

Hurlburt, R. T. & Schwitzgebel, E. *Describing Inner Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007, vii + 322 pp., (Cloth).

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It is rare to find scholars who differ on important issues being able to open-mindedly explore and critique each other's perspective. This can be especially difficult when one scholar has spent many years devoted to developing a methodological framework attempting to sample aspects of human consciousness. In such cases, we would typically expect to find critique and defense without either side being familiar with the actual issues involved, let alone fostering a respectful appreciation of opposing arguments.

Russell Hurlburt is a psychologist who has developed a sampling and interview procedure used to describe phenomenal consciousness (See Hurlburt, 1997; Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006). With nearly 30 years of work exploring such an approach, he feels he has a procedure that overcomes the problems of early introspectionist approaches and shows promise in addressing the vexing problems of studying human consciousness. He met philosopher Eric Schwitzgebel in 2002 at a conference where each were presenting opposite views regarding the potential of such introspective methods. Schwitzgebel maintains a more skeptical view regarding the value of introspective access (e.g., Schwitzgebel, 2007). Hurlburt invited Schwitzgebel to participate in "descriptive experience sampling" where a beeper is used to select experiential moments which are then recorded by the participant and later explored in a dialogal interview format with the researcher. Later, a more neutral participant, named "Melanie" was recruited by both to record her moments of experience which were then expanded via the interviewing method. While the interviews are led by Hurlburt, Schwitzgebel is also able to question Melanie. These interviews are then explored in frank exchanges between the two authors.

The present book is the result of this collaborative effort to explore the DES method and the issues it raises regarding the use of introspection to learn about conscious experience. The book begins with an account of their meeting and introductory chapters by each author. After their positions are presented, there follows six chapters, one for each sampling day, where Melanie's reports in response to the random beeps is examined, and issues are raised by each of the authors regarding the accuracy of what is being described. The book ends with each presenting their view regarding the merits and limitations of the method, and again, presenting their (relatively unchanged) positions concerning introspective access to phenomenal experience.

Briefly, Hurlburt feels his approach overcomes some of the limitations of typical introspectionist approaches because he does not require the participant to take on a specialized, third-person view analyzing their own experience, he samples

randomly and does not select himself what experiences to examine, and he has the participant record their sampled experience immediately with the follow-up expository interviews conducted within 24 hours. In the interview process he attempts not to impose a structural account, but rather aims to bracket his preconceptions while also helping the participant avoid natural tendencies to present a packaged “meaningful” account, or to explain. His aim is to describe just the sensory, perceptual, and cognitive aspects of the moment faithfully. While aware of the problems that participants face in recording their experiences, and the further challenge of biases during the interview process, Hurlburt feels his method holds promise as a way to accurately describe basic features of immediate experience. He particularly feels it is an improvement over the early introspection methods of Titchener and current “armchair” reflections of philosophers and others where problems of memory and theoretical (non-experiential) preconceptions are allowed free reign. He welcomes efforts to validate his method, but feels such criteria need themselves to be based on experientially grounded description.

Schwitzgebel shares an interest in introspective methods, but argues that such efforts have fundamental challenges that are not likely to be overcome. As such, most methods may have some limited success in garnering information that might be veridical, but their value would need to be verified by independent (nonexperiential) behavioral, physiological, and cognitive studies. At the end, he agrees that Hurlburt’s DES procedure may be used to describe some basic features of experience, but not offer the kinds of answers to bigger questions of structure and function that is of most interest to him. In addition, he does not see the DES procedure to have shown itself distinctively more accurate and less error-prone than most other “armchair” or self-reflective efforts. Despite Hurlburt’s efforts at bracketing and trying not to influence the participant’s account, Schwitzgebel felt social pressure was still too influential at times.

Both he and Hurlburt feel that a science of consciousness requires a better descriptive account of phenomenal experience. Schwitzgebel feels that immediate experience is too fleeting and ephemeral, that people are not naturally capable of much accurate description of immediate experience, that the introspective turn itself alters and motivates biased construction rather than description, and that situational and research pressures must also promote an interpretive creation rather than a faithfully descriptive account.

Both authors agree that the DES method may arrive at some accurate accounts of what was experienced in general, but feel the details of particular experiential reports should be looked upon more skeptically. They also agree about the pitfalls and challenges of introspective methods but Hurlburt feels the DES has overcome many earlier problems and shows promise, while Schwitzgebel feels there remains a likelihood of bias and pressure in the interview process.

Readers of the present journal may find much to applaud in Hurlburt's efforts. Most centrally, there is a strong case made regarding the need for, and importance of, a descriptive-experiential foundation for psychological theorizing (see pp. 257–260). His emphasis is on elucidating moments of experience and, while not focused on a structural account of lived-experience *per se*, he has developed an interview method where serious effort is given to examining and suspending presuppositions by both the researcher and the participant. Indeed, he appreciates the importance of bracketing in his approach not only to avoid the biases of preconceptions, but as central to achieving an accurate account of the phenomenal (see pp. 262–272). In addition, his procedure involves a mutually respectful exchange with his participants while together they question, vary and probe with one aim in mind; to accurately describe what was experienced at the moment of the beep. This interview process does not appear incompatible with those based on hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches (e.g., Kvale, 1983).

In addition to incorporating aspects of phenomenological rules in his method, Hurlburt's emphasis on the idiographic and personal leads him to recognize that traditional theorizing and praxis in psychology tends to ignore or presume knowledge of the personal. While he views this as a problematic component of formal theorizing, he does not appear to tie this with psychology's natural science orientation (cf. Giorgi, 1970; Giorgi, 1983). Nevertheless he sees the problem: "To observe people accurately (or even to *try* to observe people accurately, or even to observe one's *failure* to observe people accurately) is in many ways incompatible with (even antagonistic to) modern psychology" (italics in original, p. 258). In addition, he sees this tied to psychology's "impatience" to seek confirmation of hypotheses rather than carefully developing hypotheses based on descriptive study (pp. 260–261).

While these aspects of Hurlburt's approach and DES methodology appear compatible with phenomenologically oriented approaches, they also speak to differences in perspective between the two authors that were not addressed, as well as implications not recognized. The philosopher-skeptic Schwitzbebel raises important issues regarding the typical methodological problems of introspection that both agree on. Apparently, Schwitzbebel also agrees with Hurlburt on the importance of the personal, the need for a descriptive foundation, the value of bracketing presuppositions, and the problems of naive armchair speculation. Although not particularly noted (and perhaps not explicitly recognized) these are the challenges of the natural attitude (e.g., Giorgi, 1970, p. 246; Gurwitsch, 1966).

While both recognize the methodological challenges of introspective access and feel that an adequate phenomenology is essential to a scientific study of consciousness, little attention is given to the possibility that the very approach to studying consciousness might require new understanding. Also, one wonders if each have different understandings of phenomenology. Consciousness seems still to be some

presumed state or region rather than understood as the way in which we have access to and, hence, experientially constitute, phenomenal objects. The authors still seem to embrace a conception that requires consciousness to be mapped, or mined, or worked upon to get at the raw ore within. While Hurlburt recognizes the problematic language of reference to “inner” experience, both wish to rush on to methodological critique and validation rather than entertain the possibility that such language, combined with the presumptions of a traditional natural science conception of consciousness, might be worthy of skeptical inquiry.

For example, both appear to gloss over the ways in which Nisbett and Wilson’s (1977) argument about the limits of verbal reports is biased towards a privileged methodological stance regarding the causes of choices and behaviors. Developing a method that requires subjects not be allowed conscious access to the “independent variables” as conceptualized by the researchers, the researchers then affirm the consequent and embrace the null hypothesis declaring that subjects cannot have access to the processes (presumed causal mechanisms) producing conscious choices, but might, only under some circumstances, have access to the contents. Of course no serious effort is made to understand how the subjects experience the research situation. Is this likely to be a productive approach to describing consciousness?

This “confusion of standpoints” (See Giorgi, 1981) described by James (1890/1950) as the “psychologist’s fallacy” may underlie problems of approach in consciousness studies. Hurlburt’s DES methodology clearly attempts to avoid this problem, but the fact that neither author appeared to recognize its possible role in “consciousness studies” was surprising. Of course, the present book was more focused on the mutual examination of DES, but this made the aims and purposes of a science of consciousness studies all the more salient and needing better discussion. Indeed, the differences between the authors may reflect more fundamental differences in aim and approach to studying consciousness than just skepticism about a particular introspective method.

Hurlburt’s emphasis on bracketing presuppositions, and Schwitzgebel’s effort after more fundamental answers to traditional questions about consciousness, underscore these differences in aim and approach. Hurlburt’s time has been spent grappling more directly with the problems of being faithful to personal experience rather than operating within the confines of formal psychological theorizing. Interestingly, it is the philosopher Schwitzgebel whose interests have led him to appreciate (perhaps rather un-skeptically) the traditional theoretical and working conceptions of modern psychology. Perhaps it should not be surprising that Hurlburt comes closest then to a more skeptical account of traditional/formal theory and arrives at a more phenomenological perspective. Neither author, at least in the present work, radically examines the presuppositions of contemporary consciousness studies, or gives recognition to a phenomenological account.

As Giorgi (1983) has noted, an adequate phenomenological approach is an open-ended description not of things or elements that must be fitted to, or expected to conform with, current understandings of the brain sciences. The phenomenological account aims rather at the phenomenal meanings provided. It is thus, not the same as introspection. It is not exclusively idiographic, privately personal, or tied to “inner” truths, and is thus not focused on a view of consciousness as a mental state or region but rather understands consciousness as the way we constitute and have access to objects of our experience. This is only one possible view of course, but it is one that attempts to avoid some of the confusions that apparently are still current in the field of consciousness studies.

In sum, this book provides a valuable exchange of views regarding an experiential sampling method to describe conscious experience. Phenomenologically oriented psychologists would be wise to consider the problems and pitfalls discussed when undertaking similar descriptive efforts. In addition, the value of active exchanges with others who offer independent critique is clearly evident. While the aims and understandings of consciousness may differ, the authors provide a valuable model combining mutual respect with frank confrontations and scholarly inquiry. Readers will appreciate too that DES involves an inquiry method whereby participants are seen as co-researchers.

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