

Mel May
Mel Interview 3

Below in black is a word-for-word transcript of the October 31 interview with Mel that is available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/Oq3OIFBF00g>. In brown are conversations about the Descriptive Experience Sampling process that took place during the interview. In green are Russ's comments, and in blue are Julian's comments about and explanations of the Descriptive Experience Sampling process inserted after the interview. If you have corrections, suggestions, or questions, please post them as YouTube comments.

RTH = Russ Hurlburt

JBK = Julian Bass-Krueger

Mel = Mel May

0:00 RTH: Audacity recording.

0:02 JBK: And I've started my recording.

0:03 RTH: Looks like my recording is recording. Audacity records just my voice.

0:12 Mel: I feel like I need get... I need to yell at my computer. I need to set up like you, Russ. I need to get a podcast mic. Anyway, that's a problem for another day. Um...yes. Okay. Jump straight in.

0:25 RTH: You're, you're, you're quite sound, your sound is very good today, so...

0:30 Mel: Okay, good. I'm trying to talk louder.

0:32 RTH: I don't, I don't think you *have* to talk louder. That's what I'm telling you. I think you [Mel: Okay.] can talk sort of normal and, uh, we'll be fine.

0:39 Mel: Okay. Fabulous.

0:40 RTH: La- last week I think you were in a sort of a bigger room with fewer, fewer couches, or whatever in it, and so there was a little echo-y thing, but, uh...

0:48 Mel: Yeah.

0:49 RTH: Doesn't seem to be the case today.

0:51 Mel: No. And there's less renovation going on above my apartment, so...

0:56 RTH: That's always a good thing.

0:58 Mel: Um, okay...

1:01 RTH: So Julian was asking you what, what sampling was like, and you started to say, but I cut you off, but I'll uncut you and, uh...

1:10 Mel: Um, yeah. Okay. So I did it yesterday and I, [sirens]... Hmm, I was about to give like some context, but do you want me to not even do that [laughs]?

1:19 RTH: Yeah, I, I'd say we should go for the beeps. I, I... yeah, if the context seems relevant, I'm happy to hear the context, but...

1:27 Mel: [Julian: I, I am-] Well, no... yeah, you go Julian.

1:31 JBK: Uh, yeah, I was also interested in your response to reading all the back and forths about the, y'know, the annotations and the interviews, and if that was weird or distracting for you?

1:44 Mel: Yeah, I had... I remember I said to you guys earlier that I had worried that it would be, I guess, more distracting to read too much of that, but actually [car horn] I found it super interesting and almost, I hope [car horn] *beneficial* in the sense that, um, [car horn] it, [phone rings] um, like I, I found it... I don't, I dunno how to explain how I found it beneficial, but in the way of like... it sort of helped me further understand or be aware of the language that I was using and then I guess read your, your reactions or you trying to understand what I'm trying to articulate, so I could kind of see times where I felt like I was really hitting the nail on the head and expressing that, I guess? So it wasn't like swaying me of like, oh, *they like this* or anything. It was more like, oh, I think *they get that bit*. Like... do y'know what I mean?

2:43 JBK: Yeah. But I guess... yeah, that makes sense. Although you don't need to use the perfect words, as Russ keeps saying.

2:50 Mel: Um... no, I know, but it's kind of ru...

2:53 JBK: It's kind of for us to argue about how we write these descriptions.

2:56 Mel: Yeah. That was quite interesting to read as well. No, but it was not about the, the perfect words. It was more just about, um, I dunno, there's something like, not necessarily comforting, but like interesting and enriching and maybe enlightening about times where I felt like you... that whatever I was trying to convey, I felt like I *did* convey, if that makes sense. So not even necessarily about specific language, but just like there were times when I'm reading it or certain beeps where I'm like, oh, I feel like we got something there. That, that's all. So, yeah, it was... I think it was beneficial to read, but yeah, it is a bit weird getting to that like, meta level of reading about you commenting on my like... yeah, it's quite weird.

3:46 RTH: I, I have some, [clears throat] excuse me, I have some comments about that. Because I, I used to be more concerned about that and I think I've, I've been concerned about it back in the day when I *was* concerned about it...

- 3:58 Mel: Mm...
- 3:59 RTH: ...because, the rest of science says, y'know, you have to have an objective, objective procedure and everything has to be exactly the same all the time, and we wouldn't wanna corrupt our witnesses or whatever. But I think that's entirely wrong. I think it's...uh, I, I, I think *instead* what the object of science ought to be would be something like to be genuinely transparently honest with our participant. And I think the comment, the, the comments that you saw going back and forth between Julian and me were... our trying to be genuinely honest with each other about what we thought and what we saw and what we didn't see and what we... And, and, and so from my point of view, that's a, that's a *good* thing. Uh, to the extent that you're *interested* in it—it's not a good thing in the sense that I would insist that we make all the Mels of the world read these things while we're doing it—I wouldn't do that. But the, to the extent that she's *interested*, I think, I think our aim is to be transparent and honest. And if, and if the written word *helps* that, great. And, uh, and if it's disconcerting, then we shouldn't do it.
- 5:06 Mel: Yeah. I don't think it hindered. So I think that's cool. Cuz I had concerns that it would, but I, I definitely don't think it did. So anyway, um... But the only other slight context I was gonna add about this week was just that I felt like I was a little out of practice. [laughs] So because it had been a week that we missed, um, like I felt like initially I was sort of waiting for the beep again, and then one of the beeps I sort of said like, *I'm not sure that I can be confident about what I think there*. So I think I was just like a bit out of practice with it all again. Do y'know what I mean?
- 5:43 RTH: I do. And I would say to that, *good*. I'm *glad* that you're out of practice. Because the more, the more *fresh eyes* or *fresh ears* or whatever that you can have toward towards the process, the *better* as far as I'm concerned. So, so we can wipe, wipe clean what we've done before and come back and, and, and do it again; and then wipe clean what we've done before and come back and do it again—that's even better. Which is also backwards from the most scientific procedures. Most scientific procedures wanna go back and say, well, y'know, *where we left off last time was...* well, I think that's, I think that's entirely misguided.
- 6:16 Mel: Interesting.
- 6:17 RTH: I, I think the, i, I think the object of getting towards Mel's genuine experience *requires* or *encourages* us to start fresh. And that's a little bit un, disconcerting or whatever. That's the price that you pay for it.
- 6:37 JBK: Yeah. That is interesting. And it's a bit against what you've written in your books and papers Russ, which is more about DES as, as training for the next day. And I guess it is training, but also training in a process, but also to forget, y'know, what came before. It's quite interesting. So I think there's something to explore. But...
- 6:58 RTH: So, so I expect, I expect it is different from what I've written in my books before. And if you would, and it would be a service to me, if you would tell me exactly where I'm

contradicting myself, [Mel laughs] because in, in *my* recollection, I've always written exactly what I'm saying right now. And I know that that's not true, cuz I can go back occasionally and read it. But, but I, I don't feel in myself a transition. It seems like this is the way it's always been.

7:23 JBK: I don't think it's a contradiction, but like a different emphasis. But yeah, I could later go, go brush up on that [Mel laughs]. I say we into the beeps for now.

7:33 RTH: Okay.

7:35 Mel: Um...

7:37 RTH: And, and are, are, uh, Julian, are we gonna alternate back and forth? You first? Me second? Uh...

7:42 JBK: Yeah, let's do it. Yeah, I can start.

SAMPLE 3.1 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

7:45 Mel: Okay. So I did these yesterday afternoon. So the first beep went off at 3:20 PM and I've written, "I was looking at movie times on my phone. I was really honed in on considering going to see *Killers of the Flower Moon*. Um, and I was very much focused on that singular idea. There's nothing particularly noteworthy about my inner experience in the sense that it was singular. It was somewhat autopilot, though, not quite. There was contemplation present, considering whether to see the film, but in the sense of sitting with that idea. I wasn't discussing it with myself. I wasn't visualizing the cinema. I was just laying on my couch, mulling over, going to see a movie."

8:29 JBK: All right. So *Killers of the*, this new Scorsese movie [Mel: Yes.] *Killers of the Flower*, what's it called again? *Killers of*?

8:36 Mel: *Killers of the Flower Moon*.

8:37 JBK: *Killers of a Flower Moon*. So you're sitting on your couch? [Mel: Mm-hmm.] You were looking at your phone, um, and you were considering whether to see this movie?

8:50 Mel: Mm-hmm.

8:51 JBK: And it was somewhat on autopilot, but, but not fully. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] There's still this considering aspect.

8:51 Russ comments: I think that hardens or reifies what Mel said. What you say, to my ear, translates as something like: *there is a thing called autopilot, which was partially engaged*. What Mel actually said, to my ear, was more like: *I don't know what I'm talking about, so I grunt "autopilot" and then I retract that*. Said another way, JBK understands *It is autopilot* when Mel had said *It is not autopilot*.

9:00 Mel: Mm-hmm.

9:02 JBK: Um, and I guess what I wanna find out is, is what, what, what this is, between like autopilot and, and this considering aspect. Can you, is there a way for you to describe it further or, or you don't know?

9:02 Russ comments: Here again, I think "autopilot" is too reified. The good news is that Mel doesn't cave into it.

9:21 Mel: I *do* know, but trying to describe this is the really tricky bit and cuz I feel like this is a perfect example of what thought process often feels like to me. Um, because, as I mentioned, like there's, there was a contemplation, but what that, um, looks like is kind of challenging to describe, because, in a way it's easier for me to describe what it *isn't*. So it *isn't*, uh, a discussion happening with myself inside my brain. It *isn't* me visualizing me going to the cinema later. It's, it's *not that*. [JBK: Okay.] But there is a, a concept that I am like mulling over inside my brain and it almost feels like a... uh, like a presence and kind of like a... not even so much like a feeling, it's, it's conc—I keep coming back to the phrase like... *concept*. Um, so it's just, and like I said, I think last week about like a *knowing*, it's like that, but it's not, doesn't have any like color or shape or language *per se*.

10:45 JBK: Mm-hmm. So no, no language, no visual imagery of you in a theater, no, no, feeling you said, or you said it's not quite a feeling.

10:59 Mel: It's not quite a feeling.

11:01 JBK: Um, so there is something there. Is there, is there clear content? Or no? Or you don't know?

11:12 Mel: On this occasion, there was. And in fact, (yeah, sorry, I was about to add a lot of context... Stick to this bit!) Um, yes, it was really singular. It was, I...when the beep went off, I was absolutely, definitely a hundred percent focusing [car horn] on the singular thought [car horn] of, *should I go see this movie this afternoon?*...

11:33 JBK: Should I go see the movie this afternoon?

11:34 Mel: ...like that that was crystal clear. There was no, it was *such a* singular thought that I was consumed by.

11:44 JBK: And when you say, "should I go see the movie this afternoon?" [Mel: Mm hmm.] Would you say it was *that exact* content? Um, or would you say maybe it was...should I go, should I see the movie? Or maybe it was, hu, it could be good to see the movie. Or like, was it...? What I'm asking was *it that exact content?* Or maybe something slightly different, or you don't know, or...?

12:09 Mel: I feel like it, it was *that*. I was looking so like...yeah, for context that I *do* feel is relevant to this beep, like, I was looking at the exact like, movie times on the, that afternoon. So I was, the beep went off and I was physically looking at the times that were options

for this afternoon. So I feel like when it went off, my brain was thinking, *should I go see this film this afternoon?* It was... yeah, it was quite tunnel vision...

12:43 JBK: Yeah.

12:44 Mel: But again, it, this is *not* autopilot. Th- this was different. There was a... a contemplation *about this*.

12:53 JBK: Yeah. So I'm trying to... I guess what I wanna know is... um, like how, how exact or how literally was that content? Could it have been something like, *should I see that film later?* for example, or should...

13:08 Mel: No.

13:09 JBK: Or does that distinction not...

13:11 Mel: No, it, it wasn't later. It wasn't, *should I say this movie in general?* It wasn't, *should I go see it later in the week?* It was really specifically, my thought was, *should I go see this this afternoon?* And that's... it went off at the exact time that I was trying to like, decide the answer to that, I guess. Um, it wasn't *should I see it at one o'clock or should I see it at six o'clock?* It was my brain was about to answer or... yeah, was about to answer, *should I go see this movie this afternoon?* (I didn't go see it [laughs], by the way!) [Julian: You didn't see it.] But that's the exact [claps hands] I got cut off right in that moment.

13:11 Comment: This is a textbook example of unsymbolized thinking—a specific, directly apprehended, experienced thought that takes place without words, visual images, or other symbols.

13:53 JBK: But you were con- considering, mulling. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] Um, and... um, mmm...so there's clear content.

14:08 Mel: Mm-hmm.

14:10 JBK: And that is the clear content: *Should I go see this movie this afternoon?*

14:14 RTH: So can I, can I ask a question, insert a question in there? Because I think, I think it might be helpful to be a little, [car horn] excuse me, a little clearer about the content. Is it, *Should I go see the movie?* Or is it about *this afternoon?*

14:14 Russ comments: Mel actually answered this question at 13:11; my guess is that RTH was distracted by something during that turn.

14:32 Mel: Well, it's, it's both. Yeah. Should I go see it this afternoon specifically? Yeah.

14:37 RTH: But specifically about this afternoon, this is not a debate about whether I should see this movie or not. [Mel: Yeah.] It's a debate about this afternoon.

- 14:46 Mel: Yeah.
- 14:46 RTH: And so the content of this thinking, which is not clear how it's how it is presented to you or the, this experience, but it *is* clear about which aspect is, is present to you. It's the, this afternoon aspect, not the, should I see the movie aspect?
- 15:04 Mel: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.
- 15:08 JBK: Mm-hmm. All right... Um, so there's that content. Is there anything else experientially that makes it...you call like this considering or mulling over or whatever aspect?
- 15:26 Mel: No. I, I try...I would like to have more language for you, but I've tried to, um, be aware of whether, y'know, there was anything like particularly physical about it or, y'know, whether there was anything I was also...I was noticing or feeling, but truly there was not. It was just this tunnel vision of that thought. Um, and, um...I'm trying to think of like how else I can describe that knowing, because it's such a challenge, because I can, I know what I'm talking about. I can feel it. I know when I'm thinking that. But to describe that is so hard because it sort of evades t- like terminology.
- 16:21 JBK: Yeah. And... and before you said "somewhat autopilot." [Mel: Mm-hmm.] But then you described this content that you were confident of and that was clear. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] Um, I'm, I'm curious why, like, why it might still be "somewhat autopilot," or maybe you don't have to stick with how you described it before.
- 16:21 Russ comments: As I said before (see 8:51), I don't think that's what she said, which I think was "*not* autopilot."
- 16:44 Mel: No, I, I'm, I feel like that link is a little helpful for me because I guess the comparison I'm drawing there is in the singularity perhaps, and the, um... the sort of ease with which something is happening inside me? So like, y'know, if we go back to the vacuuming example or whatever that— where I describe that as like *peak autopilot*, and it's really sort of dormant inside me, *this* has, um, a sort of like the same sort of singularity. *However*, the key difference is that it's focused on a thought rather than me necessarily doing something [car horn] physical or just doing an action like this. The, what I was consumed singularly doing was contemplating something. And I think that's the key difference, but there feels like there is some synergy there.
- 17:46 JBK: Okay. So before, the, the vacuuming was kind of an action you were doing and it wasn't so much experientially present [car horn]. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] Could it be possible and, and say *no* if you want, but that this thought was just something that was happening and wasn't so experientially present?
- 17:46 Russ comments: This is still, I think, being captured by the word "autopilot," pushing Mel to acquiesce and say that her experience was on autopilot.
- 18:10 Mel: A little, but, uh. No... I know what you mean because I've felt that before and I think, no, I think this was more thought than that gives it credit for. [JBK: Okay.] This wasn't me literally like clicking on 3:20 this afternoon and going through the process of

buying ticket. This was a step before that where I was in a decision-making sort of spot.

18:10 Russ comments: Without trying to be too much of a mind reader, I think Mel's response illustrates the risk of asking pushing-in-the-wrong-direction questions. Because Mel is a nice person, she wants to agree with JBK, and so says "A little...," which is a compromise between what she thinks (*No*) and what she must say in trying to be nice to JBK (*Yes*). But then she has to pull away from the urge to be nice, and changes "a little" to "No."

Julian comments: I do agree that I was latched on too much to "autopilot." I still thought there was something worth exploring with her writing of "It was somewhat autopilot, though, not quite." Her descriptions afterward weren't what I would understand as autopilot-y and are more like what we call unsymbolized thinking. I still wanted to probe and bring in a bit of skepticism. There might have been something about Mel's experience that made it somewhat different. I didn't want to default to 'unsymbolized thinking' and potentially miss something about it that was different.

I don't think her answer was misleading. It might have started off with 'a little' but the "No" was firm and the rest of the response was also emphatic. So this response was clear to me.

18:38 JBK: Okay. Um? And just another question. So your eyes were physically on the screen, as, as a fact of reality. Was that at all in your experience?

18:50 Mel: No, because I feel like it wasn't super relevant. Like, definitely that's where my eyes were looking, but I wasn't necessarily focused on the screen at that point.

19:00 JBK: Okay. Uh, then I'm all good for questioning.

19:06 RTH: So I had a couple of follow-up questions about what I asked earlier. So, [clears throat] excuse me, it's still early in the morning here. [Mel laughs] The, it's a, so this is a pretty clearly available to me pondering about this morning or this afternoon, but it's about this afternoon. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] And is it specifically about the, the possible *times* this afternoon could be 1:20 or 5:11 or whatever? Or is this just, *should I narrow myself down to somewhere this afternoon?*

19:06 Russ comments: RTH's characterization is just about *this afternoon*, when Mel has actually said that it is about whether to *see the movie this afternoon*. That is, the thought is not just about time, but about the movie and its time. This is apparently a continuation of what was commented on at 14:14 as RTH having been distracted.

19:39 Mel: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I think the latter. Um, just in general, should I do this this afternoon at some point? Yeah.

19:49 RTH: Okay... So what I've got from the whole conversation is basically: I'm laying on my couch (it doesn't much matter). I'm looking at my phone (that doesn't much matter). But what's in my experience is some sort of contemplation slash mulling slash thinking

slash some word that we don't really have maybe a good one for [Mel: Mm-hmm.] about *whether I should see this movie this afternoon*.

20:11 Mel: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

20:12 RTH: And that's basically it. Yeah. [Mel laughs]

20:15 JBK: Okay. That's what I have as well. Yeah.

20:15 Comment: This example has the hallmarks of unsymbolized thinking: it is specific (about *whether to see the movie this afternoon*); she is confident about that specificity; there are no words or visual images; she is embarrassed by the seeming contradiction between being confident about the content but being unable to describe how it is present; the specificity is *not* a gist or a hunch or an in-the-ballpark—it is particularly specific; she uses the word “feeling” but then retracts it—her use of the word “feeling” suggests only the lack of words in her experience, that is, her experience is conceptual, not affective.

20:18 RTH: Sounds good to me.

20:20 RTH: Okay, number 2.

SAMPLE 3.2 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

20:22 Mel: Um hmm. So second one went off, uh, a long time later, 4:20, um, and I've written, “this was really empty, definite autopilot.” I was, um, sitting at my desk and I was halfway through filling in my details on the New York gov website. No thoughts, no clear perceptions. I was just sort of doing A to B.

20:48 RTH: And the doing A to B was, was typing name and identification information or whatever into the website?

20:56 Mel: Yeah. All that sort of stuff. I was applying for a New York residency card.

21:01 RTH: And... and I'm gathering that was coming out of your fingers in, into your eyes and outta your fingers without your meddling with it or something. It was...

21:13 Mel: Pretty much like, there wasn't any, like... there was no, y'know, in comparison to the beep prior to this, there was no contemplation. There was no...it was just A to B sort of like, y'know, as soon as I read whatever it was asking me to fill in, that was going in. So I think I was quite literally half... I wasn't quite typing yet, I'd just sort of read whatever the next, y'know, prompt was that I was about to fill in when the beep went off. Um, but there was no contemplation, I think, is the important difference between the two sort of beeps.

21:52 RTH: So no contemplation, no recognition *at all*? And is it the case that, that *I am processing this question entirely outside of my awareness*? I don't, I don't understand it. Obviously. I understand it because I'm about to type a skillful res- response to it. So

I'm not questioning that. The question is *in my experience* is, is there *anything*? Or is there this is, this is my brain, body, whatever, processing this stuff skillfully without any recognition on my own *at all*?

22:28 Mel: I sort of feel like the latter...Yeah. Like it didn't, it didn't feel like my brain was having to *be* active. Um, not that [laughing] somehow I think, think that my physical body can just answer the questions without my brain having to do anything. But that's sort of what it *felt like*. There wa- I wa- I didn't read it and think, oh yeah, *what's my name*? Like, y'know, it's, it was all quite, um... yeah, like how I've written there, sort of doing A to B. Then when the beep went off, my brain wasn't...my inner experience wasn't mulling over like the response, the questions, perhaps, are so straightforward that there wasn't any...thing.

22:28 Russ comments: I think by "my brain" Mel means "my inner experience"; she explicitly defines that with the apposition "my brain wasn't...my inner experience wasn't." (See also the interview at 39:32.)

23:10 RTH: And I wanna be as clear as we can be about the, about the difference between sort of a meta-analysis of this project and just *no experience* of it at all. So for example, when you talk, you were waving your hands and going like this [mimics Mel's hand gestures], whatever. I'm guessing that you had no recognition of that at all. It was skillfully coming out of you and, y'know, modulating or responding or whatever to it, but without any...

23:39 Mel: Awareness of...

23:40 RTH: Awareness *at all*, I'm guessing.

23:43 Mel: Yeah.

23:43 RTH: And the question, and the question, question is, is that the way this form reading was happening, it was, it was coming out of me... I, it was skillful... I'm, y'know, I'm, I'm conveying something, but it, but most of the time that's, it's, those gestures are outside of my awareness. [Mel gestures a pointing with her index finger as if to say *Exactly*.] And I wanna know whether this reading / answering process seemed *entirely* outside of your awareness, like a hand gesture might be.

24:09 Mel: Yes, 100%.

24:11 RTH: Okay, then I'm good.

24:15 JBK: Um...I'm...was *anything* in your awareness *at all*? Or was, so on the, the days before? [Mel: Mm-hmm.], we had some *nothing* samples. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] Um, was this a nothing? Or is this a, a little tiny, tiny bit of something?

24:15 Julian comments: This is the question that can't really be answered. Russ, you have a whole paper on that, which I'd read. And I believe we'd already discussed this on a previous day. But still I ask this again. Why? Maybe I'm thinking more about how I'm

going to draft a description than about Mel's experience. I think I want her to say the word 'nothing' so that I can feel confident enough to write it. But I don't think my question adds to understanding Mel's experience at this moment. Russ, your questioning covered that well enough. It's also interesting that before this, Mel hadn't used the word 'nothing.'

24:38 Mel: Mm. I can't remember well enough, but I think a *nothing*.

24:42 JBK: Okay.

24:43 Mel: Yeah. Yeah. Like the first thing that I wrote down here is "this was really empty, definite autopilot." So I'd suggest that that's like *nothing*.

24:53 JBK: Okay. Then I'm, I'm good as well.

24:58 RTH: Number 3.

24:59 JBK: Number 3.

SAMPLE 3.3 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

25:00 Mel: This went off pretty soon after, um, 4:35. So I've written, "Similar to above. I was filling in another form online, um, and I was just reading the screen." So all the, like, there's ...to, to me, there's absolutely no difference in those two beeps.

25:19 JBK: Absolutely no difference. [Mel: No.] Okay.

25:22 Mel: [sirens] I was still doing a task that was, uh, outside of my awareness.

25:31 JBK: Okay. So here you would also say "*nothing in experience*"?

25:37 Mel: Yeah. And *autopilot* and all that sort of language.

25:40 JBK: Okay. You're reading the screen. Be- beep number 2. This is just a, a question about context again. You were reading the screen or typing something in at that time for the previous one? [Mel: Um.] beep number 2, the one we did right before. Yeah.

25:54 Mel: I haven't written it down, but I remember this and I think...yeah, I wasn't typing, I was about to type. So yeah, I was just finishing the end of reading a prompt.

26:04 JBK: Okay, that one was also reading. Um, so no experiential differences. [Mel: Un-hn. (negative)] And you seem confident about that. So I, I don't have any more questions on this. [Mel: Yeah.]

26:22 RTH: [pause] So I'm, I'm debating here about whether I should make a meta-comment or, or ask a question. So what I'll, I'll make the meta-comment. So when a, when a DES participant says "this is like that," [Mel: Mm-hmm.] my general procedure is to say, "well, let's, it, it might be like that, but let's start at the beginning." And this is sort of

what I was saying at the beginning of, of the conversation today, that what that does is that that gives a, *another chance* sort of...*well, well, let's wipe clean and ask the same kinds of questions again*, but they won't be exactly the same kind of questions. In this case, it would've been because Julian was asking it instead of me. And, and it *could* be that when we get to the end, we would've said, "well, that was just exactly like before." But now, instead of just being...*well, Mel said it was exactly like before, so we don't have anything to say*. Now it would be, *well, we've asked the same kinds of questions, we've asked similar questions*, and we have come to the *conclusion* that it's the same as before. So I think I... I think there's, there is warrant to ask a, ask a question, ask, ask a series of questions again. I think we probably muddled the water enough at this one that we probably *shouldn't* ask the questions again. [JBK laughs] Mm-hmm.

- 27:40 JBK: I was thinking the same that, um, that I, I would wanna ask a little bit more. I think I did ask one other question, but yeah, that, that wasn't a serious inquiry. Um, but, but maybe we should, uh, do, do you wanna ask?...
- 27:54 Mel: Can I, can I give you a comment on the back of that, or ask a question on the back of that? And you can say like, *it's not relevant* or *I don't wanna tell you*. But I... that stresses me out a little bit because, um, I start to really worry about my memory being accurate enough for that. So when it gets to a level that is really beyond the, y'know, three lines that I've written down in terms of like, *that* level of inquiry, I really worry...like, I can't sit here and transport myself back to that exact moment experientially and really be like, oh yeah, I definitely remember how that looked and felt. I can't do that. So when you're suggesting that you wanna ask that level of questioning, I get really worried about how authentically and honestly I could answer that.
- 28:49 RTH: So this is the kind of que- this is the kind of commenting that makes it, makes it a *good deal* for us to have gone back and done it again. Because if we had gone back and done it again, then Mel would've said the kinds of things that she's saying now, which is to say, you guys are stressing me out by pushing me harder than I can push [Mel laughs]. And, and *that* is a valuable piece of information that goes beyond... well, *this was exactly like the other*.
- 29:15 Mel: Yeah.
- 29:15 RTH: What she's saying *now* is, well, y'know, there's a limit as to what I can remember. And, and *as far as I can say*...well, this was like that, like that other, but I can't, I can't say it was exactly like the other, it was cuz, cuz there's a limit, there's a limit to my memory. [JBK: Mm-hmm.] And, and that is a valuable part of the process, as it seems to me, because it's different from... well, *this was exactly like the other one*.
- 29:45 Mel: Do other people... and I know you're gonna wanna say it doesn't matter what other people think, but I don't care, I'm gonna ask you anyway. But do other people suggest that same sort of thing? Or is that different?
- 29:56 RTH: And by "the same sort of thing"? You mean I, I, *this is like that other beep*?

30:01 Mel: No. Of the like, *I can't remember to that level.*

30:12 RTH: Yes. I've, I've, I've written a paper about the limit (or several papers probably) about the limits of what people can remember.

30:19 Mel: Mm-hmm.

30:20 RTH: And this particular one is, the paper that I was thinking about is I've written a paper called, I don't remember what it's called, "little or no," "little" [Mel: That's [inaudible]] Little or Nothing or something like that. Because the philosophers, some philosophers, wanna take me to task when I say, well, there's little or no. And they wanna know, well, do you mean *a little* or do you mean *no*?

30:38 Mel: Yeah.

30:38 RTH: And I wanna say, y'know, that you...when you get down far enough into the weeds, you can't distinguish between little or no. And if you *think you can*, then you're probably mistaken. So I have that kind of a conversation *fairly frequently* with people.

30:53 Mel: Hmm.

30:55 RTH: So when you, when you're saying there's absolutely nothing in, in my experience, when you said that in, in response to beep number 2, [Mel: Hmm] I heard that as *well, she's gone down as far as she can get. She's probably not gonna be able to do much better than that.*

31:10 Mel: Mm-hmm. But... so that's a shared response from people generally that like, they find the limit of their memory in terms of being able to kind of go back to that moment? Or is that really different for people? You can tell me, shut up.

31:10 Russ comments: Mel is asking basically the same question she asked at 29:45 (and 30:01), probably because RTH hasn't directly answered her question.

31:30 RTH: Uh, well there, there's wide differences in how careful people are. [Mm-hmm.] *And* there are also big differences in where the, where their, where the edges of their experience abilities, their ability to describe their experience is. So *your particular* difficulty that we've discovered so far is sort of between little and nothing. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] But other people will, who, whose, whose experience is, say, somewhat more directly present to them. Like, I have a visual image and I was seeing fighter, a fighter jet plane. And, and, and I could ask *well, is the fighter plane jet going straight or banked to the left or banked to the right* or whatever. And they, they would say, well, y'know, I'm not really sure about that. I could see a fighter jet and I couldn't tell you exactly where. So they, they get to limits, but the, it's a different kind of...

32:19 Mel: Mmm, limit. Interesting. That's really interesting.

- 32:22 RTH: But, but that's the... y'know, some, some people would say, *well if, y'know, if you can't tell whether the fighter jet is going to the left or going to the right, then you can't say you had an image of a fighter jet*. Well, I think that's totally [JBK: Mm-hmm] totally wacky.
- 32:39 Mel: Yeah.
- 32:40 RTH: I think, y'know, I can, I can in, in, in the real world, y'know, I, I saw the fighter jet, and if you ask me whether I, whether it was banked to the left or banked to the right, I would probably say no, I'm not really sure, because that's the way perception is. We... we don't see things exactly the way they are. We, we see things as we understand them, and we don't remember, we remember them according to our concepts and whatever. So...
- 33:06 Mel: Mm. That's really interesting and helpful. Yeah... Anyway, so that's, that's just what I wanna note there, that definitely... Yes, you've hit the nail on the head of my, the limit of my memory or... yeah, it's a recall thing I feel like here, but exactly of trying to hone in further on, on that level of like autopilot—*was there something, was there nothing*—like that, that's where the limit is for me. That's where I start to get less confident in my ability to answer that genuinely, authentically, honestly. Like, I start to not trust, uh, not trust the recall that I would have.
- 33:49 JBK: But "I don't know" is also as authentic, uh, a response as anything. So that's fine by us. And I think another point that's interesting is you talked about the limits of your being able to go back and put yourself in that experience at that moment. And that's, that's kind of *not quite* what DES is. It's not about like trying to go back and, and reconstruct it because there are, there are other similar methods—one of them is called the micro phenomenological interview—that really try to put you back and you, you try to go back and relive this experience. But, but I think that can, can change the experience when you relive it.
- 34:31 Mel: Mm-hmm.
- 34:32 JBK: And, um, and I guess DES it's not just going back to that experience, but also going back to the, the moment after the beep when you're taking notes and remembering that experience and like, that's also part of what you're remembering now.
- 34:46 Mel: Mm-hmm.
- 34:47 JBK: So I think it's this kind of combination of the notes, the experience itself, the memory of the experience right after the beep. Um, and if you say like, I can't go much beyond like the three things I wrote in my notes, [Mel: Mm-hmm.] well like, that's, that's the point of the notes is for you to put down essential things that you think are important to tell us too. So [Mel: Mm-hmm.] I think, um, I, I think that's fine too. If you, if you say, oh, *I can't go much farther and much deeper and I'm worried that I won't be telling you accurate things*, yeah, that, that's fine to say that.
- 35:23 Mel: Mm-hmm.

- 35:26 RTH: Let me, let me amplify that a little bit. The, the difference between going back, which micro-phenomenology does, and going forwards, which I think DES does, is about the way the iterative procedure works. So whenever we, the conversation that we're having right now is about...*well, y'know, maybe there was nothin' there. Maybe there was something there. It seemed like there was pretty much nothin' there. Mostly I'm gonna say there's nothing there.* That's sort of what we, what we got today. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] And, and it might be, or one, one strategy would be, well, let's, let's see whether we can get you to go back into that, into that moment and relive that. I'm, I'm a, I'm agin it. I don't, I don't think that's a, I don't think that's a producti— *Often* it's not a productive way to do it because for the reasons Julian said.
- 36:14 But what I *do* think is: we've had a conversation about nothin' and thinkin' and stuff and the, and the, and the... you've, you've discovered that we are going to be accepting of you when you, when you have difficulties here, and now *next week* when we sample, and when you, *at the moment of the beep when it happens*, then you will have a chance to (armed by this conversation) to pay more attention to the best you can and tell us about it. [Mel: Mm-hmm.]
- 36:53 And that, that's sort of the faith of DES. The faith of DES is that, that we're not gonna try to *reconstruct* something. Our object is to *reconstruct as little as possible*. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] Our object is to become better apprehenders, in going forwards, so that then we don't *have to* reconstruct. We can, Mel... well, Mel will be in a position to say, "well this is as far as I could go," right *immediately after the beep*, when she's thinking about it herself and writing down the notes that she's gonna con she's gonna take, she, she's gonna say, "well, y'know, this is as far as I can go. I can't go any farther than that. I know they're gonna be interested in that, but I can't go there" or whatever. However she's gonna process that... with as little, with as little recollection as we can, or a little reconstruction as we can do.
- 37:41 Mel: Mm. I think I like that about this, too, because that feels better to me than, y'know... Yeah, I don't, I don't have the capacity to reconstruct or whatever. So yeah, all I can do is do exactly that and write down everything that I think at the time. Cuz then basically now all I can do is trust my notes and stuff. I don't have the capacity to like, in a helpful way, take my back, take myself *back* to a moment. Like, I can't do that. Maybe some people can, but I can't. So this process is better.
- 38:15 RTH: And, and I'm not, I'm, I'm not... I don't wanna be in a position of saying that, that going back to the details is not a good idea. I think there are, there might very well be times when going back *is*, is a excellent strategy. But it, it runs the risk of reconstruction bias or...
- 38:35 Mel: Mm-hmm. Yeah. And I feel that. Anyway, sorry I went on a tangent. [laughs]
- 38:41 RTH: So on to number 4.
- 38:44 JBK: Number 4. Wait, did we wanna ask any more content questions about this Russ, after being in the meta realm for a while?
- 38:52 RTH: Mmmm, I think we've probably muddied the water adequately. [Mel laughs].

38:56 JBK: [Laughs] Okay.

38:57 RTH: So let's go to number 4.

38:58 JBK: This is, this is yours again, Russ...

39:00 RTH: Yep.

SAMPLE 3.4 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

39:01 Mel: Uh, well, it's kind of similar. This beep went off not that long after 4:43. Um, and I wrote "Same. I'm still at the computer. I'm now looking at the my bank website and there's absol, absolutely nothing of note going on inside my brain. It's almost as if my body is present and I'm conducting physical actions without my brain needing to do anything. Almost as though my inner experience is sort of sleeping."

39:32 RTH: So what...do you when, when you say "my brain," do you mean anything other than "my experience"?

39:39 Mel: No, I think that's just the shorthand way that I like to describe my inner experience.

39:46 RTH: Okay. So some people when they say "it's going on in my brain" or whatever, they, they mean *I, I feel it up here* (gestures to the top of his head).

39:54 Mel: No, I think when I say my brain, I just mean internally.

39:58 RTH: Okay.

40:00 Mel: It doesn't necessarily mean... just the whole thing, I would say.

40:04 RTH: Okay. And, and so I'm, I'm not a hundred percent sure I've got the whole picture here, but...so what I've got is I'm looking at my bank statement...

40:15 Mel: Online, on the computer.

40:17 RTH: Okay. And there's *nothing* in my experience? Is that the..?

40:24 Mel: Yeah, I would say that this is similar to the one before of like A to B, um, separate to my awareness. *But* this time when the beep went off, I've felt, um, like I, I wasn't startled by it or anything, so I felt like I could capture the, um... not only was I just doing an A to B and this was separate to sort of my awareness, but that... in, in a meta way in me trying to be aware of my awareness... my takeaway from that was that it sort of was though, it was like *asleep*, if that makes any sense. So like, my, my... in the same way that like, there's sort of *nothing* going on and it's sort of this *autopilot*, this time I felt like a really apt description for that was that internally I was...it was like, it was like sleeping.

41:24 RTH: And, and do you mean to say that this experience was like the other one and we could have called it *sleeping*, we could have called it *autopilot* and maybe *sleeping* is a better word or whatever? Or do you mean that there's something that's different about this one, that I would call this one *sleeping* and I would call that one *autopilot*.

41:40 Mel: I think *maybe* there's a slight difference.

41:43 RTH: And what, what, what would that difference be? And I, don't, don't worry about the words, but what's the difference between this one and that one?

41:51 Mel: Yeah. So I feel like, um, it—and it's, it's, it's subtle, but I feel like the autopilot, I'm still kind of *present* within the room. And even though the like, y'know, action of vacuuming or whatever is happening and I'm like, um, whatever, I'm still sort of *present*. Whereas when I felt the need to describe this as like *sleeping*... felt like it, I was like *absolutely shut off* internally. Like...there was... [twists face] nothing, but in a way of like, I think it felt different to... I dunno, like a, it felt like a restful state. Um...

42:45 Julian comments: This goes along with my 24:15 comment about Mel not using the word "nothing" and me fishing for it. Here Mel uses the word in her original description, though qualified—"nothing of note." Russ first uses it in the questioning. Mel eventually uses it in her answer here but there is a pause and she twists her face before saying it.

It could be that it's difficult for her to say that there is nothing in her experience at particular moments. It maybe goes against preconceptions that there's always something going on. Or her image of herself as someone who has a lot going on.

But it could also be that the word "nothing" is not so apt for her. This goes back to the meta-conversation about "little or nothing" inexperience. Maybe there's some very slight stuff and "nothing" feels too totalizing. Maybe there is some quality to Mel's experience that is hinted at by words like "restful," "sleeping," "dormant." I'll save more commentary on this until the discussion later (47:37).

Russ comments: Your 24:15 and 47:37 comments are about the possibility that you asked misleading or otherwise problematic questions. I agree with those comments, and would attribute the problematics to the operation of presuppositions.

Here I will suggest that the presuppositions interfere not only with the questions posed to Mel but also with the understanding of Mel. If you are proposing in your 42:45 comment that Mel should be understood as perhaps suggesting that there is something more than nothing in the present sample, I couldn't disagree more. Mel's 42:45 turn is, to my ear, a fundamentally clear statement that this sample is "absolutely nothing," more nothing-er than what she has previously called autopilot.

RE "Mel uses the word in her original description, though qualified—'nothing of note'."

I think that characterizing "of note" as a qualification of *nothing* (by which you apparently mean a lessening of totalized [to use your word] nothing) substantially mischaracterizes what Mel said in her original description (39:01). First, the operative phrase is not "nothing of note" but rather "*absolutely* nothing of note." Second, it is followed by "It's almost as if my body is present and I'm conducting physical actions

without my brain needing to do anything.” Third, that is followed by “Almost as though my inner experience is sort of sleeping.” Those are, to my ear, three very plain totalized descriptions of *nothing*. To credit “of note” as undermining all those seems hugely off the mark.

RE “Maybe there is some quality to Mel’s experience that is hinted at by words like ‘restful’, ‘sleeping’, ‘dormant’.”

I think that substantially mischaracterizes what Mel said. She used *sleep* four times, once in her opening description (39:01), twice in 40:24, and once in 41:51, where she said “*sleeping*... felt like it, I was like *absolutely shut off* internally.” All four are, to my ear, unabashedly totalized usages. She did not use *dormant* in the present sample, but when she used it in sample 3.1 (16:44) it was, to my ear, a totalized usage: “I describe that as like *peak autopilot*, and it’s really sort of dormant inside me.” I accept that “restful” is ambiguous, offered up at the very end of a very long and difficult multiply totalized turn. But it is not fair, in my view, to lump ‘restful’, ‘sleeping’, and ‘dormant’ together as if they were unified group. *Sleeping* (four times) and *dormant* are all part of her totalized description. *Restful* at the very most, by itself opens the door a crack.

So far, to my ear, far, I do not see the more-than-nothing as coming from Mel. So far, she has said, almost entirely unequivocally, that this sample is totally nothing.

If I’m right, that Julian has misunderstood or mischaracterized Mel fairly substantially, then I would take that as a sign that a presupposition is at work in Julian—something makes him hear Mel say *not nothing* more than is warranted. If I am off the mark, then the presupposition may be on my turf.

The point here is that presuppositions can operate both on the *way in* (understanding Mel) and the *way out* (questions to Mel). My suggestion: listen to this interview from 39:01 to 42:05) several times (my own rule of thumb in such situations is seven times, because it requires repetition and repetition and repetition to start to hear things in new ways, and something seems to change at about seven; but (a) it requires substantial discipline and I often fall short; and (b) I have no reason to believe that is a general rule).

42:48 RTH: So is this like a nothing-er nothing than, uh, some of the previous beeps?

42:52 Mel: That’s what I was just trying to think. Hang on. Let me think. [pauses] I’m not sure. Um, *maybe*.

43:10 RTH: So I, I, I would say let’s not fret too hard about it, [Mel: Mm-hmm.] because this, this is the kind of thing that I, that I would try, I would trust the iterative procedure to either reveal it down the road or not. [Mel: Yeah.] Be- because, because what you’re say—this beep is *confounded* by the fact that you’re, you now have some more experience under your belt as far as how to do this stuff, at the same time as you’re doing this stuff. So, so it *could be* that, that you’re just *better* at noticing that there’s nothing going on and it’s not really *more* nothing, it’s just that I’m more happy to notice nothing. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] Or it could be that there are some *differences* between *this* kind of nothing and *that* kind of nothing.

- 43:49 Mel: Yeah. I feel like all of that is true. I, I don't know which of that it is. Whether it's just that I'm better at noticing and describing the nothing or whether it's a slight difference in the nothing... Yeah, I'm not sure.
- 44:01 RTH: I'm not sure either. And I'm *happy* with that. That's, um, that's the way this process works. And it could very well be that we're *never* going to be, be able to make that distinction, [Mel: Mm-hmm.] or maybe, or maybe we will. Um, I, I would be happy with either one. But I, what I would point out is that the distinction that we're having difficulty making is a pretty fine distinction.
- 44:24 Mel: Yeah.
- 44:24 RTH: Whether it's *nothing* or nothing *squared*, something like that. I mean, those are pretty much the same thing. Not exactly the same thing, but...
- 44:33 Mel: Yeah.
- 44:37 RTH: And that... Y'know, I think we've said along the, along the line of DES is not about perfection. It's about, let's see as good, let's do this stuff as we can, as good as we can do it.
- 44:46 Mel: Yeah. Yeah. I think it's really fair comment to make about whether it's just that I'm a little bit better at noticing or trying to describe it in a new different way or whatever, or whether it was slightly different. I'm not sure. I think that's cool.
- 45:00 RTH: I think that's right. And I think we take that seriously, and not too many other people do. And uh...but that's, that's what makes life interesting. Cuz we're gonna try to figure out what Mel's like, what Mel's experience is like after we have *maybe* figured out how to talk about it.
- 45:20 Mel: Mm-hmm.
- 45:22 JBK: Yeah. I, I agree with that. And I, I think leaving it to the iterative approach is good. And, and other days you might get closer. Um, but I had, I had one question... like knowing that we might not get an answer. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] Um, and then it might not be clear. So you've just, you compared this to some autopilot's, autopilot ones, which were a little bit more something. Maybe there was something more of the process writing email or vacuuming or whatever [Mel: Mm-hmm.] in your experience.
- 45:52 And this one was *more* nothing. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] But it's, from your descriptions, it still seemed it was more *something* than some moments you've described as *no experience*, nothing or dormant. Um, so that's the way I was... like at first I was gonna try to clarify it. Um, does that description make any sense to you? Or is it completely off the mark?
- 45:52 Russ comments: I think JBK is on the wrong track here. I think she had said, if anything, that it was *less* than the others. This was more like being asleep where the others were at least awake.

- 46:17 Mel: It does. Um, and I'm trying to decide if it's an apt description. I think, yeah... I think it's, we're in that, that really fine, like in the weeds here, whether I, where I'm not super sure. Cuz yeah...I've written "as though my inner experience is asleep," and I definitely felt that. But whether that is a distinction with like, when I've described like nothing [JBK: Mm-hmm.] experientially, I'm not, I'm not sure I need to...
- 46:49 JBK: Yeah. It might also have been just me misunderstanding it because... I mean—
- 46:53 Mel: Yeah, I think it's a really fair question. Like is there a difference? I'm... dunno...
- 47:01 JBK: Because I might have latched onto words like "restful" and was thinking, y'know, some kind of feeling of, of rest, which to me is, is a little bit of a something. But yeah... that might just be me, y'know?
- 47:12 Mel: No, I think that's, I think that's a fair statement. I, I, I actually agree with that. Yeah...There, there was a restful element to this that perhaps then is a factor in making it more than nothing, cuz that is definitely something that I've noted and felt. And so whether that is a slight difference in some way... Yeah.
- 47:37 JBK: I, I'm curious about this element and, and I realize I might've, might be biasing you by bringing up this word again and, and hanging too much on the word *restful*. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] Um, but is there anything else you could say to describe that aspect, if, if it's there?

47:37 Russ comments: This question is still, to my sensitivities, too much about the word, and it gives me the opportunity to try to articulate why I think there is something problematic about that.

When I have said "it's not about the word," one of the things I mean is that "it is risky to think that the word represents a thing (or a state, or whatever)." So here, your question parses as something like: *there is a state that is called restful, and maybe that state is present or not, and if it is, tell me about it.*

If you had said, instead, something like "You said 'restful'. And without hanging too much on the word, are you trying to tell us something about your experience? And if so what? Or was that word somehow off the mark or too fine or whatever?" then I would not have the same critical reaction. That question parses as something like: *You grunted "restful." Is there more to say in that ballpark?*

This commentary is not about your specific words. It is about the presumption that words signify things or states, and I think that is substantially risky, in that it presumes what is at issue. You described it pretty well in your 47:01 turn: "Because I might have latched onto words like restful and was thinking, y'know, some kind of feeling of, of rest, which to me is, is a little bit of a something." The problem is that your original question invites you and Mel to engage in a collusive conversation—I think Mel's 47:12 turn was a step in that (probably problematic) direction: "No, I think that's, I think that's a fair statement. I, I, I actually agree with that. Yeah...There, there was a restful element to this that perhaps then is a factor in making it more than nothing." The good news is that Mel is strong enough to resist this (when in her 47:55 turn she analyzes herself and concludes that she doesn't really know).

The heart of it, which I am trying to zero in on, is to encourage you to try to break what I think is a bad, if universal, habit of presuming that words describe things. *Sometimes they do*, but that should not be presumed. Many times (maybe most times in the experiential realm) words are more-or-less inchoate nudges that translate as something like: *let me try this grunt and see if it that helps me describe my experience, and I will try to clarify those grunts, which include the potential for retraction.*

The difference is (not hinging anything on the words) between “What does that word X mean?/What does that word X refer to?” which I think is problematic, and “What are you trying to tell me about your experience when you said X?” The first is about the word and its supposed connection to the world; the second is about Mel’s experience and the accepted imperfection of her up-to-this-point descriptions about it.

I think words should be thought of as imperfect, elastic, ambiguous *look over there* gestures: the object should be to explore what is over there, *not* the gesture that caused you to look that way. *Sometimes* the connotation of the word/gesture is useful—sometimes the word choice does reveal an aspect of the phenomenon that was heretofore unarticulated or unrealized. But I think that is rather more the exception than the rule—rather more often, the connotations are distractions rather than enlightenings.

The heart of iteration in the DES sense is to encounter ever new phenomena, and describe them in ever new ways, so that eventually the extraneous experiential features, which inspired the use of words with their particular connotations, fall away and the phenomenon is grasped without any particular word distractions. That requires attention and patience, but it is where the diamonds lie.

Julian comments: This was very valuable to me when I first read it after day 2, and still is several months later. I can see the faults in my questioning here. Even though I understand your message here, it will probably take a lot of time to let it fully seep in. It’s a process of changing my thinking, not a one-time quick fix.

I think my questioning starts along the wrong track: (45:38) “So you’ve just, you compared this to some autopilot’s, autopilot ones, which were a little bit more something.” I’m reifying ‘autopilot’. I’m saying *this word is a category that refers to one type of experience*. After many days of sampling now, I don’t think this is true at all. So that’s already not a great point to launch a comparison.

Then I did try to leave options for Mel’s response, but already these options were too constraining. As you say, I’m in the mindset of *you said restful; lets see if a restful feeling was really there*. I agree that the focus should be more about if words like *restful* relate to something in experience and then what this flavor of experience is. In the end it might have little to do with what I’m probably at this time conceptualizing as a restful feeling. It might be a rest-y flavor of nothingness. That’s of course speculative.

As I noted in the 42:45 comment there might be something about experience that words like “restful” or “sleeping” hint at. It’s impossible to say since my questioning was off the mark. And as you say, such things would maybe be better left to the iterative process anyways.

Another note about ‘leaving options’. I see that often I do it in a perfunctory way. I tack on ‘if it’s there’ or ‘or no?’ or ‘you’re not sure’ or ‘tell me if that’s off the mark’. I then think that’s good enough and I’ve given options for Mel to contradict me

or offer her own alternatives. But I see that's not good enough. At worst it comes across like *here's my theory, correct me if I'm wrong*. I see that leaving possibilities is a lot more than tacking on something at the end. It's about reforming how I conceptualize experience. Or how I approach Mel's words in relation to her actual experience. It's again not a quick fix but a process of change. If Mel's answer ever starts with something like 'you're right' or 'that's a fair statement' [46:12] that's a good indication that whatever I asked did not come across as an open question.

Russ comments: Your last paragraph contains two fundamentally important observations, which I would like to emphasize. First, the perfunctory "if it's there" or "or no." You correctly point out that "it's about reforming how I conceptualize experience." I agree, but I think it is even more than that; it's about reforming how you conceptualize *yourself*. Hearing with fidelity is about cultivating the desire to be wrong, to have your wrongness be exposed so that it can be abraded away. Fidelity is what's left after your wrongness has been abraded. Most people take the opposite approach, one populated with confirmation-bias questions. Fidelity is *never* obtained through confirmatory questions. It is obtained only through frequent and genuine disconfirmations.

Second, and relatedly, your observation that "If Mel's answer ever starts with something like 'you're right' or 'that's a fair statement' that's a good indication that whatever I asked did not come across as an open question." That is methodologically sound advice that applies to all interviewing. Listen to the sportscaster ask the coach about the game; if the coach says "You're right," you know you're going to hear a rehash of the interviewer's ideas, not the coach's.

- 47:55 Mel: No, no, no, okay. Um, no, no. Cuz I won't remember well enough, but I'm going over my notes again. "Absolutely nothing of note going on inside my brain, almost as if my body is present and I'm conducting physical actions without my brain needing to do anything." So that feels very similar to the autopilot stuff that I've described previously. [JBK: Yeah.] But then I've added "Almost as though my inner experience is asleep." So I would say to wrap this up, this is going back to what Russ and I were just talking about before about, is that just me sort of finding another way to describe that same thing? [JBK: Yeah.] Or is this slightly different? I'm not sure.
- 48:33 JBK: Yeah. I don't think I brought much clarity with my questioning, but I, I was curious. I wanted to try to probe a little bit, even though we might not get anything certain.
- 48:45 Mel: No, I appreciate that.
- 48:47 RTH: So can I, can I ask one more different line of questioning about this? So I'm looking at my bank statement online. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] And, and is it your sense that I got out of looking at the bank statement what I intended to get out of it: I wanted to find out my balance and I found out, found it out, or I wanted to figure out when I had paid this last and I found it out or whatever. Or does it seem like I am just sort of glazed over... And so what I, what I wanna know is, as best you can say, did you, were you skillfully interacting with your bank statement *while* there was nothing going on in your experience? Or were you just sort of totally asleep with my eyes aimed at the, the bank statement?

49:32 Mel: I think it was that, because I was, um, uh, was like in the pro-...I think like I just opened the bank statement or something. So, y'know, it's not like I was in the depths of reading and, and understanding any sort of like, particular details yet. So then it might've been different. But at the exact time the beep went off, I would say it's that glazed over, um, thing where nothing was... I was just doing something and I, it was beyond my consciousness, in a sense.

50:07 RTH: So that makes this beep *different* from, I guess maybe it was the first beep where we were filling out a New York form?

50:16 Mel: Mm-hmm.

50:17 RTH: Where in the, in, in *that* filling out, I was skillfully filling it out, [Mel: Mm-hmm.] even though there was sort of nothing in my experience.

50:25 Mel: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I was doing—

50:26 RTH: This—

50:27 Mel: Yeah.

50:29 JBK: But that was reading it, like having just finished reading *before* you were about to fill it out, right?

50:36 Mel: Yeah. So there were, there were a couple, but...yeah, um, uh...say the second beep was, um, yeah...I just, I was just about to fill in my details, so I was... I, yeah... (I'm trying not to provide too much, like to read too much into things), but I think that the thing I wanna say is I think it's relevant that in *that* one there was an A-to-B to do, like, do you, do y'know what I'm trying to say of like... there was a, I just finished reading a thing and my brain was about to do a thing. So that's sort of the process that I think I describe as autopilot, where there is a physical action or a skill or a task to sort of do. And I'm in the middle of doing that and I'm not really thinking about what's required to do that. The difference in this beep with the bank statement is I don't think that I was doing... I was in the middle of doing a thing yet. Y'know, like I'd sort of just opened the bank statement and I wasn't like looking for a certain part of it yet or whatever. I was just that...that I wasn't in the middle of a process or a skillful action. I was glazed over and my brain was kind of asleep because nothing was really required from it at that exact moment, [pauses] if that makes any sense. [laughs].

51:56 RTH: So I got a couple of things to say. One is Julian, I, I, I think she did say that she was in the middle of having read it and was about to respond or something along the line, but I, I would not take her too seriously about that. I think if you go back, she, you'll find that she was, she hedged that pretty successfully. So she was saying, *y'know, I don't really know what was going on. I was going from A to B and somewhere between A and B was probably this not, not, not that, but I'm not really sure.*

52:23 JBK: Okay.

52:24 RTH: And so you, you don't wanna clean, you don't wanna clean her up beyond what she's, what she's capable of saying. Which I think you're...

52:34 JBK: Okay. Because I remember trying to figure out before if, if the actual typing was ongoing at the moment or not. It's true, yeah.

52:41 RTH: Yeah. But you gotta give her... she, she's, she's saying she's not paying attention to that stuff.

52:47 JBK: Okay, yeah.

52:49 RTH: And then the... But and, but then the other thing is that...so there, there, there is sort of a big difference between being *glazed over and asleep*—there's nothing happening, I'm just shut down [Mel: Mm-hmm.]—*and there is... I'm not, I'm not shut down, I'm processing, I'm processing the New York application, even though I'm not thinking directly about it. It's, my brain cells are processing it, my finger cells are processing it, my eyeballs are processing, and all that stuff is going on, even though I don't have a apprehension of it in, in, before the footlights of consciousness. Or, I've just shut everything down, I'm asleep.* [Mel: Mm-hmm.] Obviously even in, even while you're asleep, there's, there's *some* processing going. You don't fall outta bed very often. You know where the edge of the bed is, and y'know.

53:55 Mel: Yeah. [RTH: So yeah...] I think there's a, a distinction again, and it's really fine. But yeah... in talking about it more, there's a distinction, that it's like...

54:08 RTH: And, uh, and I'm, and this conversation that I'm having right now is more about *tomorrow* than it is about *today* or *yesterday*. It's, y'know, I'm, I'm interested in whether, whether you have a, a lot of skillful processing going on without any direct apprehension, or whether at times you just shut yourself down and take a little break and then then turn all the skillful, skillful stuff back on again. Microsleep!

54:37 Mel: Yeah. That's really interesting.

54:40 RTH: [Pauses] And yeah, maybe, maybe we'll figure that out. Maybe we won't.

54:47 JBK: But to me this questioning is, um... is a bit risky because I feel like you still made some experiential assumptions, like before you were talking about processing and the neurons are doing this and, and the fingers are doing that, but there might not be any experiential difference between that and, and nothing. I mean, in some samples of Mel. So I, I dunno, there's just a couple things about this. The, the way it was phrased where I feel like it might not bring clarity.

55:25 RTH: The objective wasn't to bring clarity.

55:28 JBK: Was to muddy the waters or?...

55:29 RTH: The object was to *be unclear*. So that on the *possibility* that there's a, some distinctions in here, even though *I* don't know what they are, Mel *might in the future* be able to help us out.

55:47 JBK: But, but to me, even for iterative training, it might be like...oh, well I was skillfully doing this task and I was more engaged, so, so *maybe* it was my brain *was* on autopilot and there was some minimal like, experience for this task. But, but that might not be true. Like you could... we've seen some samples where you're doing some things, Mel, where... like maybe lots of people would be thinking lots of things and have a lot of things going on, but you were also clear that it was nothing. So I mean, yeah, that's kind of what I'm saying. I don't know if, if that iterative training is helpful.

55:47 Russ comments: I don't understand what Julian is trying to say here at 54:47 and 55:47. I suspect that either I have a blind spot (what Julian has said is clear but I find it off) or Julian has a blind spot (or confusion or whatever). Perhaps Julian is worried that I confuse a non-experiential realm (that might be called processing) with an experiential realm (what lies before the footlights of consciousness), but I don't have that concern because I think I am exquisitely differentiated regarding that distinction. But that may be far off the mark in terms of what Julian's concern actually is.

I do think it would be interesting to discover that Mel's experience is identically nothing/blank /autopilot/asleep in two very different kinds of behavioral situations: when she is skillfully engaged in verbal processing (for lack of a better word) something (like filling out a form), and when she is behaviorally paused (taking a break from skillful processing, resting, pausing, microsleeping, whatever you want to call that).

One might say that DES shouldn't care about those two different situations—they are context and DES doesn't care about context. But I think that undersells DES. DES *does* care about context; it just doesn't want to *confuse* context with experience, doesn't want to infer experience from context. So, for example, sometimes DES beeps occur when individuals are engaged in innerly seeing a clear and detailed X, with nothing else in experience. I do find it interesting to notice that sometimes such inner-seeing-and-nothing-else occurs when people are driving, and those people are often shocked to discover that they have, before-the-footlights-of-consciousness, *no* visual experience of the actual cars or the actual road *at all*. The interest of that observation comes not from ignoring context completely, but from the careful examination of inner experience while skillfully and relentlessly keeping the driving context from polluting the experiential description (*of course* I was experiencing the traffic).

But that might be off the mark of Julian's concern.

Julian comments: I think you mostly do make clear distinctions between the non-experiential and the experiential. There were just a few parts in your descriptions that seemed counter to how I normally understand you. For example, the 52:49 turn it seemed like you were saying there *is necessarily* a difference between being completely shut off/asleep experience and experience where there is skillful processing (in the eyes, fingers, wherever) but nothing is directly before the footlights of the consciousness. I don't know if there necessarily is a difference. I'm agnostic

about this. I hold off the possibility that people can be skillfully engaged in tasks but have *no more* inner experience than when in a dreamless sleep.

It actually took me a deal of time to come to see this as a possibility. And it was from reading your work. At first, I was shocked even by your writing of the possibility that for some people and especially for children and schizophrenic people there can be periods with no experience. We can't write off the possibility of slight experience, but I took seriously this possibility of *no experience*. Even if I think it's beyond the scope of DES to confirm this, I think we can't write it off.

So I would leave open the possibility of being skillfully engaged in a task and it being experientially no different (or imperceptibly different) from dreamless sleep. But as for this meta-convo mostly being about presenting options for subsequent days and trusting the iterative procedure, I agree to that.

Russ comments: It is indeed necessary to make the distinctions between experience while asleep, experience while awake but glazed over, and experience while awake and skillfully performing a task but with no experiential aspect, because for many people, those are very different experiences. I have no idea whether those distinctions apply to Mel—it was the intent of the questioning to open experiential possibilities. The art of the interview is to ask the questions without suggesting to Mel that there is some necessary, or frequent, or suspected connection between some presumed state and experience. As usual, the judgment about whether it was a good question comes from observing Mel's responses. Her 56:29 response suggests to me that she was not at all confused by what I asked.

BTW, "dreamless sleep" is the kind of term philosophers, consciousness scientists, and psychologists use when referring to states, pretending they know things they don't know. I think they (and you) don't know much (or anything, probably) about the experience of dreamless sleep.

- 56:29 Mel: I think to me this conversation has been helpful in the sense that now next time I did samples, I would, I would...like I think it's helpful knowledge to try and notice like, oh, okay. Is there a difference? Um, it feels like a helpful discussion to have to fine tune my description of nothing or autopilot or whatever in the sense of like, just encouraging me to notice if there is, uh, a difference between those things. Like I, I found this conversation helpful ["helpful" is said in an uncertain, questioning way].
- 57:03 JBK: Okay. Then that's good. [laughs]. And, um, [trails off]
- 57:13 RTH: The, I, I guess *we will* see whether the conversation was helpful or not. That's the...
- 57:19 JBK: Yeah. Should we do beep number 5?
- 57:25 RTH: Well, we're at an hour.
- 57:27 JBK: We're at an hour. Well, we had some small talk [laughs]. [Mel laughs]. But what, what'd you think, Mel? One more beep? Or are you good?
- 57:36 Mel: Let me see about the beep. I mean, I, it's, I've written that it's very similar, so I don't, I don't know that you'll get much from it, but we can do it if you want to.

57:49 JBK: I find it interesting. Russ, do you have the time and stamina for, for one more?

57:53 RTH: Yeah. Go for it. [Mel laughs].

SAMPLE 3.5 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

57:56 Mel: Okay. Well, I've written, so this only went off seven minutes later, which I, I always find, I do find the times really relevant, um, for whatever reason. Anyway, so this went off at 4:50 and I've written, "Same as above. I was physically, um, shuffling through some mail without much intention." Um, uh, and that's, that's all I wrote. So I put this in the category of that sort of autopilot in the sense that I'm doing a physical task, but there's not a lot of conscious awareness.

58:34 JBK: Mm-hmm.

58:34 Mel: To anything.

58:36 JBK: So not a lot of conscious awareness. You're going through physical mail or email?

58:42 Mel: Yeah. Mail. Yep. Right here. [Holds up envelopes] I was, I was literally like in the process of doing that.

58:48 JBK: Okay. Sifting through... Um, was it like, um, this might not have been experienced, experienced, but like physically was about reading who it's from? Was it about sorting it in some way? Was it, do y'know?

58:48 Russ comments: The general DES rule is that if it might not have been experienced, don't ask about it until you have explored what *was* experienced. The logic: the recollection of experience is ephemeral, and at the very best, describing the context/behavior is an unnecessary delay, while at the same time it runs a serious risk of contaminating the experience (any talk about context invites that context to seep into the recollection of experience). On the other hand, the recollection of context/behavior is relatively stable, and discussing experience first is likely to have little detrimental effect on the recollection of context. Said another way: you can always get the context/behavior, but you only have one shot at the experience, and you want to take that shot as early and as cleanly as possible. Said yet another way, DES is simple: be absolutely clear about the distinction between experience and all else, and then privilege the apprehension and description of experience.

59:04 Mel: Yeah, I think I kind of noticed like, um, noticed like what each letter was....

59:04 Russ comments: This is why it is not desirable to ask about context/behavior (see 58:48 comment). JBK asked about context/behavior, and Mel responds about experience (what she noticed) as *derived from* that context. That pollutes to some extent the remainder of the interview. To how large an extent? Maybe not much, because Mel is pretty good, but (a) we don't really know the extent and (b) it wasn't necessary to introduce the pollution.

59:12 Mel: (continues) ...Um, I didn't feel the need to write down anything about the physicality of the whole thing, though. Like, y'know, I didn't write down like, *oh, and I was aware of how the mail felt or smelt* or anything like that. Like there was no desire to note anything like that. Um, I... yeah, I find it interesting that I wrote...uh, "I was shuffling through the mail without much intention," cuz I think that that's sort of relevant. And this is where it's somewhere, um, between some previous beeps of that autopilot and y'know, perhaps those moments where my brain is sort of shut off because it was in an A-to-B task, y'know, I'm saying I'm shuffling through with no intention. I wasn't looking for a particular piece of mail or I wasn't right in the moment of thinking *I should open that piece of mail*. I... it, it, that's not the moment the beep went off, the moment the beep went off was doing a physical act without any intention, without much skillful, without much awareness or whatever. [JBK: Yeah.] Um, but I haven't described this as feeling like... ye- ah *sleeping*. It wasn't *that*. Yeah.

1:00:30 JBK: Well, in our gradations of not much to nothing,[laughs] would you be able to, to, to put it on some level or not?

1:00:41 Mel: Yeah, I would say, um, like vacuuming.

1:00:45 JBK: Okay. Like vacuuming. So a bit more than nothing, if I understand right?

1:00:49 Mel: Yeah, exactly. If not...if the full nothing now is sort of like the previous beep where we're saying that feels like sleeping and fully switched off, I'd say this feels like autopilot where I'm doing something, there's no like contemplation, but it's not like fully asleep. And that is a *fine* distinction and don't ask me to go any deeper than that.

1:01:16 JBK: Yeah. So a little bit of something going through the mail and you said not, not much intention? Um, was there maybe a little bit intention, a little bit of like seeing what, what you got or?...

1:01:16 Russ comments: In the *sometimes it is about the words* department: The word *intention* is problematic, because its frequent use (as in many philosophical traditions) is *not* about experience. That is, some would say that *every* act is intentional. So: when you ask about whether there was intention, it invites a response about some non-experienced theoretical presumed motivation or reason or explanation whatever...

1:01:32 Mel: Well, I guess I was shifting through it for some reason, but I can't... shifting, sifting through it for some reason. But I can't remember what it was and I didn't note what it was.

1:01:32 Russ comments: ...and that is how Mel responds: she says *there must have been some reason*. That is *not* talk about experience, but it confuses talk about experience.

1:01:41 JBK: Okay. So...

1:01:43 Mel: When the beep went off, I wasn't looking for a particular thing. Um, there wasn't... y'know, like if we go back to, uh, earlier right. Say when I was thinking about whether to go see that movie in the afternoon, and that's a *thought* that I was sitting with and contemplating. There was *none of that present* in this. There was no contemplation about a thing.

1:01:43 Russ comments: The good news is that Mel is a pretty skilled DES participant, so after giving a non-experiential answer at 1:01:32, she gives an experiential answer at 1:01:43.

1:02:11 JBK: Was the, the visual aspects in, in your awareness or, or not? Or you don't know?

1:02:18 Mel: Yeah, I would say it was, I would say the visual, the visual aspect was. The, um, tactile aspect, not so much, but the visual, definitely. Yeah. This wasn't my eyes glazed over and my sort of consciousness of sleep or whatever. I was visually taking in what I was looking at. But taking in to the level of autopilot.

1:02:47 JBK: And, and that's still different from physically you might be doing something skillfully, but it doesn't enter your experience. Like Russ mentioned before, you were moving your hands around but not necessarily experienced. Could that be the same with, with the vision? You're, you're skill skillfully looking at mail, but the visual part *wasn't* something directly entering your, your brain, your experience, whatever?

1:03:14 Mel: Maybe. Yes. I, I feel like I was a bit more like visually aware of this than I am aware of when I'm waving my hands about, like I have no awareness. I have no awareness of doing that. Whereas like there was an awareness of the visual here. Cuz that's part of what I was doing, but in turn, but that's [car horn]...

1:03:14 Russ comments: My not-sure-what-to-make-of-this antennae are pretty jangly. JBK asked a leading question (focusing on the visual; 1:02:11). Mel gave a subjunctified response (including two "I would say"s at 1:02:18) but then on her own made a careful distinction between the visual and the tactile. Then JBK tried to leave room for an alternative to the experienced visual (1:02:47 (but I don't know whether that is too little too late) and Mel stuck to her guns.

Part of the problem is the word "awareness" in JBK's 1:02:11 turn. What JBK means when he asks "Was the, the visual aspects in, in your awareness?" is pretty ambiguous, I think, because it is a fact that I am aware that there is destruction in Gaza and a war in Ukraine; I am aware that the area of a circle is πR^2 ; I am aware that *Yellowstone* is a pretty popular series; and so on. So I think "aware" is a pretty good term to avoid. (One could make a similar argument about "inner experience," which is why I work pretty hard at disambiguating that term.)

Suppose JBK had turned his questioning around and started out by asking at 1:02:11 something like: "So you were sifting through mail, which doubtless involved moving your hands around, seeing the envelopes, the tactile sensations, and so on. Is some or any of that before the footlights of consciousness? Or is that, like Russ mentioned before, more like a non-experienced gesture?" Then if Mel had said "the visual aspect was. The, um, tactile aspect, not so much," my not-sure-what-to-make-of-this antennae would have been quiet. Then, if Julian were motivated to drag his

feet, he might have replied something like “do you mean that you were directly apprehendedly *seeing* the envelopes but *not* directly apprehendedly *feeling* them?” And if Mel answered *Yes* to that, and Julian had replied “How so?” then there would have been some warrant to credit her description—Julian would have successfully undermined his own words and encouraged Mel to describe her experience.

1:03:33 JBK: Yeah,

1:03:34 Mel: But it’s, it’s fine.

1:03:37 JBK: I’m sorry, my, my parents are in— I, I’m visiting my sister, so I’m in Airbnb with my parents and they’re kind of walking around in the background. Um, but they haven’t been in this room till now. [Mel: Okay.] Anyways. Um, yeah, I’m just the visual thing. It was something I mentioned I brought up, you didn’t bring it up, which is why I’m a bit more skeptical of it...

1:03:37 Russ comments: Good.

1:03:58 Mel: Mm-hmm.

1:03:59 JBK: ...because, um, because I introduced it. [Mel: Mm-hmm.] Um, but, but you, you did say that it was in your awareness more, um. If, if it was, was there any particular aspect of, of that visual part in your awareness?

1:03:59 Russ comments: It seems to me that if you were genuinely skeptical, you would think *Oh crap! I may have led us down the wrong path here* and then end your turn at “because I introduced it.” That is another way of having faith in the iterative process. *Maybe we will get another shot at it on later sampling days, but for now it’s water over the dam*) but either way, you would leave it at that.

To go further is the *opposite* of dragging one’s feet (see comment on Mel 2 13:22) and is what I think of as irresponsible. It also tends to blame Mel (“but *you, you* did say that it was in your awareness”) when I think the more responsible view would be to leave it at something like “but *I, I* did perhaps corrupt this conversation.”

Furthermore, “but *you, you* did say that it was in your awareness” is importantly misleading. It would have been more faithful to have said, “but *you, you* did say that <underminer><underminer> it was in your awareness.” (see 1:02:18)

Said another way, to say “If, if it was, was...” is to enter the hypothetical realm. The *D* in DES is *descriptive*, and it is *not possible to describe* a hypothetical event. You can *speculate* about a hypothetical event, you can *hypothesize* about a hypothetical event, but you can’t *describe* it, because there is (or at least may not be) no *it* to describe.

Said another way: cleave to experience.

Q: You used the word *blame*, which is pretty harsh. Why don’t you use something like *shift some of the responsibility to* or something like that?

A: Because I think it is desirable to aim any criticism as directly as possible at the interviewer, whether that be Julian or me or anyone else. I don’t want to shoot a shotgun where some of the pellets hit Mel as collateral damage. I want to shoot a

bullet that hits one and only one target. And that target is the interviewer. I happily accept that I may not have aimed the rifle perfectly—that's why I have peppered my comments with qualifiers such as "it seems to me" and "I think"—and I hope that Julian and others understand that.

1:04:16 Mel: No, I just think in the, in like an observational sense, um, like that I was aware of that and it was important to... it was relevant to like, whatever I was doing or taking in or, y'know, to use the word "processing," but y'know, like in an observational sense, but nothing beyond that sort of level of awareness or, um, whatever.

1:04:45 JBK: Um, I'm, I'm good for questioning on this one. [RTH: Me too.] Hey, I asked all the questions! [laughs].

1:04:56 Mel: Well done, Julian.

1:04:58 JBK: [laughs] Finally.

1:05:03 RTH: So we can do, we can do this again?

1:05:06 Mel: Yeah. Yeah. I feel like everything that we did today was helpful in the sense that it...these discussions are helpful for me sometimes to prod about whether, yeah, just, just prod and probe about what I'm trying to, um, articulate. Like I've found this helpful today and feel like the next time I do this that will all inform when I try and notice, if that makes sense.

1:05:44 RTH: Sounds good to me. Same time, same station next week?

1:05:44 [They compare calendars.]