unconscious interpretation but because it is not “purely propositional.” Unsynchronized thinking is a directly apprehendable experience that may well have some kind of (probably subtle) sensory presentation, is therefore not purely propositional, and for that reason is not at odds with the mindreading-is-prior view.

In seeking to discover why Carruthers might hold, mistakenly, that I believe that unsynchronized thinking is “purely propositional,” I reviewed what I have written on unsynchronized thinking and discovered this sentence: “Unsynchronized Thinking is the experience of an inner process which is clearly a thought and which has a clear meaning, but which seems to take place without symbols of any kind, that is, *without* words, images, *bodily sensations*, etc.” (Hurlburt, 1993, p. 5, emphasis added). “Without...bodily sensations” might be understood to mean “purely propositional,” but that is not at all what I intended. I should have written “without...bodily *sensory awareness*” instead of “without...bodily *sensations*.”

“Sensory awareness” is a term of art in DES: “A sensory awareness is a sensory experience (itch, visual taking-in, hotness, pressure, hearing) that is in itself a primary theme or focus for the subject” (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006, p. 223). That is, sensory awareness is not merely a bodily or external sensation, but is a sensation that is itself a main thematic focus of experience. Thus, for example, Jack picks up a can of Coke, and, while preparing to drink, particularly notices the cold, slippery moistness against his fingertips. Jill picks up a can of Coke, and, while preparing to drink, says to herself in inner speech, “Carruthers is right!” Both Jack and Jill are having bodily sensations of the coldness, the moistness, the slipperiness of the can (neither drops it). Jack's central focus is on the cold, slippery moistness; therefore, he is experiencing a sensory awareness as DES defines it. Jill's central focus is on her inner speech, not on the can; therefore she is *not* experiencing a sensory awareness as defined by DES (see Hurlburt & Heavey, forthcoming).

Thus unsynchronized thinking, as I and my DES colleagues describe the phenomenon, is an experience that is directly apprehended at the moment of the DES beep but which does not involve the direct apprehension of verbal, imaginal, or other symbols and does not involve sensory awareness as DES defines that term. The apprehension of an unsynchronized thought may involve the apprehension of some sensory bits, so long as those sensory bits are not organized into a coherent, central, thematized sensory awareness. Thus I believe that unsynchronized thinking is a perceptual event, just as are inner speech, visual imagery, and feelings; it is therefore not purely propositional and is therefore not a threat to the mindreading-is-prior view.

## Access to propositional attitudes is interpretive

Far from being neutral, DES lends empirical support to the main thrust of Carruthers' analysis that propositional attitudes are interpreted, not observed. The DES procedure trains subjects carefully, repeatedly, and iteratively (Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006; Hurlburt and Heavey, 2006; Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007) to distinguish between directly observed (Carruthers' "perceptual") events and all else; that training typically requires several days. DES tries, moment by moment, to cleave to the directly observed and to bracket all that is inferred, supposed, presupposed. There is no a priori assumption about what is or is not directly observable. Attitudes are not singled out; if an attitude is directly observed at the moment of some beep, then that attitude is the proper target of DES. If not, not.

As a result of 30 years of carefully questioning subjects about their momentary experiences, my sense is that trained DES subjects who wear a beeper and inspect what is directly before the footlights of consciousness at the moment of the beeps almost never directly apprehend an attitude. Inadequately trained subjects, particularly on their first sampling day, occasionally *report* that they are experiencing some attitude. But when those reports are scrutinized in the usual DES way, querying carefully about any perceptual aspects, those subjects retreat from the attitude-was-directly-observed position, apparently coming to recognize that their attitude had been merely "background" or "context." That seems entirely consonant with the view that these subjects had initially inferred their own attitudes in the same way they infer the attitudes of others. (I note that subjects do not similarly retreat from their initial reports about unsymbolized thinking; they continue to maintain that the unsymbolized thought had been directly observed.)

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