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Iteratively Apprehending Pristine Experience

Abstract: *Pristine experience is inner experience that is directly ongoing before it is disturbed by any attempt at apprehension; we live our lives immersed in our pristine experiences. I argue that an iterative method — one that successively approximates the desired result — facilitates the faithful apprehension of pristine experience. There are four main aspects of an iterative method: the refreshment by new experience; the improvement of the observations; the multiple perspectives on experience; and (perhaps most importantly) the open-beginningedness of the process. Because an iterative exploration of experience is open-beginninged, first interviews occupy a unique position in an iterative method. I comment on the transcript of a first interview, showing why and how an iterative procedure is desirable, if not necessary.*

Keywords:

Pristine experience, iterative method, inner experience, open-beginninged, Descriptive Experience Sampling, introspection, bracketing presuppositions

If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts, but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.

— Francis Bacon

This paper urges the advantages of using an iterative procedure faithfully to apprehend inner experience. Iterative procedures are common elsewhere: for example, preparing a series of drafts of a paper for publication, each draft an incremental improvement on the previous, is a

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widely accepted iterative procedure. Hurlburt and Akhter (2006) briefly discussed the desirability of iteration as a feature of Descriptive Experience Sampling; now I amplify and generalize that discussion.

Preliminary

By *inner experience* I mean anything that is ‘directly present to’ a person, anything that a person is ‘directly aware’ or ‘(reflexively) conscious’ of, anything that is ‘directly before the footlights of consciousness’ at some given moment: thoughts, feelings, perceptions, tickles, seeings, and so on. I use the adjective *inner* to distinguish inner experience from other uses of the term experience (for example, a sentence such as ‘I have 35 years experience exploring experience’ is made much clearer by writing, ‘I have 35 years experience exploring *inner* experience’), but I emphasize that my usage of inner experience includes perceptions of the external world, so long as they are directly before the footlights of consciousness. Some would prefer the term *conscious experience*, or *lived experience*, or merely *experience*. Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel (2007, p. 15) discussed the merits of these terms, concluding that there was no ideal. In this article, for the reasons described in Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel (2007), I will often use *experience* as a synonym for the more formal *inner experience*.

By *pristine* experience (Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006) we mean naturally occurring experience (or, more formally, inner experience) that is directly ongoing before it is disturbed by any attempt at apprehension or introspection. You go about your everyday life bathed in a stream of pristine experiences. We use ‘pristine’ in the same sense as we would say a forest is pristine—before the loggers clear-cut, before the Park Service installs the walkways and the signage, before the visitors leave their plastic bags and bottles. Pristine does not necessarily mean ‘clean’ or ‘tranquil’; much of a pristine forest is mucky, bloody, brutal, and so on. A pristine forest is a forest as it freely existed before civilization altered it. Pristine experience is experience as it freely exists before it is altered by the act of trying to apprehend it.

It can be argued that pristine experience doesn’t exist, but while such thoroughgoing skepticism is impossible to refute, it is hard to accept in the face of so much natural evidence (Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007). This paper accepts the existence of pristine experience and accepts that it may be desirable, useful, or interesting, at least in some circumstances, to apprehend it; that my pristine experience at one moment may be different from that at another; that the

characteristics of my pristine experience may be different from the characteristics of yours (those arguments can be found in Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006; Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006; Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007). Our purpose here is therefore not to focus on pristine experience itself but on its *faithful apprehension*.

I use the term *apprehend* in two ways: the subject apprehends her own experience, and the interviewer apprehends the subject's experience. The subject's apprehension corresponds to Merriam-Webster's second definition of *apprehend*: 'to become aware of; perceive.' The subject apprehends by becoming aware of evanescent experience long enough to register or observe it. I prefer the term *apprehension* to *introspection* because introspection has a seeing-within connotation whereas apprehension more inclusively accepts that pristine experience may be sometimes seen, sometimes felt, sometimes heard, and so on, as well as being sometimes within and sometimes outside. The interviewer's apprehension corresponds to Merriam-Webster's third definition: 'to grasp with understanding.' The interviewer apprehends by understanding what the subject says about her experience, attempting to separate what is likely to be mistaken or distorted from what is likely to be a faithful account of the subject's experience. This paper is primarily concerned with the interviewer's apprehension; the subject's apprehension is a necessary intermediate step.

I accept that pristine experience may never be apprehended accurately by either subject or interviewer. *Accurate* means conforming exactly, and exact conformance is an unattainably (nirvana excepted) high standard: experience is always disturbed at least somewhat by the act of apprehending, and experience that is multi-dimensional or rich may be too complex to be apprehended in all its detail. We can aim at accurately apprehending pristine experience, but we will always fall short.

This paper is therefore about the *faithful* apprehension of experience rather than the unattainable ideal *accurate* apprehension of experience. By *faithful* I mean 'with fidelity'. Faithful implies unswerving adherence, not perfection; a *faithful* copy, for example, does not imply an exact copy but does imply adherence to the original in important ways. Whereas it is impossible to apprehend a complexly rich experience accurately, it may well be possible to apprehend it faithfully. A faithful apprehension will reflect the more important aspects of a rich experience while perhaps overlooking or distorting some minor details.

I accept that there are more and less faithful apprehensions of experience, just as there are higher and lower fidelity recordings of music.

There is, currently, no established measure of the fidelity of apprehension, in either the science of experience or music. But compare a Jascha Heifetz 1910 recording with a Heifetz 1970 recording and there will be no argument that the 1970 is of higher fidelity, but not as high as a modern recording. I therefore accept that, at least in broad strokes, we are acquainted with the notion of higher fidelity.

I use observe and observation the way those terms are frequently used in science: to apprehend carefully especially with attention to details. An observation here is an apprehension readied for scientific examination. Thus when I say that a subject observes her experience, I mean that she carefully apprehends her experience with the intention of describing it faithfully. I do not mean to imply that experience is separate from the experiencer, that experience can be observed as if it were an external object simply by turning one's attention inside.

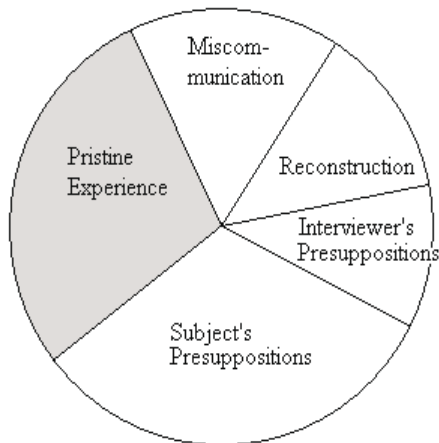
This paper assumes that, currently, if a person (the 'interviewer') is to apprehend the inner experience of another person (the 'subject'), the privacy of inner experience requires that the subject will have to convey that experience in an 'interview.' If in the future it becomes possible to apprehend experience directly, this paper will become moot. 'Interviewer,' 'subject,' and 'interview' are intended to be construed broadly; an interview might, for example, include words, gestures, drawings, dancing, and so on.

I use *iterative* in the same way a mathematician uses it: a series of successive approximations leading to a satisfactorily close approximate solution. Suppose a mathematician uses an iterative method to determine the value of x when $f(x) = F$. She guesses an initial value x_1 and determines $f(x_1)$. If $f(x_1)$ is satisfactorily close to F , then she's done: x_1 is the desired solution. Otherwise, she uses this new information ($f(x_1)$) to make a second guess x_2 and then determines $f(x_2)$. If $f(x_2)$ is satisfactorily close to F , then she's done: x_2 is the desired solution. Otherwise she uses this new information ($f(x_2)$) to make a third guess x_3 . If all goes well, x_{n+1} is a better guess than was x_n (that is, $f(x_{n+1})$ is closer to F than was $f(x_n)$), and eventually $f(x_m)$ will be close enough to F to consider x_m a satisfactory solution. Iteration is therefore not merely repetition; it requires refinement at each step. Iteration does not produce an exact result; it produces a satisfactory approximation.

This paper argues that an iterative process can lead to a more faithful apprehension of pristine experience. We begin by discussing the apprehension of pristine experience in a single interview and then across a series of iterative interviews. Then we examine a concrete example of the first interview in an iterative series.

A Single Interview

Suppose that at time t the subject undergoes a pristine experience, and at some later time a highly skilled interviewer attempts to apprehend that experience. The model shown in Figure 1 illustrates that the interviewer's initial apprehension of the subject's experience will arise partially from the pristine experience as conveyed by the subject (e.g., 'At time t I felt...'), but also from four other sources: 1. the subject's presuppositions (e.g., 'I *always* feel...', 'Everyone always feels...', 'I presume you want to know how I felt...'); 2. the interviewer's own presuppositions (about the content that the subject begins to describe, about the subject, about the mask that the interviewer wants to display to the subject, about the interview process, etc.); 3. miscommunication (lack of vocabulary, failure of the interviewer to understand the subject's terminology, lack of understanding of the task, distraction, etc.); and 4. reconstructions that the subject has used to recall or otherwise reinvoke the pristine experience between time t and the interview. The first three of those (subject's and interviewer's presuppositions and miscommunication) are non-experiential impediments to the faithful apprehension of the pristine experience; the fourth (reconstruction) is an experience (or a series of experiences) that occurs at a time removed from the original pristine experience.



Beginning of Interview

Figure 1: Contributions to the interviewer's apprehension of the subject's experience at the beginning of the interview

There may well be other ways to slice this apprehensional pie. I use the pie-chart format only for its heuristic value; I don't presume to know the actual sizes of the slices in this pie; it is primarily the *change* in size of the slices within and across interviews that I wish to discuss. Figure 1 illustrates a highly skilled interviewer: the interviewer's presuppositions are shown to have a relatively small effect on apprehension.

Now suppose that over the course of the interview the interviewer attempts to refine his or her apprehension of the pristine experience. Clarifications will be requested (e.g., 'What did you mean when you said you felt...'), attempts to bracket presuppositions will be made ('Yes, I understand that you may *usually* feel..., but at time *t* did you...'), and so on. In responding to these requests, the subject will likely attempt, repeatedly, to reconstruct the original experience, either spontaneously or by explicit instruction (e.g., Petitmengin, 2006). Let's suppose that this interview is skillful, careful, and extensive, lasting, say, 15 minutes or an hour. Figure 2 illustrates the contributors to the interviewer's apprehension at the *end* of the interview.

If the interviewer is skilled, the influence of the non-experiential impediments can be reduced: some presuppositions of both subject and interviewer can be exposed and bracketed (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006) and terminology can be refined and aligned. Figure 2 shows,

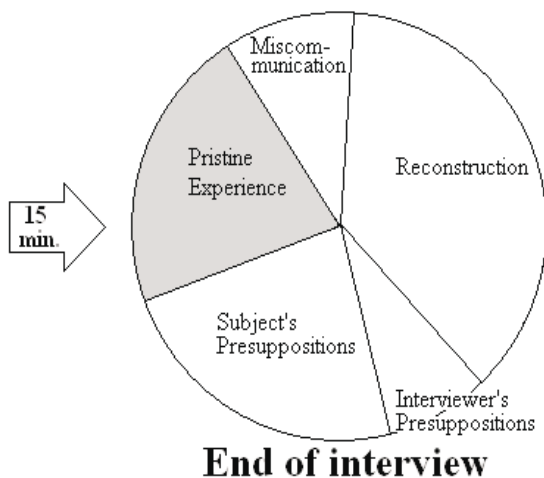


Figure 2: Contributions to the interviewer's apprehension at the end of the interview

therefore, that the relative contribution of those three aspects to the interviewer's apprehensions has been reduced compared to the beginning of the interview (Figure 1).

On the other hand, the interviewer's probing questions strongly encourage (explicitly or implicitly) the subject to try to reconstruct the pristine experience during the interview; the reconstruction slice is therefore substantially larger in Figure 2. The longer and the more intensive the interview, the more reconstructions.

The proportion that the original pristine experience contributes to the interviewer's apprehension is likely to be *less* at the end of the interview than at the beginning, because of the difficulty extricating the pristine experience from the reconstructions thereof. It is possible that the contribution of pristine experience will increase, but only if the reduction of presuppositions outweighs the effect of reconstruction.

Iterative Interviews

The preceding section concluded that the direct contribution of pristine experience to an interviewer's apprehension is likely to *decrease* across one interview as the reconstructed experiences increase. I now argue that an iterative series of interviews can increase the direct contribution of pristine experience and decrease (but not eliminate completely) the reliance on reconstruction.

There are four main aspects of an iterative method, all of which can contribute to the faithful apprehension of experience: 1. the refreshment by new experience; 2. the improvement of the apprehensions; 3. the multiple perspectives on experience; and (perhaps most importantly) 4. the open-beginningness of the process. I will discuss these as separate aspects, but they are, in practice, synergistically interrelated.

Refreshment by new experience

Suppose that the interview illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 is the first in an iterative series of interviews. The second interview is illustrated in Figure 3. At some time after the first interview, the same subject undergoes a new pristine experience and is interviewed about it by the same interviewer. This is a fresh start. The pristine experience to be discussed in this second interview is not merely one more reconstructed experience overlaid onto the same original pristine experience — the new occurrence of a new pristine experience has the potential to refresh the entire process from the beginning.

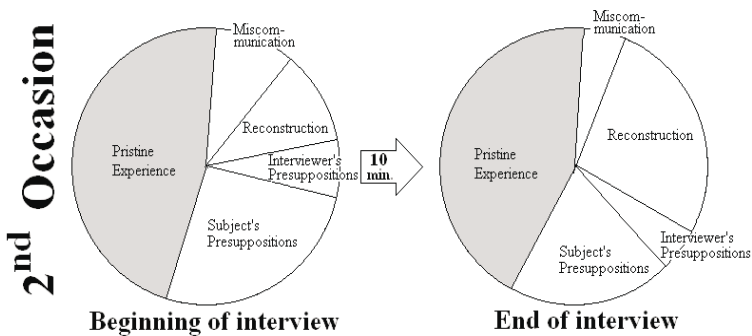


Figure 3: Contributions to the interviewer's apprehension at the beginning and end of the second interview

The sources of the interviewer's apprehension of the subject's experience at the beginning of the second interview are illustrated in the left side of Figure 3. Whatever progress was made during the first interview in reducing the non-experiential impediments (bracketing the influences of the subject's and interviewer's presuppositions, clarifying communication) is likely to be at least to some degree maintained. Thus these three slices are shown to be roughly the same at the beginning of the second interview as they were at the *end* of the first interview (Figure 2). The necessity for reconstruction between the new pristine experience and the second interview should be no greater than between the first pristine experience and the *beginning* of the first interview (the reconstruction slice in the left side of Figure 3 is about the same as in Figure 1). The result is that the relative contribution of the new pristine experience at the beginning of the second interview is greater than it was at the beginning of the original interview.

The right-hand side of Figure 3 illustrates the end of the second interview. The second interview is likely to be more efficient and probably shorter (let's say '10 minutes' instead of '15 minutes') because of the progress made in bracketing-presuppositions and communication—no need to do that again. Reconstruction still occurs during the second interview, but because the interview is shorter, it is likely that there will be fewer reconstructed experiences than in the first interview. The second interview may make further progress on bracketing presuppositions and clarifying communication.

The net result is that the direct contribution of pristine experience can be expected to decline across the second interview (as it did in the first) but remain greater than at any point in the first interview.

Nth occasion. Now let's suppose that at some time after the second interview, the subject undergoes a new (third) pristine experience and undertakes to describe it in a third interview (Figure 4), and then another new (fourth) experience and fourth interview, and so on. At the beginning of the n^{th} interview, the relative contribution of pristine experience is the whole pie minus the non-experiential impediments (presuppositions and miscommunication) minus the reconstructed experience. The sizes of the non-experiential impediment slices at the beginning of the n^{th} interview are likely to be roughly the same as those at the *end* of the $(n - 1)^{\text{st}}$ interview, because the progress participants made in the $(n - 1)^{\text{st}}$ interview is likely to be maintained. However, the size of the reconstruction slice is similar to that at the *beginning* of the $(n - 1)^{\text{st}}$ interview, because each interview starts fresh with a new pristine experience. (Actually, the size of reconstruction slice may lessen across occasions; see below.)

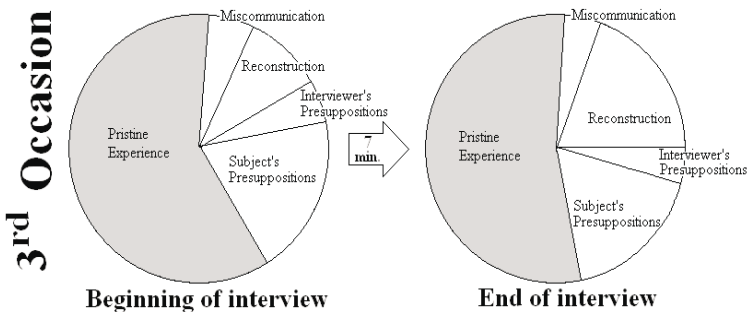


Figure 4: Contributions to the interviewer's apprehension at the beginning and end of the 3rd interview

To the extent that genuine progress is made in the bracketing of the subject's and/or the interviewer's presuppositions and/or the clarifying of communication, the relative contribution of the pristine experience at step n will be greater than at step $(n - 1)$. This improvement is made possible by the refreshment of each interview by an always new pristine experience, the starting over and over again with new pristine experience at each step.

To summarize, the direct contribution of pristine experience is likely to *decrease within each interview* because the influence of reconstructions during the interview is likely to outpace the bracketing of presuppositions, even if genuine progress is made in bracketing presuppositions and clarifying communication. However, if genuine progress is made in bracketing presuppositions and clarifying communication, the direct contribution of pristine experience is likely to *increase across interviews* because of the refreshment by the new pristine experience at each step.

I make no claim that the non-experiential impediments can be eliminated completely — presuppositions are stubborn. I therefore do not claim that pristine experience can be apprehended with absolute accuracy. I do claim that genuine skill at bracketing presuppositions can lead, across interviews, to a more and more faithful apprehension of pristine experience.

Improvement of the apprehensions

We have seen that each step in the iterative process can be refreshed by new pristine experience and therefore the relative contribution of pristine experience can increase across interviews. Now we notice that, beyond this increase in contribution, each iterative step can improve the quality of the apprehensions of the pristine experience themselves. That is, not only can the pristine experience slice of the pie increase in size, the slice itself can become of higher quality, for six main reasons: 1. practice may refine the observational skill; 2. practice may improve interview skill; 3. iteration allows the synergy of refining observation and improving interviews; 4. iteration may make the observer more prepared to observe; 5. iteration may lessen the need for reconstructions; and 6. iteration may improve the fidelity of reconstructions.

Practice in observing. Any subject's first observation of a pristine experience is likely to be of low quality: the subject doesn't skillfully know what experience is and what it is not, doesn't skillfully know the difference between observation and theorizing, doesn't have an appreciation or skills for holding presuppositions at bay, and so on. The first interview, skillfully conducted, may incrementally improve some or all of those skills, allowing the subject to become more skillful at the time of the second observation. This incremental refinement of observational skill may obtain at each occasion.

Practice in being interviewed. Because the subject has little practice in carefully describing inner experience, the first interview is

itself likely to be quite rudimentary, making only relatively crude distinctions about what was and was not apprehended and crude characterizations of the pristine experience. At each subsequent occasion, those distinctions and characterizations can become incrementally refined.

Synergy of observation and interview. Not only may practice improve observation skills and interview skills, the improvement in those skills interact synergistically. If the n^{th} interview provides an incremental improvement in the skill of bracketing presuppositions about experience, that bracketing skill may carry over to the $(n + 1)^{\text{st}}$ observation of pristine experience. Presuppositions blind, amplify, or otherwise distort, and to the extent that subjects learned to bracket them in the first interview, the second observation may be less distorted. But the $(n + 1)^{\text{st}}$ observation serves as the starting point for the $(n + 1)^{\text{st}}$ interview, and the improved quality of that observation can lead to an improved ability of the *interview* to focus more directly on the characteristics of the subject's own particular experiences, more able to bracket the subject's own particular presuppositions. That can make the $(n + 1)^{\text{st}}$ interview more effective than was the n^{th} interview, not merely because of the practice effect but because the improved observational input. This improvement in the $(n + 1)^{\text{st}}$ interview can lead to an improved quality of the $(n + 2)^{\text{nd}}$ observation, which can lead to a better $(n + 2)^{\text{nd}}$ interview, which can lead to an improved quality of the $(n + 3)^{\text{rd}}$ observation, and so on.

Readiness to observe. Pristine experience always comes 'out of the blue,' is unanticipated, more or less surprising. The practice gained in early observations and early interviews may help the observer become more prepared, more poised, more ready to observe a subsequent pristine experience when it occurs. As a result, the subject may well be quicker and more effective at apprehending the subsequent pristine experiences. This increased readiness to observe is separable from the skill of observation in the same way that a news photographer's learning to carry a camera that is prepared (what lens is likely to be useful here? what film?) is separable from skill of composing the photograph. The skilled photographer's readiness makes her more likely to be able to deploy her composition skill when the emergent situation occurs.

Lessening reconstructions. The subject acquires, over the course of the iterative interviews, an understanding of the kinds of questions the interviewer might ask, the kinds of features experience might have, and so on. As a result, the subject becomes more and more able, *at the time of the occurrence of the pristine experience*, to

make contemporaneous observations that require less and less reconstruction. Thus the reconstruction slice of the pie may decrease across interviews.

Improvement of reconstructions. The sixth aspect of the subjects' successive skill acquisition is that subjects may iteratively learn the skill of conforming their reconstructions more and more closely to their pristine experiences. Reconstructing experience is a skill like any other skill, and the practice of that skill can lead to improvement (e.g., learning how to take better contemporaneous notes about the experience, and how to refer to those notes effectively when reconstructing). If the reconstructions are more faithful, then apprehensions (which rest on both the original pristine experience and reconstructed experience) may mirror pristine experience with higher fidelity.

But not necessarily. The foregoing has assumed a skilled interviewer; in particular, it has assumed that the interviewer is effective at bracketing his own and helping the subject bracket her presuppositions. Without such skill, iteration can lead to the *amplification* of presuppositions: the subject or the interviewer may start to develop a theory about the subject's experience based on early observations, and that theory then can inform and distort future reports. If presuppositions increase, fidelity of apprehension of pristine experience decreases.

Multiple perspectives on experience

Pristine experience at any moment is determined by the characteristics of the subject, by the features of the environment, and many other factors. Suppose a subject describes her pristine experience on a series of occasions. On the first occasion her pristine experience is $X + A$; at the second occasion her pristine experience is $X + B$; at the third occasion her pristine experience is $X + C$; and so on. X could be said to be a salient feature of the subject's experience. For example, on the first occasion, Sally is simultaneously smelling pizza and recalling a scene from *Schindler's List*; on the second occasion she is smelling the sea breeze and worrying about the stock market; the third occasion she is smelling the dog's fur and contemplating a move in chess.

There are two ways that an iterative method aids in the faithful apprehension of X . First, at the outset, neither the interviewer nor the subject needs to know that X even *exists*, much less that it is a salient feature of experience, and even less what are the essential features of X (Sally needn't know, prior to the interviews, that she frequently pays attention to smells in the environment). If X is a salient feature of the

subject's experience, it will *emerge* from a series of careful examinations of pristine experience. On the first occasion, the recollection of *Schindler's List* was no more and no less an important feature of Sally's pristine experience than was the smelling of pizza. But *across occasions, X* (the smelling) occurs again and again, and will therefore be naturally recognized as salient, whereas the nonrecurring features (*Schindler's List*, stock market, chess) will therefore naturally be recognized as incidental and not salient. Thus the multiply refreshed instances of pristine experience allow the more central features to emerge, unbidden, as salient.

Second, each fresh encounter with pristine experience is a view from a somewhat different direction, highlighting experience from a new perspective on each occasion. The first occasion highlights smelling from the concrete perspective of *pizza*; the second highlights smelling from the concretely different perspective of *the sea breeze*; the third highlights smelling from the yet again concretely different perspective of *fur*. The features of the experience of smelling can be discovered by triangulating from the several vantage points.

Thus iteration allows both for the emergence of salient phenomena and for the elaboration of phenomena once they emerge. Both those characteristics taken together can, across occasions, allow a greater clarity of apprehension of the central features of pristine experience.

Open-beginninged probes

Presuppositions about experience are a primary, if not *the* primary, impediment to faithful apprehension of experience (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006). Presuppositions can be held by the subject or by the interviewer (or, worse, both), and they blind or otherwise distort the apprehension of experience.

One of the most insidious but frequent presuppositions is the presumption that people have the kind of experience that the interviewer seeks. Interviewers interested in images, for example, frequently ask subjects to form an image and then to answer questions about it, without leaving adequate space for the possibility that the subject never actually formed an image. That procedure can have very negative consequences for an investigation: the results are an inextricable aggregate of responses by those subjects who have images and those who don't have images but answer the questions anyway.

There is an alternative: Use only open-beginninged probes (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006, ch. 8; Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007) about experience.

Open-ended probes are ‘designed to permit spontaneous and unguided responses’ (Merriam-Webster), but it is only the *end* of the response that is ‘spontaneous and unguided’ — the beginning is entirely specified by the probe. ‘Tell me about your image’ is an open-ended probe, but it nearly always produces talk that *begins* ‘My image was...,’ even in subjects who do not create images in such situations. Such talk may be a plausible characterization of ‘my imagery’ that has nothing at all to do with my experience.

An open-beginninged probe is one that leaves *both* the beginning and the end of the response spontaneous and unguided. There is, as far as I know, only one open-beginninged question about experience: ‘What, if anything, was in your experience at the moment?’ Hurlburt and Heavey (2006) called this the ‘one legitimate question’ about experience. But calling this the one legitimate question is not to say that this precise wording is the best or only instantiation. On the contrary, it is desirable to be deliberately inconsistent (Heavey & Hurlburt, 2009; cf. Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007, p. 15) in the framing of this and other questions and let the iterative process do the work of sharpening the meaning. Deliberate inconsistency means using a variety of versions of this question (‘What is your experience at the moment?’ ‘Right then, what were you aware of?’ ‘What if anything presented itself before the footlights of consciousness right then?’ etc.), each with its own advantages and disadvantages. If those questions aim (each imperfectly) at pristine experience, and pristine experience is a robust phenomenon, then pristine experience will (iteratively) emerge, free from the specific influence of any specific version of the question. If there is not a robust phenomenon, no amount of care in crafting the question will help.

A genuinely open-beginninged probe adumbrates the general arena (experience or lack thereof) but provides no specification of alternatives and no pre-training, because either may limit the potential beginning of a subject’s reports. The genuinely open-beginninged probe simultaneously conveys (explicitly or implicitly) all the following: I don’t know what are the features of your experience; I don’t want to speculate about some potential aspect of your experience because then you may ‘go looking for’ that aspect; I’m interested in whatever presents itself directly to you, whatever is before the footlights of your consciousness; Maybe there is nothing in your experience; Maybe your experience is different from anything I have previously encountered; I don’t know what is in your experience so I can’t tell you what to look for; If thinking is in your experience, I’d like us to talk about thinking; But if you’re not experiencing thinking, then I don’t want to

talk about thinking; If you're feeling something I'd like us to talk about that, but if not, not; Same for seeings, tickles, hunger pangs, hearings; I'd like us to talk about whatever you *actually* experience out of the welter of possibilities that you *might* experience; I emphasize that I don't know what you experience; Maybe you will be able to perform this task, maybe you won't — either way is fine with me because I'll probably learn something either way; If you can report your experience, fine, but if you can't, fine as well; Maybe you'll find it easy, maybe you'll find it difficult at first and then it will become easy, maybe you will find it always difficult, maybe you will find it impossible — any of that is OK with me; I'm sincerely interested in your experience, whatever that is, including nothing; I'm interested in our talking honestly about your experience, including that this task is difficult or impossible if that's the way it is; Some people can do it easily, some find it difficult or impossible, and either is OK with me; Perhaps together we will be able to apprehend faithfully your experience, and if so, that would be good; But if not, that would be good, too; I want you to observe your experience; I don't want you to guess about it, or theorize about it; I want you to describe exactly what you directly observe; I don't want you to explain it or speculate about it.

(And if that is genuine, of course, there can be no hint of 'I'm really interested in images, so let's talk about images'; no hint of 'I need to get a publication out of this'; no hint of promotion, tenure, or merit considerations; no hint of 'I don't have time'.)

Obviously an interviewer can't say all that at once — it would overwhelm. But an interviewer can consistently convey that every time, and eventually, across occasions, *iteratively*, the subject will get the message: The interviewer really does want to hear about the details of my experience, whatever those details happen to be or not be. But that can happen only if the investigation is genuinely open-beginninged. Sooner or later, any un-genuineness will bleed through.

Open-beginning probes are designed to be nebulous and ambiguous, designed to create a level playing field when approached from any direction, thus allowing subjects to penetrate their own experience on their own terms. Any other approach favors one thing over other things and therefore distorts the process. In some ways an open-beginninged probe is similar to applying gesso to a canvas prior to painting. The gesso has no relationship at all to what you will paint; you don't plan, at the end of the painting, to see the gesso; applying the gesso is a temporal distraction, seems to waste time you'd rather spend painting. But the gesso, once applied, allows your artistry to

flourish: the oil doesn't bleed into the canvas, the colors stay purer, the imperfections of the cloth disappear, and so on.

Even if the interviewer's probes are genuinely open-beginninged, the subject will likely not initially believe them to be open-beginninged. The investigation operates in a context of psychological and philosophical studies, almost all of which are manipulative and goal-verification oriented, if not downright deceptive. There is little historical context for the genuine appreciation or apprehension of pristine experience. It is naïve to expect that a one-shot open-beginninged conveyance, no matter how sincere or eloquent, can overcome that context. A series of open-beginninged probes delivered in an arena where the subject can test the intention and veracity of the interviewer *for him- or herself* may be able to overcome the context, but that can happen only across occasions.

Pre-training about what might be observed is inimical. Asking open-beginninged questions is an inefficient approach — as inefficient as possible, one might say. But if the aim is a faithful apprehension of experience, there is, as far as I have been able to see, no alternative, because pre-training about potential observations is *inimical* to the faithful apprehension of pristine experience. Because pre-training takes place before concrete observations have been made, pre-training must be about abstract concepts: pre-training defines a concept, teaches how to recognize that concept, teaches what to do about that concept. But *concepts are not experiences*. If the object is to apprehend pristine experience, then non-experiential aspects are to be avoided. It is often useful, after the fact, to determine whether some particular pristine experience can be considered an instance of a concept, but the order must be to apprehend pristine experience first and to make abstract determination second. Otherwise the concept pollutes the experience.

For example, Hurlburt, Heavey, and Bensaheb (this issue) describe the concept of sensory awareness, saying that it is a frequently occurring characteristic of inner experience that is usually overlooked by subjects and interviewers. But Hurlburt, Heavey, and Bensaheb *should not* (and in fact did not) pre-train subjects about the potential existence and characteristics of sensory awareness; subjects' descriptions of sensory awareness emerged unbidden.

Suppose you pre-train subjects on the characteristics of sensory awareness (or some other aspect of experience) and then ask them to apprehend their pristine experience. To the extent that subjects paid attention to and were impacted by the pre-training, the pre-training will have three undesirable effects: (a) distraction, (b) selective

sensitization, and (c) leading. (a) Distraction: When they should be engaged in the direct observation-of-pristine-experience task, they will instead (at least in part) be engaged in a conceptual task: they will be rehearsing the definition of sensory awareness, recalling what was said in the pre-training about sensory awareness, and so on. That conceptual focus distracts from, if not obliterates entirely, the direct observation of pristine experience. (b) Selective sensitization: Subjects will approach the apprehending-pristine-experience task sensitized to the possibility of sensory awareness, and therefore selectively *desensitized* to other potential aspects of experience. The attempt at apprehending pristine experience is no longer a level playing field but is tilted in the direction of sensory awareness and away from other potential aspects. (c) Leading. Any report that the subject provides that sounds like sensory awareness is now quite possibly the result of having been led to sensory awareness by the (explicit or implied) pre-training suggestion of the interviewer.

Suppose a subject says: ‘I was driving. I know this sounds weird, but I wasn’t paying any attention at all to my driving. My entire focus was on the particular yellow color of the yellow line; it was like I was drawn to the color of it. I guess my driving was happening on auto-pilot.’ If this was given as a ‘free-range’ report, that is, by a subject who has *not* been pre-trained about sensory awareness, and particularly because it was advanced with some misgivings (‘sounds weird’), this apprehension of pristine experience is quite believable. But if the subject had been pre-trained in sensory awareness, instructed that sometimes people are ‘immersed in the experience of a particular sensory aspect of his or her external or internal environment without particular regard for the instrumental aim or perceptual objectness’ (Hurlburt *et al.*, 2009 this issue), then the same report may well be merely a reflection of the training. As a result, pre-training should *increase* the skepticism about the possibility of apprehending pristine experience. This pre-training dilemma presents itself not only for sensory awareness but for *all* features of experience. Every pre-training reifies some presupposition about what will or won’t be found in experience. It is impossible to provide pre-training that keeps a level playing field for reports of all sorts of inner experience.

An open-beginninged probe avoids that dilemma. If sensory awareness is indeed a characteristic of a subject’s inner experience, it will emerge from a series of pristine experiences faithfully apprehended even if (or especially if) no pre-training has been given (it will become the *X* of the ‘Multiple Perspectives on Experience’ section above). The price for reducing the dilemma is the inefficiency and discomfort

— open-beginningedness often is initially uncomfortable for both subject and interviewer because it involves genuinely acknowledging ignorance.

Fortunately, in our Descriptive Experience Sampling studies (see below), we have found that the open-beginninged approach is not as inefficient as it might appear. Most people apparently can, within two or three interviews, become adequately skillful in apprehending their experience. In fact, what appears to be an inefficient procedure may be not only the most direct path, but perhaps the only path to faithful apprehension.

Open-beginningedness is inextricably related to an iterative process. It's likely to be a waste to ask an open-beginninged question in a single interview: it requires one occasion to clarify what the beginning might be, and then another occasion to reap the benefits of that clarification. And it's likely to be a waste to conduct an iterative process that is not open-beginninged; the improvements brought about by iteration will then be built on a substantially impure foundation.

Synergistically interrelated

For analytical purposes, I have separated out refreshment by new experience, improvement of the apprehensions, triangulation of the observations, and the open-beginninged process, but these are all synergistically interrelated. Refreshment by new experience results in improvement of the apprehensions; but improvement of the apprehensions also increases the refreshingness of new experience. Refreshment by the new experience is what makes an open-beginninged process possible, but the open-beginning process improves the observations, which increases the refreshingness of the new experience. And so on. All these features work in concert to potentiate each other and may lead to the high fidelity apprehension of pristine experience.

A First Interview

First interviews occupy a unique position in an iterative (and therefore open-beginninged) investigation: they have to start nowhere, say nothing, and head some unknown where — head with as little interference as possible in the direction of some yet to be discovered experience. I now comment on a word-for-word transcript of the beginning of a typical first Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES; Hurlburt, 1990, 1993, 1997; Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006; Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006; Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007) interview. I use DES as an

example because (a) it is the method with which I have the most practice and (b) DES is designed to be a fully iterative method.

This interview was conducted by Nellie Mihelic (a graduate student training in the DES method, called NM in the transcript) and me (RTH) with 'Joshua Thomas' (JT), a subject who was recruited as a guinea pig for Nellie's DES training. Prior to the interview, we knew nothing about Joshua other than that he was a student in an introductory psychology class who volunteered for this study as a course requirement. Prior to this interview, Joshua had been given a random beeper and given a 45-minute instruction in DES (see Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006, Ch. 6, for typical instructions): he was to wear the beeper in his everyday natural environments until it beeped six times; at each random beep he was to pay attention to the experience that was ongoing at the last undisturbed moment before the beep began and then, immediately, to jot down notes about his experience in a notebook that we provided. The first beep occurred on September 21 at 2:14:38 pm. The first interview (the following morning) was videotaped for training purposes; we join the interview 30 seconds into the recording, during which time the camcorder was set up and adjusted, small talk exchanged, and so on. We superscript each conversational turn for ease of reference.

[0:30]

Nellie Mihelic:¹ Joshua, when did you collect your beeps?

Joshua Thomas:² Yesterday between about 2:30 and 5:30 or 6.

NM:³ And did you collect all six?

JT:⁴ Yes. Except for the last one. I kind of rushed it. I pretended there was a beep. I just want to be honest.

NM:⁵ [inaudible] OK. And the other, the first five, they were all beeps?

JT:⁶ Um hm.

NM:⁷ OK.

JT:⁸ I don't know if that ruins anything for you guys, but...

[1:00]

RTH:⁹ Well, let's see when we get there.

JT:¹⁰ Alright. [laughs]

Subjects do not follow one-shot instructions

In JT's instruction session, which had lasted about 45 minutes, we had emphasized, re-emphasized, given verbal descriptions, used visual aids, and employed metaphors all aimed at raising JT's appreciation for the importance of the exact moment of the beep. That instruction was delivered with substantial skill and sensitivity to JT's level of understanding. Despite that effort, he still simulated a beep. This kind of imperviousness to instruction is not peculiar to JT; most subjects have preconceived notions about what is important to a study and what is not, and pre-training has difficulty penetrating those preconceptions.

This failure to follow instructions is not the result of naiveté. To the contrary, very sophisticated DES subjects (consciousness scientists, for example) often fail to follow important basic instructions. One basic reason that iterative training is necessary is that subjects often don't follow the instructions given on one occasion.

Note that at RTH⁹ I don't say it's OK to pretend a beep (which it is not; Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006), but I also don't say that it is not OK. JT has just demonstrated (by allowing himself to pretend the beep in the first place) that he is currently incapable of understanding why such a pretending is not OK. I'm confident that this understanding will naturally arise in him later in the interview when he discovers the difference in his ability to describe a beeped experience and a non-beeped experience. Thus the iterative nature of DES allows his failure to follow instructions to be a valuable training experience *for the next occasion*.

That JT volunteered his pretending augurs well for the future: it demonstrates that he is motivated (even though he is currently failing) to apprehend his experience faithfully.

NM:¹¹ Well, why don't you tell us what was in your experience at beep 1.

JT:¹² Beep 1. [pause] Ah, well, I guess I could tell you what was happening right before. I was actually learning how to drive stick shift and I had the earpiece in my ear and then I just got out of the car 'cause the cops pulled up, and like 'What are you doin?'' And my friend said, 'Well, I'm teaching him how to drive stick.' So I got out of the car and I was thinking, 'It still hasn't beeped yet' and it beeped. And I was also thinking that, um, I wanted to drive on the street to get some gas for my friend's car.

Subjects (initially) don't know what a moment is

We had, in the initial instructions, tried to convey to JT the 'flashbulb' brevity of a moment, but JT, like most subjects, didn't grasp that and refers instead to a whole series of moments: the cops pulling up; the cops asking 'What are you doin?'; the friend's reply; JT's thinking about the beeper; JT's thinking he wants to drive on the street; JT's thinking about getting gas. JT's pristine experience is doubtless quite different from one of those moments to the next. We have found it impossible to convey, before sampling has been attempted, the brevity of a moment as we intend it; an iterative procedure is necessary to refine the subject's initial (mis)understanding of the moment.

[2:00]

NM:¹³ OK. So, I know you gave me some background there, so if you can help me clarify. Right when the beep went off, what was in your experience?

JT:¹⁴ Um. What do you mean, in my experience? [sounds puzzled] What was I thinking?

Subjects (initially) don't know what experience is

JT's puzzlement is a typical and necessary first step of an open-beginning iterative procedure. We had said in the initial instructions that experience was anything that is occurring directly before the footlights of his consciousness at the moment of the beep, but that instruction is apparently (and not surprisingly) difficult for him. Evident here is JT's presupposition that *thinking* is the primary feature of experience or the primary goal of the study; sooner or later we will have to disabuse him of that notion.

NM:¹⁵ Whatever was in your awareness or in your experience right at the moment of the beep. That could be....

JT:¹⁶ Well, I was standing like right at the hood of my friend's car, and, and then I was just thinking, it still hasn't beeped yet. And I actually said that out loud, too, to my friend, 'cause I had told him about the experiment. And it beeped.

NM:¹⁷ OK. Um, so the beep came right after you had said, 'It still hasn't beeped yet'?

JT:¹⁸ [laughs] Yeah, like, pretty much. [laughs]

Subjects (initially) don't know how to describe experience

The JT¹⁸ 'Yeah' seems to be an agreement with Nellie's NM¹⁷ characterization of his experience. But JT¹⁸ is what DES calls a 'subjunctified' response (Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006; Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006; Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007): the subjunctifiers ('like, pretty much') indicate Nellie's NM¹⁷ summary is probably *not* what actually was ongoing in JT's experience at the moment of the beep, or is at best a loose approximation thereof.

JT's willingness to go along with loose approximations is quite typical of most subjects on their first attempt at describing experience. It requires an iterative procedure to refine JT's understanding that a faithful description requires reporting the specific details, not an approximation.

[3:00]

NM:¹⁹ [laughs] And did you, um, you said that you said that out loud, but then, before, you also said you were thinking it? Was it both? One or the other?

JT:²⁰ It was both, pretty much. Is that normal? I don't know. [laughs nervously]

Subjects (initially) may be reluctant to describe experience

JT, like nearly all others, has never had the opportunity or occasion to expose his moments of private experience. This makes it likely that he will be reluctant to reveal his private experience on the first day. When he discovers that the interviewers are sensitive and skillful, he will likely drop that reluctance, but that will require more than one occasion.

RTH:²¹ Yes. That's normal.

JT:²² I'm the kind of person that says what they think, usually, so...

Subjects (initially) don't distinguish between apprehension and theorizing

As evidenced by 'I'm the kind of person' and 'usually,' JT²² is a statement about a theoretical presupposition about himself, *not* a statement about a direct apprehension of his experience. Our aim is to get a faithful apprehension of JT's experience, so eventually, iteratively, we will have to convey to him that we are *not* interested in his self-theorizings.

We had told him that in the pre-training, but that instruction (as expected) was not effective.

RTH:²³ I would like to clear up the ‘pretty much’ part, because I’m not exactly sure what you mean by that. So, first off, let me get the sequence right. So you had been driving, you stopped driving — did the cops pull you over while you were driving? Or were you ...

JT:²⁴ Well, we were driving in the Thomas & Mack [a basketball arena] parking lot, it was like a whole empty parking lot, and I had just parked the car and the cop came over. And my window was rolled down, and my friend was in the passenger seat of his car, ...

RTH:²⁵ But that was all before the beep, and then you....

JT:²⁶ Um hm. It was all leading up to the beep.

RTH:²⁷ OK. And then you got out of the car and moved to the front of the car, ...

JT:²⁸ Yeah.

RTH:²⁹ ... next to the hood of the car, and then you say out loud [questioningly], ‘It still hasn’t beeped yet’? You say that to your friend? Or is that, or was that before....

[4:30]

JT:³⁰ I said that like, I said that out loud, because that was what I was thinking.

RTH:³¹ OK. And when you said ‘because that was what I was thinking,’ are you separately thinking, ‘I’m thinking this hasn’t beeped yet,’ and *then* I say, ‘This hasn’t beeped yet!’ er, [uncertainly] ‘Still hasn’t beeped yet’?

JT:³² Yeah.

RTH:³³ And where does the beep come exactly in that sequence, as best you can say?

JT:³⁴ Like right after I said ‘yet’ it beeped.

RTH:³⁵ OK. So the sequence is something like, *thinking* this thing hasn’t beeped yet, and then *saying* ‘It still hasn’t beeped yet,’ beep! Is that right?

JT:³⁶ Yeah. Exactly.

RTH:³⁷ OK. Cool.

Subjects (initially) don't know what the moment of the beep is

In the initial instruction, we had given JT considerable training about the importance of the moment of the beep. We had stressed that experience was fleeting and momentary, and apprehending experience would therefore require being very careful to note exactly where the beep occurs. But it is clear that that training did not 'take'; we are about three minutes into this interview, pressing to ascertain with some precision where the moment of the beep had occurred in the stream of JT's experience. RTH³⁵ summarizes, and JT³⁶ assents, but I'm quite skeptical of the veracity of this summary. JT wasn't prepared, *at the time of the first beep*, to note with precision where in his stream of experiences the beep occurred.

JT is entirely typical in this regard. Regardless of how often we say in the necessarily abstract initial instruction, 'We want to know the exact microsecond of the beep,' only the very rare subject actually understands this.

Now, however, as a result of the concrete conversation RTH²³⁻³⁷, JT *does* probably have a clear idea of what is meant by 'the moment of the beep' and its importance. He will be far better at observing the precise moment of the beep when he wears the beeper next time. But that is the result of the concretely literal iterative training, not the initial abstract instruction.

Note carefully that even though the conversation RTH²³⁻³⁷ appears to be my attempt to determine when the beep occurred in the stream of experience that was ongoing at 2:14:38 pm September 21, that is really not my aim. Instead, I am attempting here to improve, iteratively, his ability to apprehend the moment of the beep *on future occasions*. He was not a skilled observer at 2:14:38 pm September 21, and I completely accept that, and so am highly skeptical of his accounts of that experience. It's *tomorrow's* experience that I am primarily interested in here, not *yesterday's*.

[Here I omit 30 seconds of training conversation between me and Nellie that would distract us from our present purpose.]

RTH:³⁸ So, so far I've understood you to be saying, I first of all *thought* this thing hasn't beeped yet, and then I *said* it. Now is that really the case? That... Some people would say that what really happened was that it was both at the same time, and some people say, well I just said it so I

must have been thinking it, so I want to be as explicit about that as we can be.

[5:00]

JT:³⁹ Well, OK. In that case it could have been I said it and it must have been what I was thinking.

RTH:⁴⁰ OK. So there's no really separate thought, then? ...

JT:⁴¹ I don't think so.

RTH:⁴² ... as far as you know at the moment?

JT:⁴³ As far as I know.

Subjects (initially) don't bracket presuppositions

All iterative interviews are a balance of backward looking (ascertaining what was in pristine experience on some past occasion) and forward looking (skill building for future occasions). In first interviews, this balance is predominately forward looking iterative improvement; in later interviews, the balance shifts toward the backward-looking data gathering.

Here, my aim is to level the playing field about what I take to be JT's presupposition about a sequence in inner experience: first think, then say. I don't *disbelieve* his report about this sequence; I am *skeptical* about it, and those are two very different things. I would be delighted to discover that his sequence actually is first think, then say. But I would be equally delighted to disabuse him of this presupposition if presupposition it is. So my aim here is forward looking: I raise the question about his presupposition so that the *next* occasion's interview may shed light on it.

Some might object that I am leading JT in the direction of my presuppositional theory about thinking/saying and away from his presupposition, but I disagree. First, I don't have a theory of thinking/saying — I don't care whether there is an experienced thought before an utterance or not. Second, it is JT's own comments, not my presuppositions, that lead me to this speculation about his presupposition. His utterance at JT²² ('I'm the kind of person that says what they think, usually') is a general statement about something he presumes about himself, not a description of a particular experience; thus this statement was *his* announcement of the potential existence of *his* presupposition. It is my (iterative) obligation to try to level the playing field for JT with respect to his own presuppositions. That is not a

presupposition on my part; that is proficiency at hearing JT's actual talk and expertise at helping him improve his faithful observation skills.

Such skill building *must be* iterative, and could not possibly have been performed before JT's participation in this interview, for six reasons: 1. Prior to this interview, we had no way of knowing that JT had (perhaps) this thinking-and-saying presupposition; 2. Even if we had clairvoyantly known about his thinking-and-saying presupposition, a pre-training conversation about it would have had to have been abstract. Now, by contrast, JT has a specific, real-in-his-own-life example of what is meant by a distinction between thinking-and-saying and just saying; 3. He is innately, personally involved in the process: the question stems from his own concrete behavior and his own inability to answer my questions; 4. I have demonstrated that I, as a real individual, am interested in JT's, as a real individual, getting it right about his own experience, demonstrated that I am willing to work at it; demonstrated that I have some skill in this regard. He can't just blow it off as mere boilerplate about the quality of science; 5. Had I tried to make this distinction in the abstract before it raised itself in JT's own samples, it would have focused JT on abstractions, not on the attempt to be faithful to his own experience; and 6. presuppositions are mini-delusions, and attempting to argue someone out of his delusions is generally futile.

[Here I omit 30 seconds of training conversation between me and Nellie that would distract us from our present purpose.]

RTH:⁴⁴ So you're standing at the hood of the car, the cops are around....

JT:⁴⁵ The cops had left.

RTH:⁴⁶ The cops had left. And so you're saying to your friend, 'It hasn't beeped yet.' Are those the exact words?

JT:⁴⁷ Yes.

RTH:⁴⁸ 'It still hasn't beeped yet.' And is anything else in your awareness other than the saying of those words?

JT:⁴⁹ Well. I know you showed me that whole slide [an illustration of the concept of the moment of the beep that we used in his pretraining] on, like, whenever the different situations leading up to the beep, but right before I was thinking it still hasn't beeped yet, I don't know if that's

pertinent, but I was thinking that I could drive on the street to get my friend some gas.

RTH:⁵⁰ OK. But that was before the beep? That was like...

JT:⁵¹ That was before.... It still hasn't beeped yet.

RTH:⁵² And is that still present to you or has that come and gone? So the sequence is, the cops came, the cops go, I want to drive on the street, now I say to my friend it still hasn't beeped yet, and then it beeps, like separate links in a chain of sausages, one thing and then another thing and then another thing? Or do these things overlap?

JT:⁵³ I'm pretty sure it's still in the back of my mind, the driving on the street, and then I was just thinking it still hasn't beeped yet and I say it out loud, and then it beeps. But, I don't know, like the beep kind of like interrupted my thought process, y'know.

[7:00]

RTH:⁵⁴ Right.

JT:⁵⁵ It's really hard to narrow it down. It really throws you off.

RTH:⁵⁶ OK. I agree with all that. But this is only the first beep, and you're probably going to get somewhat better at that, or maybe you won't. But most people do get a little better at it as they get accustomed to what the beep...

JT:⁵⁷ Conditioning!

RTH:⁵⁸ I would think of it as sort of a practice, that after a while you figure out, Well, *that* is what the beep is! and it doesn't startle you as much. That's probably conditioning, if you like.

Subjects (initially) don't observe skillfully

'I'm pretty sure' and 'I don't know' (at JT⁵³) and 'It's really hard to narrow it down. It really throws you off' (at JT⁵⁵) indicate that JT thinks he is not adept at apprehending his experience, and I agree with that. Most people are not very good at apprehending their experience on their first sampling occasion. So subjects need support, and I try to provide it. But note that even while supporting, I allow the subject ('or maybe you won't' at RTH⁵⁶) the opportunity to advance an alternative

that differs from my expectation and permission not to be a ‘good subject.’ Both are parts of the open-beginningness of the process.

RTH:⁵⁹ So now I’m a little bit confused. A bit ago I thought there was no thought that was before the speaking. But now it seems like maybe there is a thought that it still hasn’t beeped yet, that’s before the speaking.

JT:⁶⁰ Well, there must have been. Maybe it was a thought at the same time as I was saying it, you know. Maybe I was thinking that it still hasn’t beeped and then I say that out loud, ‘It still hasn’t beeped yet’ (snaps fingers simulating beep).

[8:00]

RTH:⁶¹ OK. And that’s fine with me. I’m not trying to talk you into or out of what’s in your experience.

JT:⁶² Right.

RTH:⁶³ What I’m trying to do is to say that we are interested in that fine of a distinction. If you’re saying ‘it still hasn’t beeped yet,’ and as part of your experience you’re also thinking that separately from the saying of it, we would like to know about that. But we don’t want to just *presume* that that’s the way it is, because we’re trying to find out the way it *really* is. So we’re ... and so we’re happy with you’re saying, if it’s true, ‘I was just saying out loud, ‘It still hasn’t beeped yet’. And that expressed myself. But I didn’t really have a thought first.’ That’s possible. And it’s also possible, ‘Well I thought to myself, Hm, this still hasn’t beeped yet, and then said, ‘It still hasn’t beeped yet.’ And it’s also possible that, ‘While I’m saying ‘it still hasn’t beeped yet’, I also am separately thinking, in my experience, that it still hasn’t beeped yet. All those things are possible. And we’re trying to figure out, what’s that like for you? ...

Distinctions are made when and where distinctions are important

The repetition and the fine distinctions at RTH⁵⁹⁻⁶³ are possible *only* because JT has a personal stake in the discussion. This discussion is squarely on his turf, and he knows it. It fascinates him because it is *his*. It would have been impossible to have a discussion this precise before JT had himself struggled to try to make the distinction.

I'm not attempting to argue JT out of his mini-delusion; I'm trying, with him, to understand exactly what he meant about a particular pristine experience. JT himself indicated that there is a fissure in his presuppositional structure: he himself is not certain that there was a thought before a speaking (he uses the subjunctifier 'pretty much' twice in his opening description of his experience). We express a sincere interest in what he is saying, including a sincere appreciation for his qualifying expressions. We are trying to understand what he is telling us. As a result, we never attack, so he doesn't have to defend.

But I re-emphasize that this conversation is primarily aimed at skill building for *tomorrow's* sampling, *not* at trying to figure out *yesterday's* experience. Yesterday he didn't have adequate observational skill to support the kinds of distinctions we are raising.

RTH:⁶⁴ ... And I think we told you when we talked to you last week that we didn't expect you to know what this was going to be like until we've done it. And this is an example of that. You had no way of knowing that we were going to be interested in that fine a detail of what your experience is like. And nobody does. There's no way that you can know that until after we've had this kind of conversation. So basically, the first sampling day or two is our trying to convey to you, We really want to know about the microscopic details of what's in your experience, as best you can report it. It could be that you can say, 'You guys are asking me questions that are way too difficult for me to answer! My experience isn't like that! I can't make that distinction.' That would be fine, too. But we want to get sort of right up to that point, where we can take you as far as you are willing to go, or can go, or your experiences can take us, about what your experience is like.

[10:15]

JT:⁶⁵ Alright. I'll try my best.

RTH:⁶⁶ That's what we're here for...

Iterative training is inherently frustrating

We don't tell subjects what they are to look for but then ask detailed questions about it. That is frustrating but is unavoidable because the alternative would be worse: We *do* tell subjects what they are to look for and then feign 'discovery' when they report it.

So we get to the end of the first interview without collecting any reports that are believable. It appears that all we have done is to point out to JT his inadequacy, that we have done nothing of positive value. But that's not true. He *was* an inadequate observer of his experience, and we have demonstrated our will at speaking the truth about his inadequacy. We have demonstrated that we are skillful at understanding what he is saying and what he is not saying, and skillful at knowing the difference between apprehension and speculation, between truth and plausibility. We have demonstrated that we are supportive of him and non-judgmental. We have demonstrated that we are sincerely interested in obtaining faithful reports about experience. All that is really quite a lot. Even though it does not get us believable reports today, it sets the stage for obtaining believable reports *tomorrow*.

The fact is that JT (like most first-time subjects) was *not* ready to observe—he didn't have the skill, wasn't prepared, didn't accept that we really were interested in what was really in his pristine experience, didn't know what experience was, didn't really trust us to take him seriously, didn't understand how brief a moment is and how much pristine experience may change from one moment to the next, didn't really know the difference between apprehending and theorizing/speculating, didn't really adequately distinguish between what was truly apprehended and what was plausibly present. So yesterday his original pristine experience came and went, was apprehended in a low-fidelity way, mixed with presupposition and self-presentation. *No amount of interviewing, no matter how skilled, could have reversed that.* Next time, however, he can, perhaps, do better. And the time after that, better still.

Discussion

This paper has drawn three main conclusions: 1. in any interview, an interviewer's apprehension of a subject's pristine experience arises from conflated contributions of pristine experience and reconstructed experience diminished by non-experiential impediments (subject's and interviewer's presuppositions, miscommunication); 2. regardless of skill, within-occasion interviewing is likely to *decrease* the direct contribution of pristine experience (because of the increase in the contribution of reconstructed experience); and 3. skillful across-occasion 'iterative' interviewing may, incrementally on successive occasions, *increase* the direct contribution of pristine experience (and decrease the contribution of reconstructed experience).

An apprehension that arises from a conflation of pristine and reconstructed experience may well be quite similar to an apprehension that might arise from pristine experience alone. A reconstructed experience is, after all, itself an experience; the subject may well have intended the reconstructed experience to mirror the pristine experience; and the reconstructed experience was created by the same bag of bones and neurons that created the pristine experience. To the extent that the reconstructed experience is similar to the pristine experience, the interviewer's apprehension of (pristine and reconstructed) experience at end of an interview can more faithfully mirror the subject's pristine experience than was possible at the beginning of the interview (the combined contribution of the pristine and the reconstructed experiences in Figure 2 is larger than in Figure 1). However, Hurlburt and Akhter (2006) argued that it is unwise to assume similarity between reconstructed and pristine experience — after all, the situations are much different (interview vs. the original), subjects may not have been skilled observers at the time of the pristine experience and so may not know what they are trying to reconstruct, and the reconstructions may reflect presuppositions as much or more than the pristine experience. At present, the science of experience has no effective way of determining in what kinds of situations and for what kinds of experiences the reliance on reconstructed experience is useful.

Some non-recurrent experiences cannot possibly be directly subjected to an iterative procedure (the experience at the moment of impact of survivors of the World Trade Center, for an extreme example, cannot be iterated). But science could iteratively influence the apprehension of even such never-to-be-repeated events by training iteratively a large number of subjects. A few of those individuals may subsequently undergo some non-recurrent event, and therefore might be more prepared to apprehend experience during it. At present, the science of experience does not know whether such a strategy is worth the effort.

I have argued that these features of iterative interviews may lead to higher fidelity apprehensions: 1. refreshment by pristine experience; 2. commitment to bracketing presuppositions; 3. practice in observing; 4. practice in being interviewed; 5. readiness to observe pristine experience; 6. reducing the need for reconstructions; 7. improving the fidelity of reconstructions; 8. multiple perspectives on experience; and 9. open beginning. A science of experience should examine which of these features is important in what situations. For example, clinical interviews could be said to be iterative: the therapist gets to know the client better on each occasion. But clinical interviews have no

procedure designed to assist in the bracketing of presuppositions by either therapist or client. Armchair observation can be said to be iterative — always trying to improve the observation of experience — but armchair observation is not about pristine experience: observation occurs only after a self-initiated intention to observe (Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007). The Experience Sampling Method (ESM; e.g. Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987) uses beepers to trigger subjects to fill out questionnaires about the experience that was occurring when beeped. Those repetitions could be called iterative, but the use of a pre-constructed Experience Sampling Form at each beep eliminates the possibility of bracketing presuppositions from one observation to the next, and ESM typically trains subjects in the use of the form on only one occasion. Descriptive Experience Sampling incorporates all the iterative features described in this paper, but perhaps that slows the method down too much to be useful in science. At present, the science of experience does not know which features of iteration are useful in which circumstances.

I have observed that iteration does not always or automatically increase the contribution of pristine experience; that the beneficial effect of iteration depends on interviewer skill, particularly the skill of bracketing presuppositions. At present, the science of experience does not expend much effort training its practitioners in the bracketing of presuppositions.

I have argued that iteration can increase fidelity, not that it leads to complete accuracy. At present, the science of experience has not worked out a method to measure the fidelity of an observation.

At present, most empirical studies in the science of experience rely on one-occasion, non-iterative observations. The analysis in this paper suggests that such reliance is problematic.

Consciousness science can be said to be caught in the crossfire between those who think experience is easy to apprehend (and therefore attempt to do so without much concern for methodological niceties) and those who think experience is impossible to apprehend (and therefore eschew the attempt altogether; Hurlburt & Heavey, 2004). Iterating the observing of experience/interview sequence may improve the apprehension of experience and thus reduce the crossfire.

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