

Mel May
Mel Interview 8

Below in black is a word-for-word transcript of the December 29 interview with Mel that is available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/PgAaLhlw18M>. 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 JBK: Um,

0:00 RTH: So I'm ready.

SAMPLE 8.1 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

0:02 Mel: Okay, cool. Um, so I did these last night. So the first one went off at 8:19 PM. Um, and I've written, "I'm painfully bloated and this is the overwhelming inner experience. My stomach feels tight and heavy and I kind of feel nauseous. Um, autopilot inside my brain, though. I'm taking in words on the screen of my phone, but certainly no audio as I read them, nor anything visual, but I'm seeing the words and attempting to retain the message."

0:37 JBK: Okay. So autopilot thing with the, the, the words or, we'll see about that first. But it, it sounds like this, this bloating thing *is* in your experience or is that or background? Or is that experienced at this moment?

0:53 Mel: No, that was very much, that was the, the main part of my experience *for sure*.

0:57 JBK: Okay. So what is that like at this moment?

1:01 Mel: Um, yeah, well I wrote "feels tight and heavy in my stomach." So I just remember when the beep went off like that was definitely the overwhelming sort of sensation. It was very front of mind. Um, that was sort of taking up more of my—consciousness doesn't feel like the right word—but attention I suppose, or awareness than the words that I was looking at on my screen.

1:27 JBK: So tight, heavy. And any particular part of the stomach or just the whole region or...?

1:35 Mel: Lower stomach.

- 1:37 JBK: Lower stomach. Um, could you describe that more? Like a tight, heavy, like pressure from having eaten something?
- 1:37 Russ comments: "From having eaten something" suggests causation. That is a problematically leading question because Mel hasn't said anything about any experienced causation.
- 1:46 Mel: *Pressure* is a nice word. I would use the word *pressure*. Yep. Um...
- 1:50 JBK: Um,
- 1:54 Mel: Yeah, I don't know.
- 1:57 JBK: Are you, um, is there context that would help? Had you just had a large meal or something or is that not necessary.[Mel laughs]
- 1:57 Russ comments: Mel has said nothing about eating, and this is JBK's second question about it. Bloating can be caused by lots of things (hormones, etc.), but either way, the causation is not necessarily part of the experience.
- 2:04 Mel: No, I don't think so. To be, to be honest, at risk of too much information, I just felt really bloated, like all day, [laughs] and complained about it on my shoot earlier as well. So no, it had been a, a presence for a few hours.
- 2:17 JBK: Okay.
- 2:18 RTH: So *stomach* is an ambiguous term. Do you mean an organ, stomach, or the abdomen region or, and, and don't, [Mel: (inaudible)] I don't really want to know whether it is the actual organ, but whether it *feels like* your, your organ. Or does it feel like the abdominal region?
- 2:34 Mel: Uh, mm, starting to find it hard to remember, but I think, um, sort of a little bit hard to differentiate in that it definitely feels like that lower abdomen region, but it wasn't like a muscular pain like that I would associate with my actual abs (if I ever used them). Um, it was felt like more deep and within than that.
- 3:03 RTH: Okay.
- 3:04 Mel: So I'd go more stomach-y in that sense. Do y'know what I mean?
- 3:09 RTH: I, I think I'm happy with that.
- 3:09 Russ comments: I don't know what she means, but I am happy to move on because I took seriously her statement (2:34) that she is having trouble remembering.
- 3:11 JBK: And when you say lower kind of lower stomach, would it just be like lower torso as in like the stomach-y region or is [inaudible]...

3:20 Mel: This is getting very medical today! [She stands up and indicates her abdomen] Um, like here's the band of my pants. I would say like here specifically like about the size of my hand too. That exact spot.

3:33 JBK: Okay.

3:35 Mel: Sorry, this is what was happening.

3:38 JBK: No, no, you can give as much detail as you think is useful to understand it. [Mel laughs]. Um, is it, does it seem like it's constrained in a very specific area? Or is that more just to show the, the general region?

3:51 Mel: Uh, no, like the tightness was very s-, the tightness and heaviness and pressure was definitely that very specific area, yeah. About the size of my hand and in that sort of region. Um, and so that *feeling* was the overwhelming thing that was in my awareness at that point for sure.

4:13 JBK: So this tight, um, pressure. Is there... is it just the physical sensation or is there anything, uh, accompanying that? Or is, would you say it's purely physical?

4:26 Mel: Um, I'm not. What else could it be, beyond that?

4:30 JBK: Um, well I, I, I don't want to give, say it has to be one thing, but I don't know a negative, y'know, pain thing with it or...

4:41 Mel: Uh huh. Uh, no, it was just physical. Yeah, it was just physical. There wasn't like, um, I think, did I even say, yeah, I said a strange phrase, but "autopilot inside my brain," and I think that's sort of me trying to distinguish that like this was a physical thing that was very front of mind. (Uh, that's a bad term to use.) This was a physical thing that was very present in my awareness, but it's sort of in a sense was, um, disconnected from like my *thoughts per se*. So like I felt like my brain was like looking at the words on my phone screen or whatever, and I was aware of this physicality in my stomach, but it wasn't, my brain wasn't then also thinking about that in a negative or positive way or thinking about the food I ate that made me that way. Like they were kind of two distinct things.

5:37 JBK: It was more in the body. [Mel: Yeah.] And just to get back to the physical part of it. [Mel: Mm-mm] Um, was it more kind of like on the surface, like pressure and you feel it on the surface? Or is it kind of deeper within, extending within?

5:55 Mel: Perhaps a little bit of both.

5:58 JBK: Okay. So I feel, I feel like maybe I, I'll leave pushing on defining the exact physical coordinates, cuz I feel like if I try to push too far, I might [Mel: Mm-mm] get things that, y'know, reach the limits of what you can say about it. Um, but the words on the screen, [Mel: Mm-mm] so you're looking at words on your, your phone screen at the same time? Or, or a different screen or

- 6:26 Mel: No? Yeah, I think actually it was my laptop screen.
- 6:29 JBK: Okay. Your laptop screen.
- 6:29 Russ comments: To me, the important part of Mel's 6:26 utterance is not so much the "laptop screen" but the "I think." That, to my ear, suggests either that the reading was not at all a part of her experience at the moment of the beep, or at most a very small part of her experience at the moment of the beep, or that she can't recall much about it.
- 6:31 Mel: Yeah.
- 6:32 JBK: Um, and that, is that part of your experience/consciousness/whatever now? Or is that more just an action that's happening, and the main thing is the stomach [inaudible]?
- 6:45 Mel: Yeah, I think it, no, it was present in that I was like, like aware of the words that I was reading on the screen and like attempting to retain them. But at the same time, what was happening in my stomach was sort of... more, um... intense than the, the act of retaining the information I was reading.
- 7:11 JBK: So the stomach is more intense? [Mel: Mm-mm] And the, the words, the retaining, were there specific words at this time? Or is that not so much part of it?
- 7:21 Mel: I didn't write 'em down and I can't even remember. I think I was reading an email like, y'know, it was sort of whatever.
- 7:29 JBK: So maybe the specific words were... Is the kind of *attempting* or *trying to retain* them? Is that, is that something that's there at this moment? Or is...
- 7:40 Mel: Yeah, like I, well I was just in the act of reading, um, so that involves me trying to retain the words that I am reading. But yeah, I think the reason I didn't even write down those words was cuz it all, that part felt very secondary to the physical thing.
- 7:40 Russ comments: Mel says she was "just in the act of reading," and then gives a theoretical account of reading ("*so that involves me trying*"), not an experiential description. So I take Mel's answer here to be *No* (or perhaps *I don't know*; see my comment at 6:29).
- 8:01 JBK: It's very secondary and much more about the physical thing. [Mel: Mm-mm] Could you say like a percentage 80—20, 90—10, or something else?
- 8:01 Russ comments: I'm not going to give much credit to the answer in this case (see my comment at 7:40), but as a matter of interviewing skill, I would say it is a mistake to try to approximate the percentage, as JBK has done here. If he is going to ask about percentages, I think it would be better to say something like "Could you say like a percentage: 60—40? 90—10? 99—1? 51—49?" I'm not suggesting particular words to be used; I'm suggesting attempting (a) to convey an *interest* in the percentage *without suggesting* a particular percentage, and (b) slightly dragging the feet—she has implied

something like 80—20 but it is desirable to give her a second chance without suggesting that she needs to be consistent with what she originally said.

8:12 Mel: Uh, I struggle to remember accurately, but like, I think 80—20 or 70—30, that sort of thing.

8:12 Russ comments:

RE “I struggle to remember accurately.”

I think there are at least two ways to understand this struggle. First, Mel has said pretty consistently for quite a long time that she is not capable of giving a faithful description of the word-screen part, if it existed in the first place, so the struggle may be about the difficulty of remembering.

RE “I struggle ... but ... I think 80—20 or 70—30”

Second, Julian has offered 80—20 or 90—10, but Mel’s experience apparently doesn’t fit that in that range, so the struggle may be not about the remembering difficulty but about having to be at cross purposes with Julian. In my experience, if a DES interviewer says “X” (here: “80—20”), and the participant responds “X or Y” (here: “80—20 or 70—30”), what the participant really means is usually “NOT X but really Y or whatever is farther away from X” (here: “for sure it wasn’t 80—20 or higher, but really it was 70—30 or probably lower than that”).

Where does the struggle come from? I don’t know and neither does Mel. The object is to avoid putting Mel in a situation where she has to struggle unnecessarily, thus simplifying our task.

Q: JBK at 8:01 didn’t offer just “80—20 or 90—10;” he also offered “or something else.”

A: Yes, he did, and that may have contributed to Mel’s willingness to suggest 70—30. I think, however, that it is questionable whether the “or something else” was a genuine offering or a formulaic utterance. If it was genuine, then Mel probably would have heard it as genuine and there would not have been a struggle. If it was formulaic, then Mel probably would have heard it as formulaic and that would have amplified the struggle. I am not a mind reader, so I am not in a position to know.

8:22 JBK: 80—20. And is there, is there more you could say about the, the word screen part? Like what that was like at this moment?

8:22 Julian comments: I often reflexively repeat a word or phrase from Mel, which is probably often a bad habit, putting us in the too-much-about-the-words realm. Here I say “80—20.” I do think, Russ, that I was attuned to the reading being a small part of experience (maybe even not present). So of the two options she gave, I reflexively took the smaller one. But as you mention in the comments above, there were better opportunities to back up and drag our feet about the reading portion of experience. Or if I am leaning towards 80—20 or 99—1 as opposed to 70—30, I should at least say why, instead of reflexively choosing one option and leaving it at that.

Russ comments:

RE “I often reflexively repeat a word or phrase from Mel”

FYI: Since the early (probably the first) interviews, I have been negatively jolted by your repeating a word or phrase of Mel's as the beginning of your responses. I have not commented on it because I thought targeting such a habit might not (or not yet) be constructive—it might make something that was too-much-about-the-words even more about-the-words.

RE “repeat[ing] a word or phrase ... put[s] us in the too-much-about-the-words realm”

I think it is not that the word repetition *would put us* in the too-much-about-words realm, but that it reflects that *we already are* in the too-much-about-words realm. That is, using the present interchange as an example, if you genuinely accepted that “80—20” was just a draft, just a grunt that might be refined or revised or withdrawn completely; and if you genuinely accepted that your task is *not* to try to understand what Mel has said but rather to help Mel improve / refine / replace /adjust what she has said (if there are adjustments to be had) so that your *trying* to understand is not necessary, then reiterating “80—20” would seem like a step in the wrong direction and you wouldn't say it.

RE “If I am leaning towards 80—20 or 99—1 as opposed to 70—30, I should at least say why”

Much of what DES calls *bracketing presuppositions* could be called *avoiding confirmation bias* (which is, I think, among the most pervasive and pernicious of human characteristics). I would say that if JBK is leaning towards 80—20 or 99—1, he should work at purging himself of any such leanings. The object of DES is *not* to figure out (or lean toward a figuring out) what Mel means, but rather to engineer the conversation so that Mel can tell us what she means without our having to figure it out.

8:34 Mel: Um, I don't think so. I just, I was laying down in bed. I was reading an email on my laptop and sort of, I guess like *distracted* by the, the physical thing that was happening in my stomach. So that's why I can't really like, recall much else about the specificity of the words I was reading and whatnot.

8:58 JBK: Okay. Um, do you have more questions, Russ?

9:02 RTH: Nope, I'm good.

9:05 JBK: All right.

Exercise for the reader (1):

In writing a description of this sample, which is better, if either, and why? Our answers are at the end of this transcript, but no fair peeking until you have committed yourself to your own answer.

(A) Mel felt bloated. This was a tight heavy pressure sensation around the lower part of her stomach.

(B) Mel felt bloated, a tight heavy pressure sensation around the lower part of her stomach.

9:06 RTH: Number 2.

9:08 JBK: Number 2.

SAMPLE 8.2 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

9:09 Mel: Uh, this one went off quite a while later, 9:03 PM. And I really didn't write much down for this. I'm really sorry, Russ. I've written, "I'm watching a film on my laptop and it feels very autopilot."

9:26 RTH: And does "autopilot" mean "I'm taking in the film"? Or does it mean "my eyeballs are aimed at the film and I'm not absorbing it"? Or something else? Or some of each?

9:36 Mel: I think absorbing it. Definitely like eyeballs are locked in; absorbing the film; wasn't distracted. Like there was, it wasn't going off in any other ways or whatever. So looking at the film, taking in whatever, but I don't think I was, um, like there was nothing to grab onto that was so enthralling or whatever that felt so overwhelming that I needed to note it, y'know. I was just kind of quite simply just watching and taking in the film.

9:36 Julian comments: I'm still not completely sure we untangled this. Mel grunted "autopilot." You gave her various options. The two main ones that originally stuck out to me are between experientially absorbing vs eyeballs-pointed-fact-of-the-universe watching. Her answer does take some terms from each of your options—eyeballs and absorbing. But it's not about the words, of course. And even the words here are potentially ambiguous. Absorbing or taking in could also happen in a non-experiential way. For example, absorbing an email without that being experiential.

This isn't a criticism of your questioning. I also had an opportunity to ask again for the next sample. I could have gone with the backside-in-the-chair comparison. I think a simple comparison like that would be useful here. Basically, three samples hinge on this line of questioning since Mel describes the next two samples as the same.

I think the final option you gave "some of each" is actually quite compelling. Maybe we won't be able to pin experience like this down. In my mind, it's not pinned down. I don't feel the need to but can live with that uncertainty.

Russ comments: As your comment implies, it is always a good idea to keep track of Mel's talk, to be sensitive to whether that talk is driven by / suggested / overly influenced by the questions. For example, if I were to have given a multiple-choice set of options *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D*, and she chose *B*, then I would have discounted her answer as being, or at least possibly being, merely a reflection of what I asked.

But that is *not* what happened here. I suggested "*not* absorbing" and Mel said "absorbing." I suggested "eyeballs aimed but not absorbing" and Mel said "eyeballs locked in." Mel did use some of the words I used, but she used them in very different ways than I used them, so I am *not* worried that she is unduly influenced by my words. I take her answer to be pretty clearly an endeavor to describe her experience. That is, by the usual standards, I take my question to be a good one.

RE “Maybe we won’t be able to pin experience like this down. In my mind, it’s not pinned down.”

I think Mel’s “I was just kind of quite simply just watching and taking in the film” is a very adequate description of Mel’s experience. I don’t know what is not pinned down for you, but I suspect it is in the ballpark of your something-like-universalist approach. There is a long discussion of related issues at the end of this transcript. (Possible relatedly, I also think it possible that the not-pinned-down is the result of some meta presupposition, something like *there has to be* some meta process that goes along with being absorbed. I don’t think that is necessary at all, but I don’t want to get us too far into the meta discussion (again).)

Julian comments: As you mention, we discuss the universalist issues at length at the end of this transcript in the section called “Email exchanges in the course of writing the descriptions of these samples.” And we keep on discussing it at the end of the day 9 transcript. I’ll write a bit more about it after a relevant section at today’s 19:17.

10:03 RTH: And, and does “watching and taking in” mean something like “I’m carried along by it”? [Mel nods affirmatively] I’m, I’m, whatever it is that the director is trying to get me to do, I’m doing. And is that, is that the way it seems?

10:17 Mel: Yeah. Yep.

10:18 RTH: Okay. And is this a commercial film? I don’t really need to know but, what it is, but are you watching a publicly available movie or, or a... film that you m-

10:18 Julian comments: This is a question about something external and I’m trying to think of how it’s different from certain external questions I asked like about Mel’s stomach sensation and what it came from [1:37 and 1:57]. There could be potential risk, for example assuming that whatever’s happening in the movie is part of experience: *Oh, it was Saltburn, so I must’ve at that time experienced the argument between the characters*. That’s not the case for Mel here, though.

One reason why it’s different from my question about the stomach bloating is that I gave an option—from having eaten too much. That would have been the equivalent of asking “so what was the movie, was it *The Lord of the Rings*?”

Another thing is that you say “I don’t really need to know.” This leaves open that learning about what the movie is won’t necessarily change our understanding of Mel’s experience.

Russ comments:

RE “This is a question about something external and I’m trying to think of how it’s different from certain external questions I asked like about Mel’s stomach sensation and what it came from [1:37 and 1:57]”

I don’t know why I asked whether this is a commercially available film—that’s not the kind of question I usually ask. Perhaps I was trying to clarify what I meant by “director” in the previous question. But the fact that I asked it should lead me to examine whether I was letting some expectation about the external world leak into my attempt to describe the inner world.

RE “One reason why it’s different from my question about the stomach bloating is that I gave an option—from having eaten too much.”

As usual, I think it is not about the words. What matters is the degree to which your question (or mine) reflects your (or my) hunch or expectation that knowing something about the external situation would supply something informative or confirmatory about Mel’s experience. I’m no mind reader, so I recommend that you examine yourself. And in that examination, I recommend starting (or trying to start) with the *Yes I did let my hunch or expectation leak into my expectations about inner experience*, remembering that this would be in the world of presuppositions / delusions, and therefore this examination will be difficult.

I’m by no means suggesting that you should perform such an examination but I should not. I should and do. As part of my own self-examination, I would note that immediately after the external reference exited my mouth, I said “I don’t really need to know,” which I would take as a sign that I was at least contemporaneously sensitive to the risk of leaking external expectations into inner experience.

The point I am trying to make here is that the iterative process applies not only within Mel but across Mel and all other investigations and investigators. The process Julian (also Russ) should be undertaking is *how can Julian (also Russ) develop himself so that he can be more attuned to Kerry’s (our next joint interviewee) experience than he was to Mel’s?* It is not about how to word a question.

- 10:27 Mel: Yeah, I was watching the movie. I was watching the movie *Saltburn* actually, if you wanna know, *Saltburn*. Um, but yes, so it’s, it was on Amazon. It’s just come out. (Very good!)
- 10:36 RTH: So what I, what I understand is that I’m watching the movie *Saltburn*. I’m, I’m carried along by the action. I’m, but I’m *not* in any *analytical* way or in any *particularly focused* way. I’m not noticing the character’s hair [Mel nods affirmatively] or the, the, any particular feature. But I’m also not spaced out. I’m, I’m absorbed in the sense that I’m carried along by that, by the movie. [Mel nods affirmatively throughout this turn.]
- 10:36 Russ comments: This is Russ stating his understanding that the experience is not meta but it is also not nothing.
- 11:02 Mel: Yes. Yes.
- 11:04 RTH: Then I’m, then I’m good.
- 11:08 JBK: Um, is there... so you’re not noticing any specific element, like, oh, this part of this scene or whatever. Um, but at this moment, is what’s happening part of your experience? Is like, what’s going on part of it?
- 11:28 Mel: I didn’t write it down cuz I don’t think it was at the time, it felt really like incidental.
- 11:34 JBK: Okay. So the specific content... Um, so would you think knowing specific content would help us understand your experience at this moment? Or no?

11:45 Mel: No? Not, not at this particular moment, no. I remember being aware of that when I was going to write things down, but like it didn't, it wasn't relevant.

11:45 Russ comments: There is a discussion of "content" at the end of this transcript in the section called "Email exchanges in the course of writing the descriptions of these samples."

11:55 JBK: Okay. Um, I'm, I'm good for that one.

12:00 RTH: Okay.

SAMPLE 8.3 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

12:01 Mel: The film keeps going for a while, so we're gonna stay on this topic for a bit. Um, so the next beep went off, yeah, like only five minutes later, really. Um, oh, no. No sorry, I skipped ahead! Um, 9:41, so 40 minutes later, and I've written, "still watching the film and just absorbing the audio and the visual. No overwhelming feeling of sensation or particular thoughts."

12:29 JBK: And "audio and visual." Is that more those specific parts of it are present to you? Or, or is, is it more just like the sample right before, [Mel: Um.] absorbing whatever's going on, like the whole package?

12:45 Mel: The whole pa... Yeah, the whole package. Um, yeah.

12:56 JBK: Okay. So it's not like there's a specific element of the audio or the visual that's...

13:03 Mel: No.

13:04 JBK: And um, in here, do you think, uh, same kind of question. Do you think if we knew something about the content of the scene, what was going on? Would that, uh, or would, would that give us some picture of your experience or, or not?

13:04 Russ comments: I worry that these questions (both here and at 11:34) are invitations to collude—to pretend that we are asking about experience when we are really asking about context. The questions suggest that knowing the setting tells us about the experience, suggest that in similar settings, Mel's experience is the same as JBK's, so that if JBK knows about the setting he can know, from his own experience, about Mel's experience. All that is true in a *validity* sense (across thousands of people, experiences are, on average, doubtlessly similar in similar settings), but false in a *fidelity* sense (knowing the context says absolutely nothing about Mel's experience as a particular individual in a particular setting). DES is entirely a *fidelity* endeavor: it aims *only* at Mel's experience *at that particular moment*, regardless of whether her experience is similar to JBK's or to most of the thousands of others watching that scene in *Saltburn*. The good news is that Mel declines the invitation.

It's also possible that I don't understand what JBK is trying to ask (see the discussion of *content* at end of the transcript).

13:23 Mel: I still don't think so here. There's a beep later where I kind of make a note about something that is a bit more like that, so I know what you mean, but I don't think so on these. I think the one thing that I really wanted to try and get across in this one (probably as an extension of the last beep as well) was that there was no, like, it was quite autopilot-y in the sense that there was no overwhelming feeling or like emotional response to what I was watching, or no thought. I wasn't, yeah, looking at a character and going, I like him, I don't like him, or that's an interesting shot, or like, none of none of that was present. It was, um, that sort of autopilot that I have discussed in other scenarios, y'know, vacuuming or whatever, where I'm totally engaged in this action of watching this film. And it's really that simple.

14:15 JBK: Yeah. It's kind of the absorbing, engaged flavor of autopilot. [Mel: Mm-mm] And, and not, not like a nothingness flavor of autopilot, not just your eyeballs are pointed, but

14:27 Mel: Yeah, there's a retention here. There's a, there's an engaged with the thing. Yeah, for sure. Um, and I guess another way to phrase that is that I'm just like not distracted, as well.

14:40 JBK: Okay. Yeah. Um, any, any other questions, Russ?

14:45 RTH: So, uh, am I understanding correctly that, that, that what you wrote about this included "absorbing the audio and the video," and that is equally applicable to the *previous* beep? This is sort of like a refinement of what you *could have said* about the previous beep? Is that, is that true?

15:02 Mel: I think so, yeah.

15:04 RTH: So it's not like you're trying to *distinguish* something between, *from* this beep with the last beep.

15:11 Mel: No, exactly right. I think it was me trying to double down on trying to find language for it. Yeah.

15:16 RTH: Okay. That's what I understood. [Mel: Mm-mm]

15:19 JBK: That's what I understood, too.

15:20 RTH: Number 4.

15:22 JBK: Uh, I have question. Um, I feel like the, this question I've asked twice, I don't know, y'know, how fruitful it is. But about the content, and if something about the content is there present? [Mel: Mm-mm] Uh, Russ, do you, do you know what I mean by that? Or, or do, or how it's phrased or if there are other ways to phrase it? Or, or if it's even a, a good line... to go down?

15:46 RTH: I, so I wrote, I wrote a note to myself in the vicinity of the first question that I was trying to figure out whether you were asking a meta-awareness question. And I wasn't

sure that, whether it was or not, and I decided I wasn't gonna ask it because it takes, might, might take too much time to answer that question.

16:07 JBK: Yeah. No, I, I don't mean it in a, in a meta way, but just there were some samples during conversation where to you it seemed like the same experience if you were talking or if your friend was talking, or whatever the conversation was about, that the content was the same. So I was trying to see if the content here of your experience is the same or, or very, very similar, y'know, at, at each moment, or it doesn't depend at all. It wasn't so much if you were paying attention to a specific part of this scene or a character's hair color or whatever. But just if, like, if something about the content is at all part of whatever your experience is like at this moment.

16:07 Russ comments: See the discussion of "content" at the end of this transcript in the section called "Email exchanges in the course of writing the descriptions of these samples."

16:55 Mel: (Hang on. Sorry, one moment. Sorry. Thank you. Housekeeping.) Um, yeah, I know what you mean. Um, and I think that there are times when that *is* the case, but not these ones. But I, I think I do know what you mean, Julian.

17:15 JBK: So it's more about absorbing, being engaged, but, and nothing specific about what's going on. Just

17:23 RTH: So I, so I guess the reason I think that's a meta-awareness question is that, that for her to... there... Certainly there is *some* aspect of her experience which differs from this scene, from that scene. Y'know, this is the scene where the, where there's a car chase and that's the scene where there's a, y'know, a love scene or whatever. Her experience is gonna be different about in, in those kinds of things in some important way.

17:45 JBK: I wouldn't, I wouldn't assume that. Um, I wouldn't assume that, which is, well, I, I would like to ask about that. Is there something about beep 3 that's different from beep 2? Like even if you're not noticing a specific part of the action or this or that, is there something about what's happening in the movie that makes beep 3 different from beep 2?

17:45 Russ comments: "Is there something about what's happening in the movie that makes beep 3 different from beep 2?" as straightforwardly understood requests a speculation about experiential causation. I think people do *not* have access to such causations. However, it is also possible that JBK didn't actually intend this question to be about causation.

18:09 Mel: I don't think so with these beeps, but there is a, a later beep where I think you will get what you're craving a little bit. [laughs]

18:17 JBK: I'm, I'm not craving anything.

18:17 Russ comments: To my ear, that is some combination of critical-of-Mel and defensive, neither of which is constructive. My recommendation: meditate on what within you (feeling, thought, whatever) that led to this response, and try to recognize that as a signal that there might be something to learn here. Mel is trying to give you what you have trained her to give you, and if that's not what you want, then either your training has been bad or you don't understand what your questioning has been conveying. It's not Mel's fault.

18:19 Mel: [laughs] No, but like of distinction because like, yeah, I know what you mean. I don't think so on these occasions. But I think that there is a later one that there is a bit of a distinction and that the content of what I'm watching at the time is sort of relevant.

18:36 JBK: Yeah. I'm perfectly happy if there's a distinction or no distinction. [laughs][Mel: Yeah.] It's, uh, just to, just to kind of find out. Hmm. [RTH: Onward?] Should we move on to number 4?

18:49 RTH: Number 4.

SAMPLE 8.4 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

18:51 Mel: Um, 1, 2, 3, 4, 4. I, this literally only went off five minutes later at 9:47, and I've written "Exactly the same as above." That's all I wrote.

19:04 JBK: Wh- okay.

19:06 RTH: And so you take that to be, I'm carried along by the movie?

19:11 Mel: Yeah.

19:12 RTH: Okay, then I'm good.

19:17 JBK: Um, and can I ask the, the same question as before or, or I'm asking that question. Is there something about what's happening on screen, even if you're not specifically noticing or paying attention, that would make beep 4 even just like a tiny bit different from beep 3 or beep 2?

19:17 Julian comments: I think this question is relevant to our discussion of Mel's carried-along-by-the-movie experience. After this interview, I originally wanted to write that Mel's being absorbed in the movie was content-free. Russ didn't want to write this and we argued at length. This question might have been the closest I got to asking about it. That being said, it's a deeply flawed question. I start by asking if there's something about what's happening on screen. So I start with the external, not the experiential. I *eventually* get to the experiential, asking if there was something that would make beep 4 even just like a tiny bit different from beep 3 or beep 2. But by anchoring this in the external, it may be too late.

Still, in our best attempts to investigate this experience, this question is relevant. When later attempting to understand this experience, I wondered if Mel saying "exactly the same" was a broad gesture. Potentially yes, the experiences are

the same. But *obviously* they're a bit different because here there's a love scene and there there's a car chase scene (ok, I still haven't seen *Saltburn*). I didn't realize that here I did give the option of "a tiny bit different" and Mel didn't take it.

There's only so much we can say about that, because, Russ, I'd suspect you'd say that as soon as I grounded this question in the external, the rest of it doesn't matter. It's gone.

Still even, after all the discussions—content-free, featureless, non-particularizing etc.—the best I can say about this experience is that I understand Mel to be watching the movie, carried along, but with this not being "garden variety" watching, not *oh obviously there's a love scene here, I'm pulled along with the loviness of it*. I do still understand it to be a shade towards the autopilot-y. I don't want to say anything totalizing like content-free. Maybe I don't want to say anything at all. I think I've learned from our discussions about it even if I don't pin it down. Probably especially if I don't pin it down.

Russ comments:

RE "but with this not being 'garden variety' watching"

I'm not sure what that means. Lots of DES participants are carried along by movies in what seems to me to be pretty much the same way that Mel is at these beeps. No meta-awareness, no being drawn to a specific detail. That seems pretty garden-variety movie-watching to me.

Lots of DES participants *are* sometimes drawn to specific details of movie scenes: the hair of the actress, the drawl of the actor, fear for the potential victim. That also seems like pretty garden-variety movie-watching to me.

RE "not *oh obviously there's a love scene here, I'm pulled along with the loviness of it*"

That kind of meta-awareness is *very unusual* among DES movie watchers—DES movie watchers simply do not generally (there are rare exceptions) have any meta-awareness whatsoever of their manner of being absorbed. If there were such meta-awareness, the experience would *not* be garden-variety movie-watching.

RE "So I start with the external, not the experiential. I *eventually* get to the experiential... Russ, I'd suspect you'd say that as soon as I grounded this question in the external, the rest of it doesn't matter. It's gone."

Actually, your starting with the external is not the important consideration to me. It is...

RE "if there was something that would make beep 4 even just like a tiny bit different from beep 3 or beep 2."

That is an impossible question to answer on two counts: first it is a theoretical and second it is a meta-awareness question.

At sample 8.2, Mel was absorbed/carried along by the (say) car chase. At sample 8.3, Mel was absorbed/carried along by the (say) love scene. Julian, apparently, would like to know whether the absorption/carried-along-by-ness is the same in samples 8.2 and 8.3 (and in the conversation beeps, too, but let's not complicate this discussion). First, it is, apparently, Julian's theory (whether explicitly stated or not) that there is this thing / process / occupation that we could call *absorption/carried-along-by-ness*, and he would, apparently, like to know whether this thing / process /

occupation is invariant across time and occasion. (I doubt that there is such a thing / process / occupation, but I don't really know; I can grant it as a possibility.)

Second, to help decide that issue, he asks Mel whether that thing / process / occupation is even a tiny bit different between sample 8.2 and 8.3. That is a meta-awareness question: for Mel to be able to answer that question presumes that she was meta-aware of her way of being absorbed/carried along by the car chase and meta-aware of her way of being absorbed/carried along by the love scene. But she wasn't meta-aware! She was absorbed/carried along by the scene.

Julian has said repeatedly that he has no presuppositions about meta-awareness, but I can't see how it is possible to expect an answer to this question without presuming meta-awareness. If you don't presume meta-awareness, then Mel would have to answer "I don't know" to any question about the manner of her absorption/carried-along-by-ness—she was absorbed/carried along by the car chase without any necessity of meta-observing the manner of her being absorbed/carried long.

19:39 Mel: No, not, not based on what I wrote. I literally wrote "exactly the same as above," so I didn't feel so...

19:48 JBK: Okay. Then I'm good on, on that one.

SAMPLE 8.5 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

19:53 Mel: Okay. So *this one* is a bit different. So I've got this one off quite a while later, so 10:25. And I've written "The distinct thought / phrase of, oh, 'for God's sake, what's going on with this Wi-Fi?' was in my head because it kept buffering at that exact moment. It's really hard to explain the way this thought happens. It's as though it appears all at once and also one word after the other. So like when I say 'it appears' like 'that phrase appears', I don't mean visually or audibly, or audibly, just kind of conceptually. I felt my heart racing a bit, too, as the movie was definitely nearing its climax. So I, that that sensation was there, which is different to previous beeps. Um, and when I say that, I mean I felt a sort of beat and throb in my chest."

20:55 JBK: Okay. So you're, you're thinking, or you got this thing "for gods sake, what's going on with this Wi-Fi?" [Mel: (laughs) Yeah.] And, and that exact phrase is there? Or something like it? Or

21:09 Mel: That exact phrase.

21:12 JBK: And are, are those, are the words present? [Mel: Yes.] Or is it more just what's going on, what your thought is, is so tightly explained by those words that those are just the perfect words for them.

21:28 Mel: That yeah, that, it definitely was that exact phrase.

21:32 JBK: That exact phrase. [Mel: Mm-mm] So it is that exact phrase. Are the words themselves present in some way?

- 21:41 Mel: Uh, present in the sense of like, well, y, yeah, like the words have to be present for that phrase to be present, but like the, it was like the phrase all at once. But then I also sort of simultaneously (which maybe I've tried to describe previously), it's as though the phrase is all there at once, but also does kind of unfold really fast. I don't know how to describe that. [JBK: Okay.] But anyway, but it's not, it's not like, yeah, I can't *see* the words or I can't *hear* the words in my voice or anyone else's voice. It's definitely like a concept.
- 22:18 JBK: Okay. So it's not like you're hearing the words or seeing or [Mel: Mm-mm] or innerly speaking or whatever. [Mel: Mm-mm.] But what this phrase is there, it's present all at once. It comes on at the same time, but, but also like it's sequential, one after the other.
- 22:37 Mel: Yeah. I know that's like literally an oxymoron, but it kind of both feels true somehow.
- 22:43 JBK: Okay. So both are true at the same time: "For God's sake. What's going on with this Wi-Fi?" Um, are there other details about that part of your experience?
- 22:57 Mel: Um, the, the film was just definitely getting to a really interesting part. And so it had just started to buffer and it sort of took me out of the, I guess that that snapped me out of the more autopilot thing of the previous beeps of just being engaged with the film. Like the act of the buffering snapped me out of that process. [JBK: Um hmm.] And then we get this other thought where, y'know, there's something else sort of, um, in my awareness. And so yeah, that's, that's what happened. [Julian: (inaudible)] And then at the same time though, when I was interrupted by that, yeah, I had, I noticed that like feeling in my chest that I guess I noticed that because of the interruption, like because of the buffering then I kind of was taken out of the act of watching the film and I realized like how engaged I was with the film in a physical sense as well.
- 23:53 JBK: So your heart is racing, you feel a beat in your [Mel: Mm-mm.] chest? Neck? I don't know, [Mel: Chest.] or some other part? [Mel: Yes.] Which? Chest?
- 24:02 Mel: Yep.
- 24:03 JBK: Okay. So beat in the chest. And you say, well, is there a, this feeling and then a separate noticing of it? Or is it more just, just feeling this, this sensation?
- 24:23 Mel: I think feeling the sensation. And then I noti-, once I *had to* then notice what had been happening when the beep went off, I think I noticed it. But like in the moment I don't think I was like meta-aware of *my heart is really racing*, if that makes sense.
- 24:36 JBK: Okay. There's not a meta thing. Um, is it a specific *area* of the chest, part of, part of the chest or,
- 24:46 Mel: Mm, I don't in general. Like, I mean, I was laying down, so it kind of just feels like, not necess-, wherever my heart is, I guess, but like there [puts hand on chest].
- 24:55 JBK: So heartbeat. [Mel: Yeah.] And, uh, a fast heartbeat?

- 25:01 Mel: Um, yeah, I would say so. It was heightened.
- 25:05 JBK: Was it heightened as in more pressured, stronger? Or faster, do you think?
- 25:11 Mel: Bit of both. Like in general I don't notice my heartbeat, y'know, so to even notice it, I would use the word heightened. Um, cuz it, uh, there was an awareness of the actual beat. And then, uh, yeah, I would say it was kind of, it kind of felt a bit fast and a bit throbby.
- 25:28 JBK: And... you mentioned at one point the, y'know, the noticing the buffering [Mel: Mm-mm.] made you notice the, the beat. Is there kind of that sequence to it? Or is it more just, at this very moment before the beep, just these two things. Like "what's going on with his Wi-Fi" and then the also the heartbeat?
- 25:53 Mel: Yeah. I think they were simultaneous.
- 25:57 JBK: Okay. Just simultaneous. Um, the heartbeat thing isn't, it's not tied or related to the Wi-Fi thing. It's not like frustration with the Wi-Fi?
- 25:57 Russ comments: That is a question about causation, which is most likely *not* part of Mel's experience. Mel will respond with a very plausible explanation of causation, which is either true or a collusion with JBK—there is no way of extricating this.
- 26:13 Mel: No. It, like, I'd say it had become present in the movie becoming like, um, quite interesting and very, very engaging in a way that like, these beeps have gone off, this beep's gone off much later than the earlier ones. So the film had really like, gotten more intense by this point. So even if the Wi-Fi thing hadn't happened, I think how I would describe the act of watching at this point would be very different, cuz the film had intensified and the content was doing things to me in a way that, that it wasn't earlier. Um, but then I think that I became *really* aware of *that* physical sensation *because* the buffering snapped me out of this beautiful sort of autopilot-engaged-in-a-thing-watching-a-movie, y'know. Because the buffering had *interrupted* that, I was then really aware of, *oh God, I was really enthralled*.
- 27:09 JBK: Okay. So we have the, "for God's sake, what's going on with the Wi-Fi" thing, the heart racing thing. Is there, is there anything else in your experience or awareness at this time?
- 27:24 Mel: Um, I don't think so.
- 27:28 JBK: Okay. And "for God's sake, what's going on with the Wi-Fi?" Uh, when you read that out, it's kind of sounds like frustration. Is [Mel: Yeah.] is frustration part of this? Or, [Mel: Yeah.] or some emotion or,
- 27:28 Russ comments: That is a leading question that invites collusion. See the comment at 28:55.

- 27:42 Mel: Yeah, I, I considered lobbing that up just then, too. I said the only other thing that this, I was gonna say, the only other thing that was perhaps part of my awareness was a *feeling* of frustration and annoyance. Like there's definitely some sort of like negative undertone to that thought.
- 27:57 JBK: But by that do you mean it's not separate from the thought itself? It's not like a separate feeling of frustration. But like the thought itself might be kind of tinged in some way with frustration? Or, or something like that.
- 28:12 Mel: Um, I think both are true. I think that I felt frustrated, and then that phrase happened in my head. And like, which is there first? Or whether they're intrinsically linked? I'm not sure. But both can be true, I think.
- 28:29 JBK: Is there, is there more you could say about this frustration element? If it's there because [inaudible]
- 28:34 RTH: So, can, can I back, can I back this conversation up? Cuz I'm a little worried about where, where we're heading here.
- 28:38 JBK: I, I kinda wanted to undercut that by saying I, I introduced this frustration thing, so if we keep pushing for that,
- 28:44 RTH: That's what I'm [inaudible]
- 28:45 JBK: We have to be aware that it's something I brought in. Yeah. I just wanted to... yeah to even give you an avenue to say, I don't know, maybe let's not probe that because we're not certain.
- 28:55 RTH: Well, I, I think maybe we can probe it with, but we could pro- probe it with a little bit of more, more dispassionately, or more openly or un- [JBK: Yeah.] un-leading-ly or whatever. So there, there's no question about that the phrase is a frustrated phrase. The, the, the, the grammar of the phrase is a frustrated phrase. [Mel: Mm-mm.] And I think it's *possible* to have a feeling of frustration *and* utter a frustrated phrase. And I also think it's possible to utter a frustrated phrase and *not feel* any frustration at all. And I think it's also possible to feel frustration and not, not utter a phrase. So all those things are separate. So now the question is at the moment of the beep, if we *can* (now that now that it's the water is a little bit over the dam), is there a *feeling* of frustration that is there present? Or is it more that there is a frustrated phrase being uttered?

28:55 Russ comments: JBK could have articulated such possibilities at 27:28, which would have transformed his extremely leading question ("Sounds like frustration. Is frustration part of this?) into a less leading question (but still somewhat leading because Julian brought it up).

However, RTH's 28:55 turn is more iterative training aimed at *possible upcoming* samples than at this particular sample—there is too much water already over the dam (we had been talking about this sample for about eight minutes before the feeling was introduced) for any description of the feeling aspect of this sample to be accepted as a high-fidelity account.

29:53 Mel: No, I think a feeling of frustration was present.

29:58 RTH: Okay. [Mel: Yeah.] And then how, how, in what way? How do you, how do you...?

30:04 Mel: Hmm. Um, I, that's really hard to articulate, I think. I think that, I mean, I'm gonna say some things and they might not be helpful, but like, I was frustrated by the fact that I'd been snapped out of the beautiful process that I, but snapped out of the act of watching the film. Um, so how does that manifest itself? I mean, like...[pause] I, I guess just in a way I'm like, be-, I was aware of myself again. Does that make any sense? Like, I was snapped back into reality a little bit and so I was frustrated by that. I'm not sure that really answers your question though, Russ.

30:59 RTH: Well, I don't think it does either. And I think maybe it's not possible to answer, answer it. And maybe it has never po-, never *has been* possible to answer it. But now this is after this, this much conversation is probably not possible to answer it. I think [inaudible]

31:12 Mel: It's quite, I'm always just like how do you, how I'm—I feel frustrated. Okay. [laughs], what does that feel like or look like? I don't, I don't know.

31:12 Russ comments: Mel was frustrated. But that in no way implies that she *feels* frustrated—maybe she did, maybe she didn't.

31:20 JBK: Can I throw out a possibility? And it can just be a possibility that you can discard if you want. [Mel: Mm-mm.] But that maybe what you're calling frustration is that there's no longer this absorption, there's no longer being in the movie. [Mel: Mm-mm.] And also, like you're noticing, or the heart racing sensation is part of your experience now. [Mel: Mm-mm.] So maybe that these things like the, the heart pounding, the not being absorbed, is something that after the fact that might be called frustration. Um, tell me if I'm, if that's off the mark.

31:57 Mel: I don't think it's off the mark. Yeah. I think that's sort of like *what happened*. But it still doesn't really feel like a good way to describe *frustration*.

32:06 JBK: Okay. So there might be something...

32:08 Mel: But that's not really.... That's really interesting, Russ.

32:11 RTH: Well, the, so all, all that Julian just said is true in an explanatory sense of all the, the, those things happened. And that would be an interpretation, I guess, as to whether that is what *feels like* frustration. And the question is whether there is something that *feels frustrating* that you can, that, that you could say, *well, as the result of those things that, that Julian identified, well, this, this is where it came from*. But, but I also think that I, I think that feelings are hard to describe—that's probably why we call 'em *feelings* rather than *thoughts* or something. But, that... but, but, but *sometimes* frustration is very *easy* to describe (for *some* people *sometimes*). Y'know, I was feeling frustrated. How do y'know that? Well, my, I felt a shortness of breath and my hands

were clenched or whatever. There's the people, people *can say*, this is the aspect that makes me recognize frustration.

33:03 Mel: Mm.

33:04 RTH: But other people will say, y'know, I, I was yelling at my husband and, y'know, but I didn't feel angry. There was [laughs], there were angry words coming outta my mouth. But I can't say that I *felt that!*

33:16 Mel: Mm. That's really interesting. This is like a, just a good chat for like, future ones to try and be aware of that. To note. Yeah.

33:16 Russ comments: That is the heart of the iterative aspect of DES and was the motivation behind this conversation (as most clearly evidenced in RTH's 28:55 turn).

33:28 RTH: I think it's very, I think, I think conversations about feelings are in general difficult. Or I shouldn't say in *general* difficult because some, for some people, sometimes I'll, they're *very easy*. And then for a lot of times it's very difficult.

33:41 Mel: Yeah. Interesting.

33:42 RTH: But I would, I would all, I'd like to ask another series of maybe related questions. And that is that about the heart beating, which you originally attributed to being from the movie. And in conversation with Julian, then you reiterated they're from the movie. But I would like to know why you would say that the heart rate came from the movie. Is, is there something about, about your *experience* that says this is a *movie* heart rate rather than a *interrupted* heart rate?

33:42 Russ comments: This is a continuation of the iterative discussion. RTH doesn't expect the question to be reliably answerable, but discussing it may lead to higher skill in later sampling days.

34:14 Mel: Yep. Um. Yes, because I just feel like it was really relevant to the context of where the film was at. Um, so it was definitely like in its climax of sort of like, y'know, character development was really unfolding and you're like, *oh my gosh, this is*. Like, I was kind of like absolutely glued to the screen. Like, Wow! The movie's really getting good at the moment, da da! And I was kind of like, *Oh! Is that gonna happen!? Is that guy gonna reveal himself as this!?* And then it was buffering and then I noticed my heart rate. So it felt like a suspenseful sort of heart rate as opposed to a hotheaded angry heart rate.

34:14 Russ comments: Note that this is discrepant from what had been said previously: at 31:20, JBK asked if it was a hotheaded angry heart rate, and at 31:57 Mel said it was. I think that this discrepancy follows from the fact that different plausibilities were highlighted in the two series of questions, and both asked about causation, which was not directly apprehended in either case.

34:54 RTH: Pissed-off heart, pissed-off heart rate. Okay. [Mel: Yeah.] And then that's what I gathered, but that's what I wanted to ask. [Mel: Mm-mm.] Alright, I'm good.

35:05 JBK: I'm good on that, too.

35:06 RTH: Number 6.

SAMPLE 8.6 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

35:06 Mel: Cool. So then it was the last one, um, was at 10:47. And I've written, um, "This is tricky. I don't really remember. And I think it's because the beep kind of startled me, cuz I was at the very ending of the movie and I was so engulfed in it."

35:26 RTH: [pause] So [long pause until 35:43] should, should, should we start with, "I don't remember" and just leave it at that? Or should we say "I'm, I'm more engrossed in the movie than I was in, in other places. And so by the time I got around to processing the beep, i, it just seemed like I couldn't do it."

35:26 Julian comments: This is quite a long pause (roughly 17 seconds cumulatively) and instructive for that reason. It's okay to take time to come up with the best avenue for questioning. This may even encourage participants to take time and reflect before responding. It's also interesting, Russ, that you leave it up to Mel what the best avenue is to continue.

Russ comments:

RE "You leave it up to Mel what the best avenue is to continue."

DES interviewing is, in a way, something like being a midwife. I try to structure a situation where Mel can safely and efficiently describe her experience (and teach her what the important aspects of that process are, for example, to avoid speculating about causation), but in the end, Mel has to do the work. Less metaphorically: my expertise is not in trying to figure out things about Mel's experience, but in setting up a situation where Mel can reliably and credibly tell us about her experience.

36:04 Mel: I, I think the latter. The reason, so like, I would've previously had this beep go off and been and had this feeling or sensation, and been like, oh, I don't know, do another one. But then I remember last time I did that you guys were like, "still write it down if that happens." So this was very much that. But I think, um, it, it's *immediate!* Like it, the beep went off and *immediately* I was like, *oh my gosh! I have no idea what was happening then!* And I think, as you just said, I think it is cuz I was *so* engrossed, moreso than previous beeps while watching the film, that I just had no idea what was even happening. I was so *startled* by the beep that I couldn't, I, I had no idea.

36:53 RTH: So the previous beeps that, that were watching the movie, I was being carried along by the movie, but i, in an interruptible kind of a way, apparently. When the beep happened, I could say, well, that was the beep—I was watching the movie. But *here* I'm apparently being carried along by the movie and when the beep happens, I can't even say that, [inaudible].

37:10 Mel: Mm-mm, definitely.

37:14 RTH: Okay.

37:15 Mel: I, I was *engrossed* by this point. (Very good film!) [laughs]

37:25 RTH: Then I think I'm good.

37:28 JBK: Um, I think I'm good. I'm good, too. Yeah, I, yeah, I had something along the lines of Russ's last question, that in some other beeps you were absorbed in the movie and that's all there was, but you *could* remember. [Mel: Mm-mm.] Um, but here it is *not* the same. It's not just that you can write or say to us that you were totally absorbed. Um, and so, but, but for you saying like "totally absorbed in the movie" would still seem like just a guess? Or, or maybe not accurate?

38:10 Mel: Uh, uh, in relation to this last beep?

38:12 JBK: Yeah, yeah.

38:14 Mel: Yeah, I think, I mean, I think it's a guess, but, um, I find it interesting because, y'know, like on previous beeps I've been like, *oh, I'm like totally absorbed in the film*. This almost feels like, I guess when we found different distinctions of like *autopilot* or *nothingness* in my head, this feels like I found another layer of being like completely absorbed in [gestures rather frantically with fists clenched and arms in a circles], um, watching something or taking in information. Like to me, this was an absolute new layer of being engrossed by something, so much so that I was just almost zoned out. Like I was so locked in that I have no idea what was happening. And that is, that was a very, that's different to the beeps previously, when I would've said, oh, I was just like fully engaged with this film. This was, *seems like* another step beyond that in intensity, perhaps.

38:14 Russ comments: Note that even though the level of absorption is much greater here than in samples 8.2, 8.3, and 8.4, Mel did *not* have at the moment of the beep any meta-awareness of the degree of absorption / being-carried-along-by. See the comment at 19:17.

39:15 JBK: Yeah. Um, I'm good on this beep.

39:19 RTH: Me too. And when, and what I, what I would say sort of in general is that I think people are multiprocessors, and I think it takes, it takes some processing to process the beep. [Mel: Mm.] And I think that there, I think it's quite possible that you can, that you can have, you can have an exterior-world processing, which is, which is going on at 2% or something like that, but keeping track of things and, and then when things get really interesting or hairy or whatever, then you can turn *that* off [Mel: Mm.] and, uh, and so the, the beep just doesn't get processed, [Mel: Mm.] or processed as equally easily or quickly or facile-y as another time.

- 39:19 Russ comments: That processing is usually *not* before the footlights of consciousness. (Consider the hearing of your name mentioned behind you at a cocktail party: the fact that you hear your name means that you must have been processing the vibrations in a skillful way, but that does *not* mean that that processing had been directly apprehended.
- 40:00 Mel: Yeah. Yeah. That definitely feels true. It was just like immediately I was like on [inaudible].
- 40:06 RTH: So what I'm, what I'm trying to say is that the, the beep is not actually a physical thing. (The beep *is* a physical thing, obviously, in the real world—there's vibrations going on or something like that.) But *you* have to *process* the beep before it becomes a beep. There are, there are vibrations in the air [Mel: Mm.] and then you, you have to apply your gray matter to that [Mel: Mm.] and end up end up realizing that that's the beep. And sometimes I think that's a harder thing to do than other times.
- 40:06 Russ comments: RTH misspoke when he said "But *you* have to *process* the beep before it becomes a beep." He should have said "But *you* have to *process* the ~~beep~~ vibrations before ~~it~~ they become a beep." He tried (perhaps adequately) to clear that up in the remainder of the turn.
- 40:36 Mel: Mm. That's really interesting. Anyway, that was all my beeps. Um, I enjoyed me watching a film.
- 40:45 JBK: Makes me want to watch this movie. Sounds, [RTH: Good for me.] sounds engrossing.
- 40:49 Mel: Yeah, it was good, Julian! You should watch it. I think you'd like it.
- 40:54 JBK: Maybe family movie night.
- 40:57 RTH: So shall we do it again?
- 40:59 Mel: Yes.
- 41:01 JBK: I'm down.
- 41:04 Mel: So my movements, my, are there any particular days or anything next week that work best for anyone? I can kind of work backwards a bit.

ANSWERS TO EXERCISE FOR THE READER (1)

In writing a description of this sample, which is better, if either, and why? Our answers are below, but no fair peeking until you have committed yourself to your own answer.

(A) Mel felt bloated. This was a tight heavy pressure sensation around the lower part of her stomach.

(B) Mel felt bloated, a tight heavy pressure sensation around the lower part of her stomach.

Julian answers: The demonstrative pronoun “this” nounifies the pressure sensation. So (B) would then be preferable. The exercise did cause me to reconsider the underlying experience and how my descriptions of it conveyed it. But after noting this, I also see how hard it is to de-nounify (and wonder if it’s desirable to do this completely). After all, option (B) still uses the noun ‘sensation’.

The core question, is what do we get out of de-nouning / de-thinging here? Here’s what I came up with.

(1) For one, nouns lend a constancy that may not be there. Mel’s feeling bloated may be different from my feeling bloated, your feeling bloated, or any other person’s feeling bloated. It may be different from Mel’s feeling bloated yesterday or Mel’s feeling bloated a week from now.

(2) Nouns also convey short-term constancy. If we look at Mel’s feeling bloated as a process, we might better observe how it could (potentially) change even over the course of the short time before the beep.

Are there other benefits of de-thinging relevant here that I missed?

Another question, does mentally de-thinging require verbally de-nouning? For example, is it still okay that we use the noun “sensation”? I think we should be more fluid in our approach to parts of speech than strict linguistics. If we understand “sensation” as a process unfolding over time that is unique to Mel at this point in time, then I think it’s ok not to use a verb here. What happens if we do try to de-noun completely? We get:

(C) Mel felt bloated, a tight heavy pressing around her lower stomach(ing).

Hard to de-noun stomach. You could get Heideggerian with it—‘being-stomach’ ‘appearing-as-stomach’. Even though every formula is awkward, it’s still an interesting exercise, in that a stomach in Mel’s experience still isn’t a thing, it’s a sensation fluctuating over time, in ways that may or may not correspond to the physical locations of any organs.

Still, I think in being too strict about de-nouning, it becomes too much about the words. We have to be vigilant about which nouns are holding back our thinking process and prohibiting access to experience as it was. Otherwise, we’ve got to take language as it is.

Russ answers: As always, it is not about the words, so I am not interested in the consideration of alternate word choices. I am interested in the thought process behind the words, and I created this exercise as a springboard for considering the effect of nounification.

I agree that option B is better for the reasons you say, and with your ramifications (1) and (2). I would add

(3) Nounifying contributes to a meta perspective (in the second sense of *meta* from our previous discussions). If you write “(A) Mel felt bloated. This was a tight heavy pressure,” then the grammar suggests that there is the bloated-ness, and then there must be an observing of that bloated-ness. By contrast, there is no meta in “(B) Mel felt bloated, a tight heavy pressure,” which is an adjective, clarified by an adjectival phrase.

RE “is it still ok that we use the noun ‘sensation’?”

The word “sensation” is indeed a noun, but I think it is used here to emphasize that we are *not* describing a meta experience of the first kind: Mel is experiencing the bloating as a sensation, *not* as an analysis/cognition/meta consideration.

RE “Hard to de-noun stomach. You could get Heideggerian with it—‘being-stomach’ ‘appearing-as-stomach’”

That was the distinction I was making at 2:18: “So *stomach* is an ambiguous term. Do you mean an organ, stomach, or the abdomen region or, and don’t, [Mel: (inaudible)] I don’t really want to know whether it is the actual organ, but whether it *feels like* your, your organ. Or does it feel like the abdominal region?”

RE “I think in being too strict about de-nouning, it becomes too much about the words”

I agree. If one confidently and with facility does not *think* of an experience as a thing, then it largely doesn’t matter whether one nounifies or not.

EMAIL EXCHANGES IN THE COURSE OF WRITING THE DESCRIPTIONS OF THESE SAMPLES

Later in the day of this interview, Julian wrote brief descriptions of each sample and emailed them to Russ and Mel. His description of sample 8.2 read:

[Mel was watching the movie *Saltburn*.] At this moment she was absorbed in the movie. (She wasn’t noticing any particular element. Also, the content of the movie itself wasn’t so present. The absorption wasn’t content-dependent.)

Russ comments: First, I think “absorbed in” is too strong from a plain English perspective. One could say in plain English that Mel was absorbed in sample 8.6, but not here. I think “carried along by” is descriptively plain-English preferable to “absorbed in.” But that is only a minor strand of what I think is at stake here. So in what follows, I will continue to use “absorbed.”

Second, you turn the adjective “absorbed” into a noun “absorption,” and then turn the noun absorption into a thing, as when you write “The absorption wasn’t content-dependent.” That is problematic because there is no thing called absorption.

Third, I don’t understand how “the content of the movie itself wasn’t so present” makes sense. It would make straightforward sense to say, for example, about sample 5.3 (where Mel was mindlessly scrolling through Twitter) that “the content of the Twitter entries themselves wasn’t so present,” but that is a very different experiential situation from the 8.2 movie: in 5.3 Twitter was barely there, whereas in 8.2 she was absorbed in the movie.

Exercise for the reader (2)

Do you agree that Mel's experience as described by "the content of the movie itself wasn't so present" is different from her experience as described by "the content of the Twitter entries themselves wasn't so present"? If so, please rewrite what you say about sample 8.2 so as to disentangle that?

Julian comments: I do like 'carried along' and I agree about nounification. But regarding the content-free discussion, I don't agree or I don't understand. I feel like we're missing something important of Mel's experience. If we don't mention content and whether or not it's experienced, I don't think the descriptions are inaccurate. But I think they're incomplete. I think there is something salient and different about Mel's experience regarding content of whatever she's absorbed in. I don't know if it's 'unique' but I do think it's idiographically relevant in that it's different from other people I've sampled, and different from my own presuppositions before this sampling.

On day 4 for instance, we had samples where her experience of talking was indistinguishable to her from her experience of her friend speaking. In some of the sample descriptions, I wrote that the content was not experienced. You took this out in many. Although in one I see it's still mentioned:

4.4 [Mel and her friend were still talking. Mel's friend was talking at the moment of the beep; the content was dating in NYC]. Mel was absorbed in the conversation. This experience was indistinguishable to her from the previous sample. (She was not experiencing the content of the conversation. She was absorbed/consumed. There were no present thoughts, feelings, sensations, or meta-experience.)

Maybe this doesn't solve much and your response is just that you forgot to strike "She was not experiencing the content of the conversation" from this sample. I still think that without it we lose something. If this sample is indistinguishable from another sample from a completely different point in the conversation, how is this content experientially present?

I also think you're operating with presuppositions. Take for example, you say at 17:30 in the interview:

"17:30 RTH: Certainly there is some aspect of her experience which differs from this scene from that scene. Now this is the scene where there's a car chase and that's the scene where there's a, you know, a love scene or whatever. Her experience is going to be different about those things in some way."

Even if you are right, and her experience is in some way different, this is presupposition city. "Certainly"—no it is not certain. "Her experience is going to be different"—no, it's not necessarily going to be different. Or at least not necessarily different in the way that the car chase-ness of the scene or the love-ness makes it different. It could be minimally different in the way that all experience at different moments is probably different to some minimal degree.

But I still hold it possible that when Mel is carried along by a movie, or conversation or whatever, it can be a content-empty kind of carried along. There may very well be no way that the car chase-ness or lovey-ness of a scene colors her being absorbed. And again, I'm not talking about specifically noticing a specific thing like the speed of a car or the color of lips. I'm talking about the most basic way these things can color experience.

I asked from multiple angles to try to find out if her being carried along was in some way colored by what was happening in the movie. She said *No* from many different angles. It may still be that I didn't make myself fully understood. But in that case, I think we should be working to find other ways to make

this question as clear as possible. For now, your arguments to dropping descriptions of content and its lack from experience are not convincing to me.

Russ comments:

RE “nounification”

The important issue is not the nounification, but the objectification that is facilitated by the nounification.

RE “I don’t think the descriptions are inaccurate. But I think they’re incomplete”:

All descriptions are incomplete. The aim is to craft a description that, in its incompleteness, lies easily on the phenomenon, making neither more or it nor less of it than is necessary.

RE 17:30

Had I finished what I was starting to say at 17:30, it would have been very similar to your “It could be minimally different in the way that all experience at different moments is probably different to some minimal degree.”

RE: “try to find out if her being carried along was in some way colored by what was happening in the movie:”

You have nounified “carried along by” to “being carried along by,” and then (and this is the problem—it is not the nounification *per se*) treat the being carried along by as an object. For example, you want to know whether there “can be a content-empty kind of carried along.” That is a question about the thing/object/entity carried-along-ness. There is no such thing.

Julian comments: I agree with your replies. Except for the last one where I’m not sure. I’m not sure if it criticizes my word choices without addressing my underlying point. Maybe my word choices do bely my presuppositions, though.

I’m not even sure of the linguistics involved. In other words, linguists would say that the gerund “being” functions as a noun here, but do I really think it does? This isn’t rhetorical at all.

I did try to de-noun the description and struggled with it. I’ll go through my thought process.

At first I kept ending up with demonstrative pronouns or gerund verbs.

I even tried a made-up word to see if that helped. If Mel’s particular carried-along-by experience at this time could be dubbed ‘rindolf’, you have: “I am rindolf with the movie. No part of, of the movie or plot or circumstances or action enters my rindolf in any way.” Does the possessive “my rindolf” still nounify rindolf, though?

This wasn’t satisfying to me so I tried a simpler example. Maybe the passive voice of “carried along by” was confusing things.

I tried with “I am punching a bag.” But still ended up with verbs functioning as nouns or demonstrative pronouns. For example, “I am punching a bag, which is not colored at all by what I’m punching.”

The struggle of de-thinging did help me reshift my thinking. What was I trying to convey? The possibility that punching a bag could be no different from punching a wall or punching a face. Did this make sense? Wouldn’t the texture of the bag or wall or face in some way shape the sensation of the punching? Even if someone couldn’t distinguish between a sample of punching a bag or punching a wall, wouldn’t the texture of the thing punched in some way enter experience?

I’m not sure, and I don’t think it’s a given. I hold possible that experience really could be just about the punch. And that even if the wall or bag texture does somehow minimally shape experience,

the fact that it's so minimal is salient. One person's sampled punching experience could be much more about the punching, another person's could be about the punching and the bag.

The de-thinged content-free phrase I eventually came to was: I am punching [a bag].

Applying this to Mel's description we have:

[Mel was watching the movie *Saltburn* on her laptop.] At this moment she was carried along by [the movie]. (She wasn't noticing any particular element.)

I do think we should consider this possibility. I do think it's possible that the movie was not in experience, even if Mel was carried along.

I anticipate a possible reply that this is beyond the scope of DES. It may be impossible to tell if a movie minimally shapes experience or doesn't at all. But I'm also thinking back about what you wrote about being overly *syat* cautious *syat* regarding describing experience or its lack. So I think we should still be open to possibilities.

Russ comments:

RE "The de-thinged content-free phrase I eventually came to was: I am punching [a bag]."

Peliminarily, I suggest you review as best you can what went on with you when you were engaging the thought process about the punching. I suggest that you bottle that feeling so that later you can recognize it if it arises again.

I don't agree with your argument about punching, which I think is too much about the word. You theorize, apparently, because the word "punching" is used in punching a bag and punching a wall and punching a face, that therefore punching is an entity that can be content-free—punching [an *X*]. Whether that is true in some abstract theoretical sense is of no interest to me, because in the real world, people don't take the punching action off the shelf and then apply it to the bag; or take the same punching action off the shelf and apply it to the face; or to the wall. The fact that we use the same word *punch* in all those cases is entirely an approximation / ambiguity of language. We also punch a timecard, punch a binder sheet, punch the football in from the 1-yard line, punch the cattle to the next pasture. *Punch* is just a grunt, ambiguous like all grunts; we try to reduce the ambiguity by applying words surrounding it.

Perhaps that bottled feeling (that I referred to in the "preliminarily" paragraph above) has arisen again when you read the previous paragraph. I call attention to the feeling because we have been engaged in a kind of analytical / theoretical digression that I believe will substantially *hinder / interfere* with the aim of describing Mel's experience with fidelity. So I urge you to notice whatever it is that goes along with such analytical process, and when it arises, acknowledge that *Russ says that as far as DES is concerned, that feeling signifies heading in the wrong direction.*

RE "[Mel was watching the movie *Saltburn* on her laptop.] At this moment she was carried along by [the movie]. (She wasn't noticing any particular element.)"

Our task is to describe with fidelity Mel's experience at 9:03 PM on December 28th; I think "she was carried along by the movie" is apt. Whether she would be *carried along by* something else in the same way, or by the same thing at some other time in the same way is not relevant to describing Mel's experience at 9:03 PM on December 28th. So putting brackets around "[the movie]" is *not* part of the effort to describe Mel's experience at 9:03 PM on December 28th—Mel was *not* carried along by [—], she was carried along by *the movie*. *Julian* wants to know whether Mel's "carried along by" has some universal or universal-to-Mel applicability; that is *Julian's* interest, and he is, in my view, apparently willing to sacrifice fidelity-to-Mel to pursue a Julian-based interest.

We grunt “Mel was carried along by the movie.” We *don’t* grunt “Mel was engaged in a contentless carried-along-by in which, in this instance, the *by* happened to be a movie.” That has nothing to do with *Mel* and a lot to do with *Julian*.

I recommended the bottling because I think the insertion of the brackets in “[the movie]” makes the sentence a universalist attempt—a portrayal of some abstractly existing *carried along by*—rather than a descriptive attempt—what Mel was experiencing at 9:03 PM on December 28th. Those are *very* different intentions. The second one is what DES is about. To the extent that you are interested in / motivated by the first, you cannot do DES well. (Note that I am not saying that DES has value and the other does not—that judgment is above my pay grade. I am saying that the universalizing / analytical intention interferes with the descriptive intention and vice versa.

RE content

I think you may be using the words *content* and *experience* in a manner that is different from the way I use them, and perhaps different from the way you use them in other contexts. So let’s start with a fairly straightforward sample, 8.5, where Mel was thinking “For God’s sake....” About that sample, I would say that Mel’s experience, which is to say what she directly apprehends, is the worded phrase “For God’s sake....” I don’t have any special understanding of *content*; but it would be moderately natural to say that the *content* of sample 8.5 is the words “For God’s sake....,” as a way of referring to one aspect of her experience by distinction from another aspect—say, the manner of that experience is that the words are both all simultaneously there and serially unfolding.

But when you say (16:07) “I was trying to see if the content ... of your experience is the same ... at each moment,” your words *content* and *experience* seem to have different meanings from what I just described. So I wonder, how would your words *content* and *experience* be applied to the 8.5 sample? I’m not really sure, but it seems that you mean something even more basic than either the words “For God’s sake....,” or their simultaneously-there-and-serially-unfolding nature. Maybe you mean something like: The content of Mel’s experience at sample 8.5 is the what-it-was-like to apprehend the simultaneously there and unfolding words “For God’s sake....” Is that right? If so, then your 16:07 question translates to “So I was trying to see if the content here of your experienced what-it-was-like to apprehend [the several *Saltburn* scenes] is the same or, or very, very similar, y’know, at, at each moment.”

I’ve spent a lot of time trying to understand what we’re talking about here, so I’d like to return to...

RE “If we don’t mention content and whether or not it’s experienced, I don’t think the descriptions are inaccurate. But I think they’re incomplete. I think there is something salient and different about Mel’s experience regarding content of whatever she’s absorbed in.”

It seems you are using *content* (at least some of the time) to mean some very basic pre-apprehensional something that could be the same or different regardless of whether Mel is watching a movie, mindlessly scrolling through Twitter, talking to a friend, hearing a friend talk, and so on. I take no position on whether there is such a thing (if I had to bet, I’d bet against it), but either way, I think it belongs to the theoretical, or perhaps to the pre-reflective, or to the second kind of meta, or to the analytically supposed essential, or to the presuppositional (as, for example, that the *experience regarding content* is both unitary and describable). I think it is *not* discoverable by DES, and to the extent that you go looking for it, you are substantially off the DES track.

RE “I asked from multiple angles to try to find out if her being carried along was in some way colored by what was happening in the movie. She said *No* from many different angles.”

The object of DES is to say something straightforwardly descriptive about inner experience while simultaneously avoiding inferring or theorizing about inner experience. I suspect that Mel said *No* because you were asking about something that doesn't exist, or something that is too close to (if not entirely) the purely theoretical or the substantially presuppositional.

DES is an extremely limited endeavor: it tries to describe (a) Mel's (b) directly apprehended (c) private experiences (d) with fidelity (e) in ways that Mel, we, and our audience know what we are talking about and (f) trusts us.

The moral to this story, and it is a central moral to DES, is that DES is useful *only* in describing directly apprehended phenomena. DES cannot be used to describe theoretical entities, because theoretical entities cannot possibly be described. If one tries to use DES to describe theoretical entities, then one has corrupted both DES (making it worthless) and the theoretical endeavor (making it distorted). It is possible that good DES descriptions can be useful in illuminating some theoretical issues, but that is *not* the province of DES itself (and I have argued elsewhere that DES describers should be firewalled away from theoreticians).

So I suggest that the description read:

Sample 8.2: [Mel was watching the movie *Saltburn* on her laptop.] At this moment she was carried along by the movie. (She wasn't particularizing any aspect.)

Julian comments: I would add two sentences to the end of that description, to read:

Sample 8.2: [Mel was watching the movie *Saltburn* on her laptop.] At this moment she was carried along by the movie. (She wasn't particularizing any aspect. She certainly wasn't singling out any particular thing from the movie. But beyond that it may be that whatever was going on in the movie didn't even register in her direct experience, even though she was carried along by it.)

This edit comes from my allergy to using unexplained jargon. "Particularizing" is not something that every reader will understand. So explaining it may lead back to this whole debate we've been having. I didn't want to leave it conclusive since I agree with your approach. We can't say too much, since we don't know for sure, and questioning could have been clearer. But I don't want to say too little either.

Mel wasn't noticing the color of a character's hat or attuned to a particular line of dialogue. We know that much. But to just point that out doesn't do justice to how non-particularizing Mel's experience could have been. I think that *maybe* it goes beyond that and *maybe* it goes much beyond that. As I try to type some answers I anticipate all kinds of replies from you for why their wrong. So I welcome you to try your hand at it.

I also want to reinvoke the idea that there may have been *some* truth in my approach, even if you did point out numerous flaws. I still do think there's something of a presupposition in your 17:30 comment: "Certainly there is some aspect of her experience which differs from this scene from that scene. Now this is the scene where there's a car chase and that's the scene where there's a, you know, a love scene or whatever. Her experience is going to be different about those things in some way." You hedged this later saying that you were potentially only talking about tiny differences. But I don't think this is how you intend it. And the phrasing *does* make it seem like it's the car chase or the love scene that imparts the different (or at least that the difference can be linked to those). I think that *maybe* this is not true for Mel's experience here. And if it is a presupposition operating here, you'd be the last to know, since they're delusions ;)

I don't want to run back against the argument brick wall. But I do want to keep in possibilities that haven't been ruled out. And I do want to have those come from Mel (not my theories). If Mel says different samples are the same, I think we should take that seriously. The same could be a gesture—

Mount Everest and Mount McKinley are the same. Or it could much more exact—a Ticonderoga #2 pencil is the same as another one from the carton. Even though they have different atoms and positions and an expert detective might find a scratch on one that the other doesn't have. In that we haven't ruled out Mel's meaning here, I think we should leave in all possibilities.

Russ comments: Suppose, in describing sample 8.2, Mel had said

Y'know, the beep went off at 9:03 PM and there was absolutely nothing in my experience at the moment of the beep. I recognized after the beep that I was watching a car chase scene in a movie, but at the moment of the beep nothing was in my experience—as far as my directly apprehended experience was concerned, I didn't even know I was watching a movie. I might as well have been having a conversation with my sister or vacuuming.

Had she said something in that ballpark (and it seemed, to our best judgment, that she *intended* to say something like that), then I would be happy to write "it *may* be that whatever was going on in the movie didn't even register in her direct experience, even though she was carried along by it."

But as far as I can see, she *didn't* say anything remotely close to that. Instead, she said "I was just kind of quite simply just watching and taking in the film" (9:36).

There is no room in a description for something that simply *may be*, unless there is warrant *from what Mel said*. Otherwise, the *may be* comes from Julian. Once you start down that path, you are no longer *describing Mel's experience*, which is, of course, the heart of *descriptive experience sampling*. It *may be* that Julian is a brain in a vat; it *may be* that there is an experiencer that is separate from the thing experienced and the experience was not at all affected by the movie; it *may be* that Mel at 9:03 was thinking about Cadillac Escalades but was not motivated to tell us about that; it *may be* lots of things. But Mel gave us no warrant to include any of those in the description.

So I am opposed to including anything in a description that *doesn't come from Mel*. If you can show me where in the video Mel suggests that whatever was going on in the movie didn't even register in her direct experience, then I'd be happy to reconsider.

And, if you can't show me where Mel suggests that but still wish to include such a statement, I would be willing to include in the description a statement something like "JBK thinks the description should go on to say X; RTH thinks that is unwarranted and is likely more due to JBK than to Mel; see Y in the transcript."

Also: I don't think "particularizing" counts as jargon, but I have no attachment to it. I'd be happy to delete "She wasn't particularizing any aspect."

Julian comments: Notes to self. So what do I think about Mel here? Well there's a good chance Russ is right. Because even in conversation samples she rarely noted what it was about. Maybe it comes from *oh that's not important, they're not interested*. Or maybe that's just her experience. Absorption and the *what* is there, it shapes it, but nothing sticks out as a spike from the ball, enough to note. But to say it's not conscious is arbitrarily separating the absorption from the thing being absorbed. If it's even a thing. It's not a thing. It's a process.