

**Review of Russell T. Hurlburt's & Eric Schwitzgebel's
*Describing Inner Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic***

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***Describing Inner Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic*
Russell T. Hurlburt & Eric Schwitzgebel
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What happens when a psychologist who's spent the last 30 years developing a method of introspective sampling and a philosopher whose central research project is casting skeptical doubt on the accuracy of introspection write a book together? The result, Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel's thought-provoking *Describing Inner Experience?*, is both encouraging and disheartening. Encouraging, because the book is a fine example of fruitful and open-minded interdisciplinary engagement; disheartening, because it makes clear just how difficult it is to justify the accuracy of introspective methods in psychology and philosophy. Since debates in consciousness studies largely turn on fine points of introspective detail, this is no minor methodological stumbling block.

The book emerged out of an extended debate between psychologist Hurlburt and philosopher Schwitzgebel over the possibility of accurate introspective reports. Both have a detailed knowledge of the failings of late 19th century introspectionist psychology and both recognize the central importance of introspective reports in the mind sciences. They differ in their attitudes towards a solution: Hurlburt, optimistic that his "Descriptive Experience Sampling" (DES) method avoids the shortcomings of earlier approaches; Schwitzgebel pessimistic, based on his ongoing explorations into the surprising unreliability of introspection. After arguing at a conference, and then by email, Schwitzgebel agreed to try Hurlburt's DES on himself. Both recognized, however, that this was not sufficient to demonstrate the method in its best light. Instead, they arranged for Hurlburt to examine a single subject, with Eric as an active observer, free to question and probe as he saw fit. Enter Melanie, the subject of this unusual psychological test and in many ways the heart of the book. Melanie (not her real name), a college graduate with a joint degree in psychology and philosophy, employed DES to introspectively sample her experience, under the guidance of Hurlburt and with Schwitzgebel as

cross-examiner. The resulting snap-shot of DES at work, together with the disputes and reflections of the authors, makes up *Describing Inner Experience*.

The book is organized around selected verbatim transcripts of Melanie's DES experience, bookended by introductory material and concluding remarks from the authors. Hurlburt opens by sketching the DES method and lauding some of its purported success. Schwitzgebel then summarizes his main worries about introspection. The transcribed interviews with Melanie make up the middle section of the book, heavily interspersed with parenthetical boxes where proponent and skeptic duke it out over fine (and not so fine) points of disagreement. The final section contains Schwitzgebel's perhaps unsurprising rejection DES, and Hurlburt's point-by-point response to Schwitzgebel. A closing word from Schwitzgebel offers, it not hope, then a guarded wish that DES or some successor might one day provide a means of justifying introspective reports.

Hurlburt's DES

DES, according to Hurlburt, is designed to explore inner experience, to provide a reliable characterization of the experiences of an individual subject at a series of randomly-chosen times. (For more on DES, see Hurlburt 1979, 1990, 1993, 1997; Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006, Hurlburt & Heavey 2006.) As Hurlburt describes it,

DES uses a random beeper in the subject's natural environment to signal the subject to pay attention to the experience that was ongoing at the moment of the beep. The subject then jots down notes about that now-immediately-past experience. The subject collects a half-dozen such beeped experiences and then meets with the investigator within 24 hours for an expositional interview, the aim of which is to describe the experiences that were ongoing at each of the six beeped moments. (p. 20)

The researcher acts as a "co-investigator" with the subject. Together in the ex-post facto expositional interview they try to craft the most accurate description of the subject's inner experience. Hurlburt explains,

The aim of the expositional interview is simple: help the subject stay focused on the experience that was ongoing at the moment of the beeps and no other, to describe the features of that particular ongoing experience and not experience in general, and to describe the ongoing phenomena as they actually present themselves, not according to some a priori understanding or expectation. (Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006, p. 280)

It is clear that the investigator is not a passive recorder. Rather, he is actively involved in developing the final record of the introspective report.

One might worry that the active role of the investigator might bias the results (indeed, this is one of Schwitzgebel's central concerns). But Hurlburt is confident that a properly trained investigator can avoid skewing the books. To achieve this neutrality, both subject and investigator must "bracket their presuppositions" throughout the procedure, in Hurlburt's terms. This means they should as far as possible refrain from categorizing the described experiences into pre-established categories or according to a priori presuppositions. Further, they should simply describe the particular experience in question, rather than theorize about experience generally. Though Hurlburt acknowledges that complete bracketing is not possible, he offers it as a goal to guide the process of description. As best we can, we should "apprehend the phenomena as close as possible to the way they actually present themselves" (Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006, p. 283). Hurlburt repeatedly stresses that his own experience with the method reassures him of its neutrality. Subjects, he tells us, do not feel coerced into making claims.

They are encouraged to say *I don't know* when they are unsure. What's more, both subject and investigator are often surprised by the final results of the method, indicating that the process is not being forced into one or another predetermined interpretation.

The process of beeping, recording, and interviewing is repeated over several days. This repetition serves to improve the subject's facility with the method and it helps to isolate recurring features of the subject's experience. By the end of the session, a purportedly accurate record of the subject's inner experience at a series of random times is generated. Further, the investigations of a range of subjects can be compared and contrasted to find patterns and recurring features across subjects. Hurlburt contends that DES avoids the troubles of other methods by targeting brief, naturally-occurring experiences. This serves to minimize the demands on the subject and to help emphasize the particular over the general in experience, avoiding hasty "faux" generalizations. Further, the presence of a skilled investigator helps to reduce the influence of prior theorizing and presuppositions. DES maintains, according to Hurlburt, a healthy skepticism about introspective reports without undermining the very possibility of success. DES provides a careful, controlled way of investigating the inner experiences of conscious subjects. It appears to provide just the source of neutral data needed to study human consciousness. That is, if the method is sound.

Schwitzgebel's Skepticism

Enter the skeptic. In a range of articles, Eric Schwitzgebel (2002a, b, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008) has challenged the idea that introspection can be relied upon at all for data useful to a science of the mind. In his introductory chapter, Schwitzgebel makes his case that despite commonsense intuition and long-standing philosophical practice to the contrary, introspection is considerably less reliable than ordinary world-directed perception. He challenges readers to consider if they can confidently characterize their own conscious experience. He asks us to consider a conscious image, say this morning's breakfast table. Is the image experienced as clear and detailed all over, or does it have a clear focus and a less clear periphery? Are all the parts of the image equally detailed, or are some less detailed? Do less-detailed features seem somehow hazy or are they unnoticed? He also asks us to consider how well we grasp our current emotional experience. Are we really so sure what it feels like to be happy or angry, and are we really so sure we can always tell just what emotion we are experiencing? Is there a bodily component to our emotional experience or is it all just "in the head?" And so forth. Schwitzgebel is skilled at asking more and more detailed questions concerning the features of conscious experience and the effect, for me at least, is indeed an increasing lack of confidence over just what is going on in my mind even in these seemingly simple cases. Schwitzgebel maintains that introspection is less reliable than many imagine, and it is not to be trusted to deliver even the most minimal data for consciousness studies. He is a rare breed even among philosophers: an "inner" skeptic.

Schwitzgebel identifies five main sources of the unreliability of introspection. First, conscious states are fleeting and changeable. Close attention makes it apparent that there is rarely a stable, easily observed "content" of consciousness. Second, we're not often in the habit of introspecting and certainly not with the level of detail demanded by psychologists and philosophers. We just don't spend that much time trying to pin down the details of our conscious experience. Third, because our interest is generally focused outward, we lack good descriptive concepts of conscious experience. Our concepts are generally borrowed from those employed in outward perceptual experience. This creates a confusing double use of many terms, like *red* or *sweet*. Is it the apple or the apple experience that is red? Or is it both? And is it the candy or the

experience of eating candy that is sweet? With care, these subtleties can be kept clear, but it creates a distinct worry of confusion and equivocation. Fourth, introspection requires focused attention on conscious experience. But this arguably alters the very experience attended to. Further, introspection may generally occur after the conscious “facts”; it might be better to see it as retrospection, a later reflection on past conscious experience. This potentially alters the data we wish to ascertain, making a clear, unadulterated picture of consciousness difficult if not impossible. Further, it creates a problem of memory, one that grows as the demands of detail and complexity grow. Can we be so sure we are accurately recalling just what occurred in our past experience? Finally, the fifth difficulty directly challenges the notion of “bracketing” introduced by Hurlburt. Schwitzgebel contends that interpretation and (often implicit) theorizing is ever-present in introspection. This is not a minor issue; according to Schwitzgebel, the influence of theory on introspection can be acute. And even if it is more minimally invasive, it is extremely difficult to tell just where theorizing leaves off and “uncorrupted” introspection begins. Even the most basic introspective claims are thus threatened with bias and distortion. Schwitzgebel and Hurlburt seem most at odds over the extent of this problem.

Melanie in the Middle

We are left with a distinct contrast. Hurlburt contends that his DES reliably describes inner experience, while Schwitzgebel holds that there are fundamental difficulties inherent in such a task. As of yet, however, nothing particularly novel has been introduced into the debate: A proponent and a skeptic have presented their views on introspection. But now we come to the core of the book: the interview transcripts with Melanie. They allow the authors to flesh out their positions in the light of real, concrete data. More importantly, however, they provide the reader with an opportunity to fully grasp the subtleties of the debate. It is perhaps the nicest feature of the book that so much of the raw or minimally altered data is presented. Further, the authors have made available a wealth of additional unaltered data on the web. The reader is free to make up her mind given the facts on the ground, rather than by being bullied with the heated abstract rhetoric common in this domain. This very much captures the spirit of the work: There is a live and difficult issue at play, and the more view-points that can be brought to bear on it, the better. With that in mind, I’ll provide a brief sample of Melanie’s reports and her back-and-forth with the authors. It will help to bring out the nontraditional nature of the project.

The following is a snip-it from the expositional interview wherein Melanie recounts what she was thinking at a particular beep, under the questioning of Hurlburt:

Melanie: During this little time period I was brushing my teeth in the bathroom. I kind of was letting my mind wander, because it’s such a banal thing I do every day. I was aware of being slightly bent over the sink and aware of the kind of rhythmic motion of my hand, you know, brushing up and down and side to side. I was aware of the kind of cold and gooiness of the toothpaste.

Russ: And is that it, in your awareness?

Melanie: Yeah.

Russ: And when you say you’re aware of being bent over, so you’re sort of...

Melanie: Like hunched over a little bit. I mainly could feel it in my spine, because it’s not a super comfortable position to be in.

Russ: So this is like a bodily awareness or a kinesthetic awareness, something like that?

Melanie: Yes.

Russ: And does that seem like a sort of separate awareness? You've got the bent-over awareness and you've got...

Melanie: Yeah, they seemed very localized. Like the feeling in my back feels in my back, and the up and down motion I can feel in my mouth and with my hand and my arm, because I'm holding the toothbrush and moving it.

Russ: And the cold and gooiness?

Melanie: Another feeling that is very located, just in my mouth and everything.

Russ: And nothing else is going on at this particular moment.

Melanie: Nope. (2007: 123-24)

Schwitzgebel then follows with any questions he has about the specific experience in question.

Eric: You started by saying your mind was wandering.

Melanie: Yeah, well, I mean, that was the best way to say my mind was kind of empty [laughs].

Eric: Oh, okay, so that was...you were just...

Melanie: Pretty much absorbed in what I was doing.

Eric: ...pretty much absorbed in that. Because you could think "your mind was wandering" could mean...

Melanie: Yeah, jumping to different subjects.

Eric: ...thinking about, you know, what you are going to do today or something like that, but that's not...

Melanie: No. (2007: 124-25)

A bit later, Schwitzgebel presses one of his worries, and Hurlburt and Melanie try to respond. It is not uncommon in the transcripts to find Hurlburt leaping in to clarify what he takes Melanie to have said, and to defend the cogency of her answers to Schwitzgebel's questions.

Eric: It seems to me that we should also bear in mind the possibility (I'm not saying it's the case) that when the beep goes off you think "Okay, what was my experience? Was I having an experience of the bathroom? Oh, the bathroom floor is cold. I guess I was experiencing that at the time"—letting your knowledge of your environment feed back into your impression of what your experience was at the time of the beep.

Melanie: Right. I'm not defending myself by any means. But I tried specifically to really focus on the moment of the beep and not what came afterwards, because of the discussion last time about how the beep would usually catch me towards the end of a thought. And I wanted to work on trying to hone that, and so I was trying to do that as best I could.

Eric: Right. I guess the concern I have is not so much directly temporal. You could be trying to reconstruct what's going on at the moment of the beep, or immediately prior to the beep, and not confusing it in any way with what's going on now, but noticing what's going on now and then deliberately thinking "Okay, was this going on a moment before?" And then because it's going on now and because you know certain things about your environment, you might infer that it was going on the moment before as well.

Russ: Well, I don't think Melanie can confidently say she doesn't do any of that. I think she just did confidently say she tried not to do that.

Eric: Right. And again, you know, I'm not saying that I have any specific reason to worry about this particular case. How do we partial out how much is due to a partial reconstruction?

(2007: 128)

And so forth. This gives a flavor of the method. The transcript contains considerable back and forth between Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel, with Melanie listening in. The details of many of these debates are provided in parenthetical boxes beside the main transcript. Among the main issues debated there is the use of terminology, the reliability of particular claims by Melanie, the nature of emotional experience, and so on. Overall, we get the feel of a Platonic dialogue with commentary in the margins, a venerable method for exploring deep and controversial issues.

After the final set of transcripts from the sixth sampling day, the authors present their concluding remarks. Unsurprisingly, Schwitzgebel is not convinced, adding more criticism of introspection in general and DES in particular. He draws a parallel with problems known to plague the precision of eye-witness testimony, arguing that the same surprising inaccuracies are likely present here, perhaps with greater frequency given the shifty nature of introspection. He also stresses the problems of memory and interpretation. If we are reconstructing what we consciously experienced in memory, and if that process is particularly theory-laden, how can we trust any report to accurately convey just what was occurring in a subject's inner awareness at a given time?

Hurlburt responds by offering again a defense of his method, noting in particular its careful focus on current, randomly sampled moments of experience and its cautious avoidance of generalization and theorizing. Further, he cites his great experience with the method, emphasizing that he's time-and-again confronted the issues raised by Schwitzgebel, and minimized them to his own satisfaction. He does not deny that retrospective theorizing and hasty generalization may occur; rather, he stresses that DES has the means of isolating and correcting for those problems. And, as he contends throughout the work, he knows of no better method on offer. It may be that DES has some shortcomings (and Hurlburt is clearly very open to constructive criticism of his method, as the book itself witnesses), but at present we have no better way to explore the inner experiences of single subjects. We need such a method if psychology, and consciousness studies in particular, are to advance.

Describing Inner Experience? The Jury is Still Out

We are left with an unusual and stimulating presentation of psychological and philosophical ideas, as well as an admirable example of open-minded interdisciplinary cooperation. That, in itself, is reason enough to read *Describing Inner Experience*. The central issues that drove the development of the book, however, remain unresolved. The main problem is that by Hurlburt's own admission, DES is not designed to address issues at the level of detail demanded by many of the debates in consciousness studies. In a telling exchange, Hurlburt notes that

I think it is a serious mistake to be too concerned about small details. The point is worth making strongly because this mistake contributed to the downfall of the Introspectionist program of a century ago. [...] If we ask such impossible to answer questions, we can destroy the ability to observe accurately. (2007: 119)

Schwitzgebel responds,

Here, perhaps, is a key source of our disagreement and divergence in approach. I'm greatly interested in such "details" as whether the experience of emotion is (or can be) exhausted by bodily sensation, whether there is a constant visual experience, and whether thought is possible without imagery. (ibid)

DES is just not suited to answer the questions of fine-detail that plague consciousness studies. While it may serve to establish the very existence of certain general features of conscious experience (and, perhaps, there are philosophers out there who do have their doubts about these matters), it does little to provide data useful for settling the sorts of debates most prevalent in the literature. The controversy over Ned Block's *A*- and *P*-consciousness, for example (Block, 1995, 2001, forthcoming), or the question of the ubiquity of self-consciousness in ordinary conscious experience (cf., Kriegel & Williford, 2006), are left untouched by DES. This is unsurprising. As Schwitzgebel points out, the imprecision of introspective concepts and the shifting, ephemeral nature of the phenomena in question render the reports of DES open to multiple interpretations. There seems little a subject can do, even one as open to the process as Melanie, to settle these questions. The door is always open to reinterpret a claim, or to deny its validity, based on the fine detail and quick time scales involved. Further, even the central terms in the study, *consciousness*, *inner experience*, *awareness*, etcetera, are open to multiple interpretations. Hurlburt defends his use of *inner experience* early on in the book, but Schwitzgebel never relents on the issue of rival interpretations and it remains unclear how to resolve the problem.

Perhaps, then, the researchers have different targets. Hurlburt offers DES as a method for exploring the inner experiences of a single subject. He does not tout it as a means of settling subtle points of psychological theorizing, much less philosophical debates over the fundamental constitution of conscious experience. Schwitzgebel is focused on just these issues, given his vocation. There is indeed a fair bit of agreement between the two. Both agree that there are grave short-comings with "arm-chair" introspection performed by psychologists and philosophers who then make sweeping general pronouncements about the nature of mind. Further, both agree about the prior failings of introspectionist psychology. What's more, both are sensitive to the need for some kind of reliable introspective method, even as Schwitzgebel criticizes current methodology.

But if DES cannot settle subtle issues in consciousness studies, what can it do? Hurlburt contends that it at least can validate the presence of gross features of the conscious mind: for example, the presence, on occasion, of what subjects take to be mental images, the presence of a sort of "unsymbolized thinking," periods of where subjects hold that nothing is going on in their inner experience. But Schwitzgebel questions even these claims, wondering, again, if there are problems of equivocation or interpretation infecting these reports. At this point, a reader (particularly a non-philosopher!) might become impatient with the skeptic's trope. After all, can't we challenge any claim, if we wish to really dig in our epistemological heels? But skepticism in this particular realm is well-warranted, given the history of failed introspective methods and the seemingly intractable debates over fine-grained data in consciousness studies. Is there any more that can be done or has the skeptic won the day?

The crucial addition, one mentioned throughout by both authors, is the need for an additional line of evidence to corroborate subjects' reports. This could be in the form of behavioral data, increased or decreased speed on tasks correlated with the reported presence of a particular conscious feature or in the form of neurological data, from noninvasive brain scanning. This certainly will not satisfy all skeptics or settle all debates; the slack between data and theory is still too great here. But the discovery of this kind of correlation is the only way to address the issues in question. If we cede full authority on the nature of inner experience to reporting subjects, there will never be a way to adjudicate between conflicting claims. Yet if we

allow the skeptic to junk all lines of evidence, the possibility of consciousness studies may be blocked by epistemic fiat. And while the presence of behavioral or neurological data may itself be subject to interpretation and doubt, the act of triangulating on the target phenomena can create, over time, a consensus about the nature of inner experience. In this process, DES, with its well worked out method and deliberate care in teasing out the details of experience, may prove invaluable. Or perhaps it will be some successor to DES. Either way, the project of developing and exploring DES, especially under the scrutiny of a skeptical philosophical critic, is a good way of moving forward. Even if one finds that DES comes up short, working through *Describing Inner Experience* is a truly thought-provoking endeavor, one that will hopefully inspire the creation of methods overcoming the serious hurdles to the use of introspection in a science of the mind.

I highly recommend the book to everyone with an interest in consciousness studies.

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