

Describing Inner Experience?

Proponent Meets Skeptic

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Preface

Can inner experience (“phenomenal consciousness” in contemporary philosophical lingo) be accurately apprehended and faithfully described? The question is crucially important, both for a humanistic understanding of who we are and what we know about ourselves and for the newly burgeoning scientific field of “consciousness studies.” One of us, Russ, is an optimist, believing that adequate methods make faithful descriptions of experience possible. The other, Eric, is a pessimist, believing that people are prone to considerable introspective error even under the best of conditions. Five years ago at a conference in Tucson, we 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 our respective flights home.

This book is the product of our best attempt to make concrete progress in our dispute. We felt a need to do something more than simply continue with the usual methods of abstract argument, historical reference, and citation of favorite experiments. Thus, we recruited someone not party to the dispute (we’ll call her “Melanie”), asked her to describe her experience in a way Russ found suitable – by random sampling and interview – and debated the extent to which the resulting descriptions could be believed. The bulk of this book is a lightly edited transcript of these interviews, in which Melanie makes her best effort to describe individual moments of her experience in careful detail, and Russ and Eric question her,

argue with each other, and further pursue their disagreements (and connect with the relevant psychological and philosophical literature) in side boxes. Although Melanie's experiences are in certain respects quite ordinary, we think the reader will find at least some of her descriptions surprising, intriguing, and suggestive. The book begins and concludes with chapters expressing our different points of view and our different takes on what we accomplished and failed to accomplish.

Russ thanks Chris Heavey and the group of psychology graduate students at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas who have been involved with inner experience research. They read earlier drafts of this manuscript and provided illuminating comments and discussion. Special thanks to Sharon Jones-Forrester (who transcribed the interviews), Todd Seibert and Aadee Mizrachi (who checked the transcripts for accuracy), and Sarah Akhter (who consulted on many phases of the project).

Eric would like to thank the U.C. Riverside graduate students, from both philosophy and psychology, who read early drafts of the transcripts in a Spring 2004 seminar; the many colleagues and students – far too many to track – with whom he's had illuminating conversations on the topics of this book; and especially his wife Pauline and son Davy. Pauline gave detailed comments on the entire manuscript, and neither sees why a tenured professor should need to go in to work every weekday from 8 to 5:30 all summer when he could be on the beach or throwing paper airplanes from their treehouse. Eric's not sure he fully

understands his behavior either; but then, of course, he's a pessimist about introspection and self-knowledge.

Russ and Eric both express substantial gratitude to Melanie for her willingness to expose both her private experiences and her ability to access them to our pointed, and now public, examinations. She received nothing in return other than the opportunity to help out two people struggling to figure out important things and whatever personal insight might occur along the way. We hope the reader will respect Melanie's privacy; we trust that any reader who by chance discovers her real name will decline to make that public.

