

Michael Pollan sent Russ an advance copy of *A World Appears: A Journey Into Consciousness*. Russ responded by email:

Hi Michael--

I received the book--thanks very much. I've found it informative and engaging. A good read!

I thought your depiction of our DES experience was well done and fair. I'm happy to be a part of it.

Perhaps it would be useful to spell out where and why I had a few quibbles; see below. But that in no way undermines that overall I'm happy with how I and DES are portrayed.

Thanks again!

--Russ

RE p. 136: "What Hurlburt is after in his research is the 'pristine inner experience', by which he means a sample of human **thought** unspoiled by the act of observation or reflection."

That sentence is misleading because it says that DES aims at thoughts, when in fact it aims at any kind of experience, not merely thoughts.

RE p. 136: "He believes that his method can get us closer to the **uncontaminated ideal** than any other."

That sentence is misleading on one of two counts. First, if by "uncontaminated ideal" you mean pristine inner experience as it is experience in everyday life by everyday folk (so the sentence reads "he believes that his method can get us closer to ~~the uncontaminated ideal~~ pristine inner experience than any other"), then I think the sentence is correct—I think DES has a better chance than armchair introspection, questionnaires, or any other method that I know of. But pristine inner experience is not *an ideal*, uncontaminated or not.

But if by "uncontaminated ideal" you mean some sort of pure experience, then the sentence is entirely wrong—I think DES does *not* intend or accomplish that goal at all. Those who have attained nirvana (about which I have no personal experience) may well encounter pure experience, but DES does not aim to alter or replace any path to enlightenment. Some adept meditation masters have described DES as a more powerful

first step than they themselves teach their students, but they are talking about first steps, not acquisition of perfection.

RE p. 137: “Could I visualize the two options?”

That is *not* a question I would or did ask. The question I *did* ask (Interview 1 at 12:57) was:

RTH: So is it the case that the most prominent, the most salient, the most unambiguous portion of your experience at the moment of the beep is the visual? Is that true?”

That is, my question was about what you *did* at the moment of this particular beep, *not* about what you *could do*, either during the interview or at any other time. The first question is about your pristine inner experience; the other questions are about your abilities or your reconstructions. The question about pristine inner experience is very different from the other questions.

The remaining comments are about the distinction between "isolating a moment" (e.g., p. 145) and "the specifics *at a* moment" (e.g., pp. 142-3). This is potentially a substantial misunderstanding about an important aspect of my thinking.

RE p. 142: “He [Russ] drew a fine distinction on this point [moments vs. at-the-moment] that I’m not sure I understand.”

I think, as you say, that it is likely you do not understand, so all that follows will be my trying to clarify.

RE p. 197: “What does, or could, that memory mean for me now? Or as Levin put it: ‘Can I cobble together a coherent story of myself, my past, my environment, and be creative about it?’ We all do this, I realized.” Then you tell the novella story, which seems intended to set up this statement on p. 199: “There are any number of ways to interpret and tell this story. At various times, I’ve regarded it as a story about our cleverness, precocity, or pretentiousness. ... This, then, is an example of my own ‘mnemonic improvisation’—bending a memory to bolster my current identity.”

I think that is an excellent story, with two excellent conclusory observations: (1) we (meaning you and I and every other individual short of nirvana) want a coherent story of myself; and (2) we (meaning you and I and every other individual short of nirvana) *bend memory to bolster* that story. I think those are fundamentally important observations, and DES can aptly be thought of as being simply the result of Russ's efforts to minimize artificial coherence and the bending of memory (whether to bolster current identity [whatever that is] or to bolster anything else). DES really is that simple.

RE p. 145: "your objective is to isolate and sample a single moment."

My objective is *not* to isolate and sample a single moment. My objective is to talk with each other in a way that minimizes artificial coherence and the bending of memory. The *result* of that objective is that I focus on experience that is directly apprehended at particular moments.

RE p. 143: "On my walk the evening before I had, in effect, rehearsed these observations not only in the form of images (the blossoming magnolias) but also in the form of words (the phrase 'wide berth'), so the thoughts I was about to share were already in mind and partially baked."

I happily accept that there is a kernel of truth in that statement, and I have never (with you or anyone else) tried to deny such kernels. But beyond the kernel there is the very great likelihood that your account is artificially coherent and that you have bent your memory to bolster your desire to convey the "gist" of your consciousness. That is, your account is very likely what you would call a mnemonic improvisation. I don't use the term *mnemonic improvisation*, but I think mnemonic improvisations are untrustworthy for the same reasons you think they are untrustworthy—that they bend memory.

RE p. 145: "Drawing such a sharp distinction between context and 'directly apprehended experience' when one suffuses the other is going to be difficult, if not impossible."

The distinction is *not* particularly difficult, and perhaps the culprit is that my use of the word "context" is misleading—perhaps I should replace "context" with something like "the nearly infinite range of precursors and co-occurrences that suffuse every word with the whole idea" (to enlarge somewhat the point that James made on your page 144). Or, to be less pedantic, perhaps I should write "context-and-suffusion" (rather than merely "context") to emphasize that I mean external and internal aspects.

I think context and suffusion exists, and exists in important ways. DES in absolutely no way denies that. What DES *does* do is to notice the difference between context/suffusion and directly apprehended experience and to recognize that it is impossible to specify the nearly infinite range of contexts and suffusings that underlie every word / action / image / etc. that you produce. Your account of last evening's image of blooming magnolias, the words "wide berth," and the other aspects you list are part of your mnemonically improvisational explanation of the beeped experience. Your last-evening magnolia image is part of the suffusing; that fact that you saw the huge magnolias in Charlottesville when you gave a talk at UVA in the spring of 2012 is part of the suffusing; the fact that you unhooked a girl's bra for the first time under a cherry tree in 1967 (and that cherry blossoms are somewhat similar to magnolia blossoms) is part of the suffusing; and on and on and on, all absolutely truly and absolutely unspecifiably part of the suffusing. (I could give a similar account of "wide berth.")

Out of that nearly-infinite history, you create (I think) the mnemonic improvisation that occupies much of page 143. I don't begrudge you (or anyone else) the right to produce such improvisations. But I do *not* think they can be the basis of a sustainable experiential science. There are far too many unacknowledged factors that shape such suffusings and improvisations—that you do occasionally think about the girl under the cherry tree; that your wife doesn't know about the girl under the cherry tree or that you think about her; that you don't want Russ to know that your wife doesn't know about the girl under the cherry tree, even though you think about her occasionally; that you don't want your wife to know that you don't want Russ to know that you don't want your wife to know that you occasionally think about the girl under the cherry tree; etc.; etc.; etc.

I happily accept that all those contexts/suffusings are in some way important. But I think they are far too vulnerable to the selection heuristics and memory bendings that we (as in you and I) employ to create an exaggeratedly coherent and impression-management story to be told to a psychologist, so DES avoids them.

I fully and happily accept (and accepted) that something about magnolias and wide berths suffused your speaking to your wife. I have never tried to talk you out of that. What I tried to do was to make a distinction between magnolias suffusing your at-the-moment-of-the-beep speaking and at-the-moment-of-the-beep innerly seeing magnolias. I think you understood and made that distinction in our interview: Yes, magnolias suffused your speaking at the moment of the beep; No, you were not innerly seeing magnolias at the moment of the beep. That is the kind of distinction that I find important.

You made this kind of distinction pretty confidently in sample 5.1, where *before* the beep (you said) you innerly saw a muddy trail and then an asphalt trail, and gave details of

those seeings, including the impossible from-the-side perspective of that seeing. Moments later, at the moment of the beep, (you seemingly confidently said) you were thinking *we should go to Inspiration Point* without any inner seeings being experienced at that moment. I have no doubt that the muddy and asphalt alternatives suffused your *we should go to Inspiration Point* thinking, but I think the two inner seeings were not directly apprehended *at the moment of the beep*.

Said another way: the two inner seeings were part of the mnemonic improvisation, but not part of the directly apprehended experience at this moment. We might even say that there was less memory bending in the Inspiration Point sample than in the magnolia sample, because there was less time between the muddy path and Inspiration Point thought than between the magnolia image and the conversation with your wife. But to say that is to engage in a whole 'nother mnemonic improvisation.

I think most of consciousness science is about mnemonic improvisation, and I accept that that may well turn out to be scientifically productive. I doubt it, because I think there are too many forces that bend your memory, and I see no way to catalog or measure them all. DES is my suggestion for how to proceed without that complication—let's examine what is directly apprehended and try to discover whether that is useful.

p. 145: "The very idea of isolating a moment is an artifact of Hurlburt's particular kind of science, one that introduces another potential distortion into the process—the risk of overlooking or minimizing what James taught of about how subtly and intricately interleaved our conscious experiences are."

I *don't* try to isolate a moment. I *do* try, as unambiguously as possible, to identify a moment so that we can consider what was directly apprehended as ongoing at that moment and not at any other moment. Your samples had, for example, very few inner seeings that were ongoing at the moment of the beep. This was not because you don't know how to describe inner seeing as being ongoing at a moment of a beep—you did so at sample 3.5 when you described innerly seeing a dark wood stage with people milling around and a horseshoe of chairs. About Michael's inner experience, within the limits of sampling error, we can say, I think with confidence, that Michael does *not* frequently innerly see.

By contrast, I do *not* think we can say with confidence anything specific about how magnolia trees, wide berths, or even the entire Covid experience affects or is reflected in Michael's inner experience. Michael can tell coherent, interesting, memorially selective and memorially bent stories about his inner experience. One might even say that he is

especially good at that—has made quite a career of it! But that would be another mnemonically improvisational account, which could be rebutted, amplified, refuted, supported, examined, questionnaired, etc. without end, all of which could be interesting but (I think) not of sustainable scientific value.

In short: DES tries to cleave to the directly apprehended and eschew the contexts and suffusions. You and I can pretty entirely agree about the fact that Michael's experience does not often include visual imagery, whereas other individuals do experience visual imagery clearly and frequently (e.g. Kerry in Part XI of my website)—that is, I think, a radically objective fact. I think such observations are sufficiently attainable to be admissible (if not fundamental) to a science of experience. (Whether science would discover that such observations are valuable is a different story, yet to be told.) By diametric (as it seems to me) contrast, context – suffusion, mnemonic improvisation, and other such heuristically selected and memorially bent but coherently told stories cannot (I think) be made adequately attainable to be admissible to a science of experience.

None of that is to quarrel with your right to say and write whatever you think, nor to say that I did not find what you said interesting. I'm responding by saying what I think, on the possibility that it might be useful to you or to me.