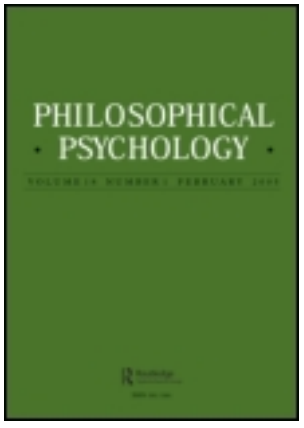

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Describing Inner Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic

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Book reviews

Describing Inner Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic
Russell T. Hurlburt & Eric Schwitzgebel
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007
309 pages, ISBN: 0262083663 (hbk); $45.00

What is memory? What is pain? What does your colleague mean when they tell you they are foggy-headed? The way we understand mental phenomena is illustrated by William James's (1890) oft-quoted passage:

> Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others. (pp. 403–404)

In other words, the way we understand mental phenomena is *partly* through a grasp of their functional role (e.g., attention increases performance, pain causes avoidance), but also, and rather more saliently, that understanding is based on our experiential acquaintance with those mental phenomena. You know what it is like to remember, to attend, to be in pain; and so you can imagine what it is like for others—you can empathize. This experiential mode of understanding is tremendously important. It allows you to navigate your social world. It is essential for regulating your cognitive and emotional states. It achieves the shared subjectivity that is the glue of social relationships, the motivating force for altruism, and an essential element of nuanced ethical thought. It bridges social and cultural divides. Yet it is a very different kind of understanding from canonical forms of scientific understanding. Understanding the mind from an experiential point of view is very different from understanding the mechanisms of mind.

The origins of this cognitive divide can be seen in our development, and in the biology of the healthy adult brain. Work by developmental psychologist Paul Bloom (2004) suggests we are born dualists: we start out thinking of people and objects as fundamentally different kinds of things. As adults, we understand we are frail physical objects as well as minds. Yet we continue to have difficulty integrating our understanding of mechanism with our understanding of experience. The biological basis of this explanatory gap can be seen in the brain. Neuroimaging studies show that we use different parts of the brain to think about mechanisms, as opposed to minds. Furthermore, when we engage in analytic tasks, e.g., scientific reasoning, we suppress

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activity in parts of the brain that are critical for attending to experiential states, and when we attend to experiential states we suppress brain areas critical for mechanical reasoning. The striking biological phenomenon of suppression of areas involved in introspection during attention demanding tasks that don't involve social cognition (Goldberg, Harel, & Malach, 2006; Gusnard, 2001), and is best known by reference to the "default mode network" (Raichle et al., 2001). However, there is some variance to the rule: individuals with autism (Kennedy, 2006) and schizophrenia (Pomarol-Clotet et al., 2008) have a less pronounced tendency to deactivate these areas. They also have difficulty understanding their own experience (Hurlburt, Happe, & Frith, 1994). In other words, the brain areas involved in understanding experience have a push-pull relationship with the brain areas involved in understanding mechanism; and this antagonistic relationship appears to be a signature of healthy function.

This biological phenomenon presents a hurdle which psychology has yet to fully overcome. We have yet to succeed at reconciling different approaches to understanding the mind. The history of psychology has been a history of dualisms and schisms. Scientific psychology has worn the dismissal of introspection as a badge of pride, often repeating a deeply distorted history of scientific psychology in which the introspectionists are claimed to have failed because their methods were fundamentally flawed (Costall, 2006). This has left the study of human experience to be held hostage by quasi-literary phenomenological and psychoanalytic traditions, steeped in references to authority instead of experimental findings. As a result we have come, rather too simplistically, to think of the mechanistic as the scientific and to think of the experiential as the non-scientific. But this is no solution for psychology. To fail to connect these modes of understanding is, in essence, to fail to have a science of the *mind*. Hence the foolish fantasy that we might somehow bridge the gap in a single leap, and bring the mind back in, with some bold theory of consciousness. Yet no single theory can knit together the myriad connections that must be established between our experiential and mechanistic modes of understanding. The gap is a result of our approach, the methods we use as a matter of habit. In the laboratory, thousands of psychological experiments are conducted each year, yet most of them focus exclusively on understanding the mechanisms of cognition, and lack any systematic attempt to reveal its experiential aspects. Outside the laboratory the situation is even worse. Hurlburt is the one of the only experimenters in recent decades who has attempted to systematically map naturally occurring experience.

Describing inner experience? Proponent meets skeptic by Russell Hurlburt and Eric Schwitzgebel represents a foundational step towards an integrated science of the mind. What makes this book so important are not the discoveries contained within, but the example it sets. The dialogue contained in this book encapsulates the essential tension that is required to draw out our understanding of human experience. However, the book is not without frustrations. Our interlocutors can be caricatured as the naive empiricist hungry for data and inclined to accept it at face value (Hurlburt), and the radical skeptic who endlessly questions and doubts that any true knowledge has been acquired (Schwitzgebel). Reading their dialogue is rather like attending a production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Our central characters occupy themselves interpreting

the minutia of a third person's reported experience. Yet they virtually never reach a satisfactory conclusion. Instead they await a resolution which remains outside their control and which, for them if not for us, is bound to never arrive. Nonetheless, what emerges from this exchange is something much larger than at first appears, in fact something quite magnificent: an archetypal scientific dialogue. Our interlocutors can never reach a resolution for exactly the right reason—because further experimental work is needed to provide the convergent evidence that would validate one interpretation or another. Thus, even the frustrating aspects of this book exemplify the attitude that is required to transform the study of experience into a science.

To make progress towards an integrated psychology, we need to follow Hurlburt's example of making more observations of experience. We must be willing to place enough faith in the data to make a habit of carefully collecting it. We also need Schwitzgebel's skepticism and the awareness it brings of possible errors. However, here we must also proceed with caution, as Schwitzgebel evinces many forms of skepticism, some more useful than others. The substantive issues that have hindered the use of introspective evidence have had little to do with the methods by which it is collected. The real error the introspectionists made was how they interpreted the evidence. They confused the experiential and physical, by attempting to reify experience. James supposed that we might ultimately understand all of nature as constituted by experience. That metaphysics, a form of idealism, is no longer in vogue. However, modern identity theory encourages a different error of reification, encouraging us to situate the experiential not at the lowest level but rather at a high level in the hierarchy of physical explanation. Yet this move fails to appreciate the fundamental divide, which can be seen so vividly in the brain. Experiences are, of course, the products of physical mechanisms, but experiential understanding cannot be slotted into a framework of mechanistic explanation. It stands apart as a distinct mode of understanding.

A metaphor might be useful here: we might think of experiences as the virtual user interface of the brain. In other words, they are something like the operating system of your computer. They are virtual in the sense that their existence and coherence is contingent on the smooth running of the hardware of the brain. They are the user interface in the sense that this is the primary way in which you understand and are able to engage with your brain, and other brains—not by tampering with the configuration of the hardware, or even by reference to the underlying code, but through the user interface.

A mistake which Schwitzgebel lapses into is to ask questions which are too literal. At one point (chapter 8) he becomes fixated with the issue of whether a fleeting experience which Melanie reports was truly, as she claims, the same as the experience of sitting in a car. Yet Schwitzgebel's insistence misses the point. Experience is neither more nor less than how we understand our minds. What should one say to someone who insists on an answer to the question "does your computer *really* have a desktop?"

For some time, psychology was stuck on the question of whether there are people (synaesthetes) who really experience colors when they view monochrome letters. There were those who, blinkered by their allegiance to one of psychology's dualisms, dismissed synaesthetes' reported experience as not a proper subject for scientific

investigation. Others had concerns similar to Schwitzgebel's—they wondered to what extent these reports were literally correct or metaphorical. Real progress was achieved by people willing to trust that the synaesthetes were on to something, at least enough to do the kind of creative and careful experimental work needed to reveal functional and neural properties of synaesthetic perceptual states. An important study used Gestalt principles to show how synaesthetic colors produce grouping effects similar to real colors (Ramachandran & Hubbard, 2001). As a result, synaesthetes demonstrate a clear objective advantage on carefully designed tasks. This shows that synaesthetes' reports are at least partly true. That is, in at least one way synaesthetic experiences are just like seeing real colors, although most likely there are other ways in which they are different. But the truth of the reports isn't what is really important. What is significant is that, by weaving together different modes of understanding, this work helps us make sense of synaesthetic experience. This is how we will gradually dissolve the mysteries of consciousness, by triangulating between the experiential and the mechanical (Jack & Roepstorff, 2002).

There is no end of flashy books on consciousness and free will that have sold well in recent decades. They are intellectual dead ends. This book may not have such immediate appeal, but it puts down a different kind of marker. This is how the real work will get done—through conversations like this, resulting in experimental programs. We have gone on long enough trying to understand the mind while ignoring its user interface. If we want to have a useful and complete science of the mind, then it is time to pay attention to experience.

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Others in Mind: Social Origins of Self-Consciousness
Philippe Rochat
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009
264 pages, ISBN: 0521729653 (pbk); $25.99

Philippe Rochat's *Others in mind: Social origins of self-consciousness* is an ambitious and fruitful project. Rochat's central thesis is that an innate fear of rejection causes a child to affiliate with others, and that through a process of affiliating with others, the child constructs the self. Rochat's theory of the social construction of the self will undoubtedly be valuable for both philosophers and psychologists, with the caveat that there are unexplored theoretical issues in need of development. Because Rochat is so systematic in his presentation, I will attempt to follow the development of his argument, offering important points along the way.

The second chapter of Rochat's book summarizes the project by advancing six core propositions:

1. Self-knowledge is a system of representations arising when one's self becomes an object to itself via the process of self-objectification.
2. Self-objectification, and thus self-knowledge, is a social process.
3. The origins of self-knowledge are triadic and intersubjective, not private.
4. The authority of first- over third-person perspective on the self exists, but is short lived in development.
5. There is a dissonance between explicit self-knowledge from the first- and third-person perspectives.
6. The first-person perspective primes inflated values on the self as the third-person perspective primes deflated values on the self out of a fear of rejection. (pp. 39–41)