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Review
Describing Inner Experience?
Proponent Meets Skeptic
by Russell T. Hurlburt and Eric Schwitzgebel
MIT Press, 2007
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Pick a problem, pit two researchers against each other with opposing views, and put their debate and discussion between two covers. The result? A work that more of us should emulate. In Describing Inner Experience? Russell T. Hurlburt and Eric Schwitzgebel deliberate on whether inner experience (or "phenomenal consciousness") can faithfully be described. Hurlburt is an optimist believing that, with the correct methodology, a person's subjective life can be more or less accurately recorded, while Schwitzgebel is a pessimist, assuming that such descriptions are prone to "introspectable error."

The several chapters constituting part one introduce the problem of introspection and methodology, thereby setting up the book's agenda. Part two (chapters four to nine) reports on the six days of interviews (spread over a month) with a subject called Melanie about her conscious experiences. Part three, composed of the last three chapters, recount the authors' final reflections and responses to each others' arguments. Two appendices treat methodological issues. Connections to pertinent psychological and philosophical research are explored in handy side boxes throughout the book.

Studies of introspection have played a rather strange role in the history of psychology. After all, the birth of psychology as a scientific discipline in the late nineteenth century in many ways centered on defining the nature of introspection. And yet the rise of behaviorism, at least in America, was a reaction by the likes of John B. Watson (1878–1958) and B.F. Skinner (1904–1990) to what they believed to be an experience that had no place in a scientific account of human nature. By the late 1950s and early 1960s an emergent cognitive science readmitted subjective experience back into the field (though "subjective experience" is sometimes designated with the more scientific-sounding "mental representations," this term is just as vague and contested). Investigations on mental rotation and visual memory tasks and visual creativity tests are now regularly carried out, though questions of the most appropriate methodology still haunt such research. Indeed, most of the book under review is centered on explorations of Melanie's inner experiences under the protocols of Descriptive Experience Sampling. Developed by Hulburt, DES is a methodological attempt to record introspective experiences. Simply

explained, it works as follows: a beeper signals the subject to give attention to inner experience. Then the subject and investigator meet to discuss the details of the "beeped moments."

This is an important work that tackles head on a crucial issue in psychology. It is refreshing to see a work that zeroes in on, like a laser, one research topic. Many works in the "consciousness studies" genre are weakened by taking on too many subjects, resulting in vague treatments. Nevertheless, several issues need to be addressed. While it is true that the reader will find a wealth of information about "imagery, emotion, self-awareness, inner speech, and sensory experience" (p. 11), the rather glib listing of these terms raises many thorny theoretical issues. Like many researchers, the authors confuse and conflate concepts that require careful definition and differentiation. Arguably, emotion is physiological affect that has been psychologized, and much of what Melanie reports is not "sensory experience" (perceptions) but rather interiorized sensory experience (introceptions or more prosaically, what is perceived "in" the mind in contrast to what is physically experienced). Consciousness and cognition need to be disentangled: many contend that while the latter generates mental imagery and inner visualizations, cognition itself, a nonconscious process, is inaccessible to the mind's eye.

Related to this is a need to more carefully enumerate the qualia of consciousness. Schwitzgebel makes the interesting argument that Descartes's famous dictum--"I think therefore I am" (i.e., "I can introspect therefore something must be doing this introspecting and this thing is myself, so I exist")--got things backward. The outside world of tangible things we know quite well; it is the semi-hallucinatory world of the dimly experienced introcosm that we cannot completely know. But of course, Descartes's point was arguably not about to what degree we can trust our experiences (whether of the external or mental world); it concerned how the indescribable sense of self-reflexivity affirmed in a way that no other experience could our beingness.

Both authors imply that the introspectivist psychology of an earlier era failed because its methods were flawed. However, it seems to this reviewer that the problems are much more fundamental than that. The advice in "Fifteen Guidelines from a Century of Science" (pp. 14–20; a chapter by Hurlburt) suggests what is needed for "any good introspective method." While useful, these guidelines miss a highly significant point: a phenomenon as slippery and subjectivized as inner experience cannot be adequately appreciated unless observed in its "natural" setting, i.e., in history, literature, art, and religious studies. While DES and similar "laboratory inspired" methods are certainly useful, a more humanistic approach is needed. This book, then, illustrates obstacles to understanding the human psyche when it is approached from the perspective of conventional research psychology.

In side box 7.12 ("Do we think in our heads?"; p. 160) the authors bring up phenomenological issues in a cross-cultural context, specifically where in the body it was believed that thought occurs. Here Scwhitzgebel is mistaken when he places his bet on the fact that the "phenomenology of thought has remained roughly the same over the ages" (p. 160). Not only has thinking been believed to transpire in the heart and head, but

in some cultures what we call the mind was positioned in the liver, kidneys, stomach, blood, etc. But besides treating questions of cultural comparison, a well-balanced psychology must also confront chronological changes in the human psyche. What is needed is a "stratigraphic psychology." If we believe Julian Jaynes, until the late second millennium BCE ancient peoples were mysteriously unconcerned about recording what we would call introspectable experience. Why? (see his The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind). To answer this question, the social function of introspectability (e.g., as an efficient way to "see" one's behavior and its future consequences before acting them out in the physical world) must be addressed.

Schwitzgebel may not agree with my assessment here, but his concerns about the truthfulness of introspective reports appear rooted in the assumption that the psyche is somehow a reflection of reality (the "mind as mirror" view), with "reality" in this case being mental contents. Reports on one's introspection, then, should portray those contents. He writes that we need "external corroboration" or to find evidence "not grounded solely in interviews of this sort." Melanie's accounts record an "exploration, not a verification" and "further physiological or behavioral evidence of some sort" is required (pp. 223, 222). At one level his concerns are certainly justifiable, but I cannot help but think that they fall into the category of "how many angels can dance on the head of a needle." I would argue that the human mind, and one of its more specific capabilities, introspection, has an evolutionary, adaptive function. Its primary purpose is to help the organism survive, not report on the really real or an abstract notion of "truth." Our goal should be, therefore, to discover the social usefulness of introspection, and only a historically-informed approach can shed led light on the adaptive nature of psychological processes.

The aforementioned issues I raised are meant to trigger debate; they in no way distract from an important and carefully written work. More books should be written in the manner designed by Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel. They are to be commended for providing an excellent and rare balance among data (interviews with a subject), scholarly exploration (debate between the two authors), and theoretical discussion (side boxes). I enthusiastically recommend this book to anyone interested in consciousness.

Reference

Julian Jaynes 1976. The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Brian J. McVeigh teaches in the East Asian Studies Department at the University of Arizona. An anthropologist and Japan specialist, his latest book is The State Bearing Gifts: Deception and Disaffection in Japanese Higher Education. He is currently writing a book entitled The Propertied Self: Politics, Psychology, and Ownership in Global Perspective.