

A case study in bracketing presuppositions: Agency

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This paper has two goals. First, it illustrates how presuppositions present themselves. Second, it amplifies the comment that Russ made (**Presuppositions and Background Assumptions** ***REF) about **Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons**: that their own presuppositions would likely stand toxically in the way of their discovering the important features of agency.

Our interest here is the bracketing of presuppositions, which we think is of primary importance (see **Presuppositions and Background Assumptions**). We use **Horgan and Timmons** as an example because we believe that their interest in agency is important, and we hope constructively to contribute to the investigation of agency by considering an excerpt from the third-sampling-day expositional interview of “Walt” conducted primarily by graduate student Neda Raymond under the supervision of Russ. Neda is a DES interviewer in training. She is knowledgeable about DES and recognizes the importance of the bracketing of presuppositions and is developing the bracketing skill. Focusing on a developing skill will allow us to deconstruct the bracketing process therefore expose the process to sunlight.

Of interest here is Walt’s sample 3.4, in which Walt described himself as paying attention to his body posture as he was running up the stairs. Immediately following that interview, Russ said to Neda that it had appeared that she had at least initially not believed Walt’s account of sample 3.4, and Neda agreed. Russ commented that this disbelief probably reflected the operation of a presupposition that Neda had only partially bracketed: the presupposition still evidenced itself enough that Russ could sense Neda’s disbelief. Neda agreed. As part of her endeavor to acquire the bracketing of presuppositions skill, Russ suggested that Neda write, as soon as possible, a diary entry chronicling her reactions as she had gone through the sample 3.4 interview. The object was to try to capture her whole experience, from when Walt first said he was going up the stairs to after the meeting when Russ said it seemed that Neda didn’t believe him. Neda was to write this diary entry as a personal, private account, by Neda privately for Neda alone. After she had finished writing, she could elect to show it to Russ, or first bowdlerize it and then show it to Russ, or not to show it to him at all—that choice would be Neda’s to make without prejudice *after* she had written the private-for-Neda account. Five hours after the sampling interview, Neda sent the diary entry to Russ with a note saying it was exactly as she had originally written it—no bowdlerization necessary. Thus the diary is retrospective, 4-5 hours after the original interview, which, while a long time by DES standards, is short by comparison to most retrospections.

We believe that Neda’s diary highlights with unusual transparency the nature of the bracketing of presuppositions, so we present it below, inserted into an unedited transcript of the interview. The diary was written from Neda’s memory; that is, Neda did *not* view the videotape of the interview before she wrote the diary. The “Neda’s Diary:”

entries are slightly edited, leaving the sense intact but correcting irrelevancies such as misspellings, etc., and breaking the entries apart to aid the comprehension of the reader.

[Russ: Neda is to be commended for her willingness to expose her private process to our public inspection.] We number each conversational turn to facilitate subsequent references to them.

Interview 3.4 (third sampling day, fourth beep):

Neda:¹ So what was going on in beep 3.4?

Walt:² Okay. 3.4 was in the evening of Sunday. My son was upstairs and he was in his crib and upset, and I was running upstairs to get him. And so at the beep you guys caught me about half way up the stairs. Um. My...what was in my attention was the... kind of the action of going upstairs, so the movements required to do that. So I was concentrating on, or I was aware of, um y’know, the physical act of moving. I was aware of kind of the associated tension in my y’know legs and back, and I was aware of my balance as well, basically that kind of trying not to fall over.

Neda’s Diary: My immediate thought is, ‘Yeah, right! There’s no way you’re paying attention to that level of detail as you’re running toward your son’s crying. You *must* have noticed the physical tension and balance stuff *after* the beep, when you’re taking stock of the situation’. I’m not sure of my precise thought at that moment, but it’s something pretty close to this.

Comments:(1) Presuppositions are impossible to specify in advance, both because there are so many of them and because, by definition, they exist as part of the unexamined fabric of our understanding of the world. Prior to this sampling, Neda likely *never* would have identified someone paying attention to his bodily posture as he runs upstairs as a triggering a presupposition. And yet that presupposition is there, poised, ready to go when activated.

(2) Presuppositions interfere with the ability to apprehend experience faithfully. Setting aside for the moment whether Walt’s experience actually was centered on his body as he went up the stairs, Neda’s presupposition makes it difficult for her to apprehend *whatever* experience Walt is trying to describe. At the very least, Neda’s attention is divided between her own thoughts and what Walt is saying.

(3) Presuppositions betray an already tilted playing field. Neda’s disbelief comes not in the slightest because of what Walt said or didn’t say or how he said or didn’t say it; she was a disbeliever *pre* his saying anything.

(4) Presuppositions operate immediately—Neda doesn’t *gradually* become disbelieving, she is *immediately* disbelieving. She was probably disbelieving well before Walt had even finished giving his opening paragraph—probably was disbelieving before she really understood what Walt was saying. That is the *pre* of *presupposition*.

(5) Presuppositions have substantial personal power. Neda’s reaction is not merely a cognitive “background belief” as Eric describes them (“working assumptions about what kinds of things are relatively likely and unlikely, how the world divides up and fits

together”; **Presuppositions and Background Assumptions**, ***REF). Neda’s reaction is an organismic, emotionally charged way of orienting.

(6) Presuppositions are imperatives, not skepticisms. Neda *didn’t believe* Walt; it was not merely that she wondered whether what he said was true.

N:³ So *right* at that moment of the beep, [snaps fingers] right before that beep kind of disturbs your awareness...

W:⁴ um hm.

N:⁵ ...are you paying attention to or concentrating or aware of y’know your balance and the tension in your legs and back? Or would you say y’know after the beep goes off when you’re kind of looking back at the situation, that’s what...

Neda’s Diary: I also begin to feel immediately “off” somehow – uncomfortable or something along those lines. So I immediately ask him, ‘so, RIGHT at the moment of the beep you say you’re running up stairs, feeling tension in your legs, trying not to fall, is that right?’ (or something to that effect) and he says Yes, he is.

Comments: (7) The reaction to presuppositions, like the presuppositions themselves (see 5) is organismic. Neda’s bodily discomfort is a sign that her organism is resisting her own presupposition. Or perhaps the discomfort is a sign of the presupposition itself—a negative reaction to someone who would say such foolish things.

(8) Presuppositions can be bracketed. Neda *has* a presupposition, but nonetheless she asks a pretty good, pretty even-handed question, giving Walt the opportunity to clarify what he meant. That is, she is pretty successful in bracketing an existing presupposition. However,...

(9) Bracketing presuppositions is a skill, and whereas Neda asks a moderately skilled presupposition-bracketed question, it is not highly skilled. Her tone, among other things, gives her away: “*Right* at that moment” has a disbelieving stress on *right*. Such aspects, while subtle, were evident enough that Russ noticed the implied criticism (and so, presumably, might Walt).

(10) There is no predetermined or fixed level of required skill for the bracketing of presuppositions. It varies based on the person, situation, etc. Apparently, Walt was not as sensitive to the implied criticism as was Russ, so Neda’s bracketing was good enough in this situation. Had Walt been, for whatever reason, more sensitive, her question might not have been adequate—the implied criticism might have inhibited his attempts to describe phenomena.

W:⁶ I can, I can *definitely* say that I was aware of my balance. The, y’know, maybe the tension in my legs and back was after?

Neda’s Diary: And he says “well maybe the tension was right after the beep, but the balancing was definitely at the beep,” and so now I think to myself, “Hah! So I was right! There was no tension! He became aware of that AFTER the beep. I *knew* it!” (There

WAS actually a slight, “told you so” tinge to this thought, like I somehow had won this round of “truth seeking”).

Comments: (11) Neda’s presuppositions are, at least in part, *about Neda*, not about Walt. *Neda wants to win*. This has this corollary:

(11a) Presuppositions distract. Wanting to win necessarily distracts from the intention of wanting *to apprehend with fidelity*. (The wanting to win is further evidence that (5) presuppositions are organismic, not merely cognitive, processes.) Wanting to win, wanting to show I’m right, wanting to show that the other is wrong are frequent but not ubiquitous characteristics of presuppositions.

[pause]

N:⁷ So *right* at the moment of the beep you’re kind of aware of your balance?

Neda’s Diary: Still not believing, I ask again, “but RIGHT at the moment of the beep, are you actually aware of the tension in your legs and trying to balance? Or are you just running up the stairs?”

Comments: (12) Presuppositions color experience. Note that Neda’s diary reconstruction of what she said is somewhat more negative than were her actual words as transcribed from the videotape: as do most people, she recalls her *intentions* as much or more than her actual words. That is, she recalls herself as asking, disbelievingly, “are you actually aware” when she actually said, much more neutrally, “you’re kind of aware.”

W:⁸ Um hmm.

N:⁹ And what... how is that awareness occurring. When you say you’re aware of your balance, can you say more about [voice softens] what you mean about that?
[pause]

Neda’s Diary: As I’m asking him this last part¹, I start to realize that what I’m saying doesn’t quite make sense, and I’m feeling a little strange about my own line of questioning. I’m feeling a little uncomfortable asking him the question. I was feeling

¹ We make here a methodological comment about the structure of this paper. When Neda’s Diary says “As I’m asking him this last part,” it may appear that Neda’s diary was written in response to viewing the transcript of the interview—that is, “this last part” may appear to refer to what she actually said at N⁹. We emphasize that Neda wrote the diary a few hours after the interview while recalling the interview from memory, not from the transcript (which didn’t yet exist) and not from watching the videotape (to which she didn’t have access during the diary writing). Thus “this last part” refers to the last part of the previous sentence in her diary, that is, to the “Or are you just running up the stairs?” which is the last sentence in her diary entry shown after N⁷. We have “torn apart” the diary and inserted it at what seemed relevant places in the transcript as a literary device—as a way of making the diary accessible for the reader. This is one of a few places where that tearing apart slightly distorts the original intention. In our judgment, that slight distortion does not materially affect the impact of the presentation. However, we do wish our process to be transparent, because the distinction between a retrospection after a few hours and a reconstruction from a transcript can sometimes be important (see Hurlburt, in preparation, ch. 7).]

slightly uncomfortable before this point, like I was in competition with him to PROVE that my belief was correct, and that he couldn't possibly be paying attention to balancing, because *I'd* never do that in a similar situation. But I kind of started thinking along the lines of, "Why am I so hell bent on 'proving' something about his experience that I think is true?" "Why am I not just accepting what he has to say about his experience? After all, it's HIS experience not mine." (Again, I didn't think those exact words, but those words capture my thought process well).

Comments: As we said at (8), bracketing presuppositions does *not* require *eliminating* presuppositions. Neda's question at N⁹ is a good, level-playing-field question, and she asks that despite the fact that her presupposition still exists. That is, Neda has found a way to set her presupposition aside, put it out of play, ask a good question anyway—that's what we mean by "bracket."

(13) Bracketing presuppositions is not easy. Neda here has a real battle on her hands, not between her and Walt but between her presupposition about what people are aware of when they run up the stairs (i.e., not their balance) and the part of her genuinely trying to understand what Walt was experiencing at that moment.

W:¹⁰ [tentatively] I, I... um... It's kind of hard to describe the feeling of balance. Um, it's, y'know, whether, the best uh, the best way I could describe would be y'know is continually asking myself the question Am I about to fall? And the answer being No, or Yes, depending on whether I have my balance or not. So, um, so I guess you could say my, my spatial relation to the stairs, where I was in between the two railings, how I was angled one way or the other, forward or back, that all kind of comes to play in my awareness of balance. So my physical position. Would that, does that help?

Neda's Diary: At this point I am feeling rather uncomfortable with myself, and also kind of suddenly realizing Dr. Hurlburt is in the room; I'm feeling a little embarrassed too. I decide to "go with" what Walt is saying regarding his physicality and paying attention to not falling over. I'm still not really convinced at this point that what he's saying was occurring was actually occurring, but I'm not feeling "in competition" with him to prove my own correctness at this point.

Comments: (14) The bracketing skill is acquired over time. Neda's decision to "go with" what Walt is saying is *not* a substantial improvement over her earlier presupposition to disbelieve him. The highly skilled interviewer would not be caught in that either/or, but would be continually evaluating the extent to which Walt's talk is consistent, subjunctified, unusual, and so on. So the fact that Neda recognized a presupposition and strove to bracket it is better than merely unthinkingly going along with the presupposition, but it does not *solve* the presupposition problem. It is a step toward that solution, which will ripen only with substantial practice.

N:¹¹ Okay. So you're saying... right at the moment of the beep you said, you said a couple of ways that this awareness of your balance was kind of manifesting...

W:¹² Um hm.

N:¹³ You're asking yourself over and over...

W:¹⁴ [interrupts] Um. Well it's not really.... That's the best way to describe it. [N: Okay] It's simply a, it's simply.... [sighs] The best way I could describe it would be um an awareness of whether or not I'm going to fall over. So I'm not, I'm not actually like mentally asking myself, Am I gonna fall, Am I gonna fall, Am I gonna fall. It's more just being conscious of whether or not... of the outcome of my physical positioning. Does that better clarify?

Neda's Diary: As he continues to speak about the details of his experience and as I'm listening more carefully, I start to believe him a little more, especially when he talks about feeling like he's thinking "don't fall, don't fall, don't fall" but isn't actually thinking that, is just using those words to try to convey what he was experiencing – this sense of balancing as he's running up the stairs.

Comments: As part of the bracketing-skill-acquisition described in comment (14) above, this realization can help Neda become more convinced that the bracketing of presuppositions can actually be successful, which can contribute to her becoming more skillful at bracketing in the future.

Neda's Retrospection

Neda: That's the end of my diary entry. Now that I review my diary writing, I see that it does not convey how surprising was the suddenness and the strength with which this presupposition operated, and also its specificity. The presupposition arose not merely because I found Walt's experience hard to believe, but apparently because that disbelief triggered something deep in me. I had found other parts of Walt's sampling hard to believe; for example, in his sample 3.5 Walt was eating a banana and said that at the moment of the beep he was tasting yellowness—a light, fluffy slightly sweet taste. That is, he said he was tasting the *color yellow itself*, not tasting the banana that happened to be yellow. That was mildly hard to believe, but I did *not* fight against that experience as I had fought against the running-up-stairs experience. My own experience in the interview for the two beeps was dramatically different. I strongly wanted to prove him wrong in 3.4, whereas I wanted to figure out what he meant and whether it was believable in 3.5. I have no explanation for why the running-up-stairs experience would trigger a strong reaction in me while the tasting-yellow would not.

Retrospectively I'm surprised at the strength of my resistance to the running-upstairs experience. As far as I know, I don't care one way or the other about what people feel when they run up stairs, so my resistance seems entirely out of character. And I find it striking how fast this all happened. I felt *immediately* uncomfortable in a way that is hard for me to describe. I don't know whether it is his account, my disbelief of it, or the conflict between my disbelief and the intention to bracket presuppositions that made me uncomfortable, but whatever it was, it happened *immediately*, out of the blue.

I believed, prior to my DES experience, that my presuppositions were akin to generalizations, were obvious, were easy to “put aside,” didn’t color my apprehension of others’ experience as long as I was aware that the presuppositions exist. Now I think this may be true in some cases, that certain presuppositions are knowable ahead of time and therefore can be bracketed with ease. However, this example illustrates that presuppositions are not always that straightforward or predictable.

Comments: (15) Presuppositions are themselves invisible. Neda observes her *reaction* to the presupposition, but carefully considered, Neda does not know whether her resistance arises from her feelings about agency (*Walt-is-focused-on-his-posture-while-running*), her feelings about maternity (*Walt-is-focused-on-running-while-his-baby-is-screaming*), or about some other aspect of Walt’s interchange, or to some combination thereof. At most, all Neda experiences are some *results* of her presupposition: the disbelief and bodily discomfort.

Agency

Russ: In the conclusion of **Presuppositions and Background Assumptions** I raised the possibility that analysis could not resolve the bracketing of presuppositions problem—that practice, not analysis, is required. We’ve presented here one example of that practice, trying to illustrate, where the rubber meets the road, how presuppositions operate—without warning, powerfully, personally, irrationally. This example also illustrates how the *bracketing* of presuppositions operates—Neda asked moderately skilled, relatively level-playing-field-questions despite her presuppositions and her inner battle against it. Had Neda not recognized the importance of bracketing presuppositions, she probably never would have apprehended Walt’s stair-climbing bodily focus *at all*.

This example also illustrates why I object to Eric’s referring in **Presuppositions and Background Assumptions** to presuppositions as “background beliefs” or “assumptions.” Background beliefs and assumptions are neutral terms, comments on the base rates of phenomena. Neda is probably right about the low base rate of people’s attention to their balance while running upstairs. But that base rate has little to do with Neda’s presuppositional reaction, which is anything but neutral. Had Neda’s reaction been tied simply to the base rate, her process would have been something like: “Hm. Walt is saying something pretty unusual here. I should ask very careful questions to make sure that I understand what he means and try to discover if he really intends what he says.” But her actual reaction was “I want to win!” reflecting a presupposition in action. Presuppositions are *not* merely reactions to low base rate phenomena.

Because this example is (or at least might be) about agency, it also illustrates how the failure to bracket presuppositions can be toxic to an investigation. For example, **Horgan and Timmons** seem to suggest asking *everyone* about the sense of agency. If Walt were a participant in such a study, and he reported that he was running upstairs, **Horgan and Timmons’s** interviewers would ask him if he felt himself purposefully running, and he would no doubt say Yes. Thus it might appear that **Horgan and Timmons’s** interviewers would do a good job of apprehending Walt’s agentic experience. However, the problem is that if they asked the same questions of *everyone* who was running upstairs, nearly everyone would say that *of course* they were

purposefully running upstairs. That is unfortunate because it makes Walt's experience of attending to his running seem quite ordinary when actually it is quite unusual.

This, then, is why I think presuppositions are toxic. **Horgan and Timmons's** presuppositional interest in the experience of agency makes it highly *unlikely* that they would discover some fundamentally important aspects of the experience of agency—that some rare individuals have powerful agentive experiences whereas most people have little or none. That is indeed an important and fascinating result about the experience of agency, which I have called the “doing of” (Hurlburt, 1993). Most people when they run simply run; a *few* people when they run experience the *doing of* running—the premeditated placing of one foot in front of the other, the losing and maintaining of balance, and so on. But to *discover* the doing of running, investigators would have to have their presuppositions bracketed.

I applaud **Horgan and Timmon's** interest in the experience of agency—my sense is that carefully exploring the *doing of* experience would shed important light on consciousness science and psychology. I originally wrote about the doing of experiences in my 1993 discussion of anxiety. Walt was a subject in Neda's PTSD research; PTSD is a disorder where anxiety is prominent. Hmm! There's likely a lot to be learned here, either that anxiety causes the *doing of* experience, or that the *doing of* experience causes anxiety (and so on). Sorting that through could be a substantial contribution.

But that sorting-through must be undertaken, I think, with due attention to the bracketing of presuppositions.

Learning to bracket and/or eliminate presuppositions is (or at least can be) a long-term, probably lifetime, endeavor. That learning can be a spiraling process: Through this incident, Neda incrementally improved her skills of recognizing the arising of her own presuppositions and of bracketing them when they arise. At the same time she is likely to become more accepting of the existence of her own imperfections/presuppositions, and therefore may have, incrementally, less of a battle with them in the future. And as she has less of a battle, she may be able to spot newly uncovered presuppositions even faster and more skillfully. And so on. This is a lifetime process because it is presuppositions all the way down, and newly uncovered presuppositions may present new and stronger methods of defense.

The good news is that DES, with its relentless focus on concrete moments of specific experience, can present an endless stream of opportunities for presuppositions to arise, and therefore can set the occasion for an endless stream of battles, which can provide an endless stream of learning opportunities. That's what Hurlburt and Akhter (2006, p. 284) meant by “If you let it, the randomness of the beep will break you, one presupposition at a time.”

References

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