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BOOK REVIEWS

Describing Inner Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic by Russell T. Hurlburt and Eric Schwitzgebel. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. viii + 322 pp. \$34.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-262-08366-9, 0-262-08366-3.

Trying to go beyond the usual academic practice of having a “dialogue between the deaf,” this book is the collaboration between two individuals holding quite different views about the possibility of obtaining valid and reliable (although by no means perfect) accounts of conscious experience. On the cautiously “yes” side is psychologist Russell T. Hurlburt, who created his Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) methodology and has tested it in programmatic research spanning many years now (e.g., Hurlburt & Heavey, 2004). On the cautiously “no” side is philosopher Eric Schwitzgebel, who has written extensively about his distrust of introspective reports.

After the two authors met in a conference on consciousness they initiated a discussion that included Schwitzgebel trying the DES method himself. They then decided to write a book in which they would intersperse points and counterpoints among new DES data collected from participant “Melanie.” The initial chapters of the book are devoted to the authors laying out their territory, followed by a section of the book devoted to the sampling and analysis of Melanie’s conscious experience. The book ends with reflections by both writers.

In his initial chapter, Hurlburt reviews the literature on introspection as a research method, showing that some of the received wisdom about the limitations of introspection are wrong, including the usual account of why it was abandoned (i.e., that competing laboratories were getting dissimilar data, instead of the fact that they got similar data but interpreted them differently), and the famous critique by Nisbett and Wilson (1977) of introspection (pertinent to reporting about the causes of one’s experience rather than to the experiences themselves; see also Wilson, 2003). Hurlburt describes methods to sample the contents of consciousness, although he does not discuss other relevant methods such as phenomenological approaches and questionnaires (cf. Pekala & Cardeña, 2000). He describes the DES method, which includes random beeping as a signal for the participant to pay attention to his/her experience at the time of the beeping, to write some notes about it, and to meet with the experimenter within 24 hours to participant in an interview to explicate the experience. This is an iterative process and Hurlburt mentions that it takes some practice and a skilled interviewer before the participant can provide good reports. He concludes that, albeit imperfect, this is the best introspective method and that it produces valid and reliable data, giving examples from research with individuals with borderline personality disorder and Asperger’s disorder.

In his chapter, Schwitzgebel provides a philosophical critique to positions that treat introspection as either being infallible or useless, and briefly summarizes the reformed positivist approach of Dennett as “incoherent” (p. 44). Schwitzgebel considers that introspective data must be treated with great caution and throughout the book advocates using multiple methods to establish the validity of introspective data. I find it difficult to argue against his position as the literature in many areas, including hypnosis, shows that subjective reports and “objective” data can supplement each other. For instance, PET research shows that the brain areas responsive to color in highly hypnotizable individuals become more active after they are given a hypnotic suggestion to see a black-and-white pattern as if it were in color, in agreement with the verbal report of their experiences (Kosslyn et al., 2000). A neurophenomenological approach (e.g., Cardeña et al., 2007; Lutz & Thompson, 2003) that considers introspective reports as essential to the understanding of related brain activity can yield results that go well beyond simplistic use of brain imaging techniques and of the limitations of any method of research, whether about introspection or about “objective” matters (cf. Pekala & Cardeña, 2000).

About half of the book is devoted to an analysis and discussion of the sampling of Melanie’s experience. To give a taste of this section, on the fourth sampling day Melanie reports feeling a yearning about scuba diving, feeling bobbing at the top of the water, and so on, at the moment of the beep. Then Hurlburt seeks to clarify if those were two different sensations, which one was the central one, and proceeds to seek clarification and analysis of the experience. Schwitzgebel dialogues with him and Melanie about a number of issues he is skeptical of, such as whether some of Melanie’s report is more inference than recall. This then goes on for about 27 pages, with some boxed asides to discuss more general issues in depth. To what extent the reader will be interested in more than 150 pages of this will depend, I suspect, on how much she/he cares about DES practical and theoretical nuances. For my part, I noticed that after reading a number of pages in this section, my interest in the book started to wane.

The final section of the book includes reflections by both authors on what they learned during this process. Although they became subtler in their evaluation of the other’s position, there was no real revelation or change of hearts by either. It is clear that Schwitzgebel respects Hurlburt’s work, but he does not agree that the DES is the best or only way to study conscious experience. I agree with this assessment even though I have admired Hurlburt’s work for a long time. Some of my research involves comparing more global aspects of the stream of consciousness such as consciousness alterations following a hypnotic procedure. Although taking a less atomistic approach than the DES will miss many details, I think that alternative introspective methods provide a better sense of states of consciousness as a whole (Cardeña et al., 2007). And even the maligned “armchair” approach of introspection yielded what is probably the most significant analysis of the stream of consciousness when it was used by someone of the caliber of William James (1890). Thus I would also be less skeptical of

introspection than Schwitzgebel, or perhaps better said, as skeptical of introspectionism as of other methods in psychology and the sciences in general, all of which offer at best limited perspectives. Tolerating uncertainty is a skill demanded by science (and life), or as James put it, the true philosopher (or scientist) should have “the habit of always seeing an alternative” (1876).

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