

Socratic Introspection and the Abundance of Experience

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ABSTRACT

I examine the prospects of using Hurlburt's DES method to justify his very "thin" view of experience, on which visual experience is so infrequent as to be typically absent when reading and speaking. Such justification would seem to be based on the claim that, in DES "beeper" samples, subjects often deny they just had any visual experience. But if the question of "visual experience" is properly construed, then (judging by the example of Melanie) it is doubtful they *are* denying this. And even if they were, that would not generally warrant overturning belief in the abundance of one's own visual experience.

I defend use of non-DES introspective judgments in reaching this conclusion. These are no more dubious overall than the near-term retrospective judgments in response to open-ended prompts employed in DES. Moreover, DES itself needs to presuppose subjects enjoy an introspective competence not confined to their beeper reports. The true power of DES to revise introspection thus lies in its interview portion. This view is further supported by considering Hurlburt's and Schwitzgebel's discussion of detail in visual imagery.

Introspectively based conceptions of experience should be improved and corrected, not by means of a supposedly privileged class of reports, but by questioning that clarifies distinctions and makes explicit the implications of what one says in making introspective judgments. My advocacy of this sort of "Socratic introspection" leads me to broad agreement with many of Schwitzgebel's conclusions. But it also makes me regard myself as a "proponent" of—not a "skeptic" about—the use of introspection to study experience.

1. Introduction

Describing Inner Experience recounts a conversation among a psychologist (Hurlburt), a philosopher (Schwitzgebel), and a subject of Hurlburt's Descriptive Experiential Sampling (DES) research—the pseudonymous "Melanie." In accord with DES methodology, Melanie has supplied a number of reports of her own experience just prior to beeps that occur randomly as she goes about her daily business. Of course, the ultimate interest of this inquiry does not lie simply in what thoughts, feelings or images happened to arise in

Melanie's mind right before she was "beeped." Her self-reports, along with data from other subjects, provide opportunities to investigate general questions about human experience and the use of introspection. So this is to a large extent an inquiry about methodology—though that dry expression might obscure how enjoyable the book is to read, and how close to home these issues are. For depending on how we sort all this out, we may arrive at vastly different pictures of ourselves, of how we compare to others, and of our capacity to generate and rationally revise our self-conception.

It must be emphasized that Hurlburt does not just tabulate "beeper reports," and then directly use these to support or refute claims about experience. It is also essential to his method to *elaborate* and *interpret* such (initially meager and sketchy) reports, in dialogue with the subjects themselves. Hulbert gives a simple illustration of this, when Melanie ventures that, on a certain beeper trial, her thoughts had been "wandering." (p. 125) Hulbert quite rightly insists that we cannot use such remarks to work up an account of her experience, compare it to others, or generalize from it, *until we are clear about what she means*. For just what she intends to say about herself is not always sufficiently clear from an initial expression of her claim. That may be ambiguous, or may not effectively convey what she intends, or its bearing on some issue at hand may not yet be obvious. Persistent and artful questioning is often needed to expose just what the subjects *mean to say*, hence what *beliefs* they hold about their own experience.

Thus a notable feature of Hurlburt's method is what I want to call its "Socratic aspect." For the Socrates of Plato's dialogues assumes, like Hulbert, that an initial expression of belief may not well reveal our attitudes towards what's important—this may require careful follow-up questioning. Of course we should not minimize differences between a DES interview and a Socratic examination. But one could say that, in either case, the questioning has the potential to lead us to reconsider what we *thought* we knew about ourselves by prodding us to articulate our attitudes to an uncustomary degree.

Now maybe the participation of a philosopher in the book's DES interviews (together with my own obsessions) make me exaggerate this comparison. (And Schwitzgebel does seem (more than Hurlburt) to want to press questions in a challenging Socratic fashion.) But I do think Hurlburt's procedures provide an instructive setting in which to consider how philosophical inquiry merges with psychological research. In any case, it seems clear that when thinking about Hurlburt's use of DES, we need to keep well in mind two distinctive phases it involves.

Beeper Reports. "Surprise" eliciting of first-person judgments about experience in the very recent past, in response to an open-ended query about what "inner experience" one was having, recorded in brief notes taken at the time.

Dialogue. Interpretation and elaboration of those reports in dialogue with a researcher, occurring some time (generally hours) after the initial sampling, in which subjects are posed additional questions about the experience reported, partly in order to clarify what they meant to say by their reports, hence just what they are claiming about their experience.

Now, in my view, part of what makes *Describing Inner Experience* such a valuable study is how it explicitly incorporates and makes prominent what I am calling this “dialogue phase.” Hurlburt’s method brings to the fore how much it matters just how we interpret the terms we deploy in reports of our experience, and what distinctions we recognize. It also strikingly raises the issue of how we might take introspective judgment seriously in studying experience, even as we use it to *overturn* certain introspectively based conceptions of it. For, as we shall see, sometimes Hurlburt seems to envision a pretty extreme overthrow of this kind. My comments will focus on these themes, and on some of the distinctions that seem to me particularly salient in conducting the dialogue phase with Melanie. I will aim to show that a “Socratic aspect” is indeed crucial to a scrupulous use of introspection. But the resulting picture of experience and method will contrast significantly with Hurlburt’s.

2. Visual Experience: What is the Question?

One distinction I want to examine plays a role early on, though it provokes relatively little direct discussion in the book. I focus on it, nevertheless, because I think it can help shed light on the potential of introspection to correct introspection, and the importance of dialogue. This is a distinction Hurlburt assumes between *seeing* something and having *visual experience* of it.

This distinction appears in the discussion of the first sample, in which Melanie recounts an experience connected with having unpacked a chair and found a document with it. Melanie is taken to say that while, just prior to the beep, she *saw* and *looked at* the paper before her, she then had either *no visual experience*, or *very little*. At least that disjunction (“little or none”) is used in the summary of the first DES sampling results on p. 305.

But it could be clearer just how Hurlburt wishes to interpret Melanie (and his DES subjects generally) on this issue. When Schwitzgebel takes Hurlburt’s interview with Melanie to suggest she’s saying she had no visual experience at all just before the beep, Hurlburt denies this interpretation. (p. 74) However, in the same breath he says that *many* of his subjects *do* persuasively deny having *any* visual experience in their samples. It’s left unclear how what they said distinguished them from Melanie. Further, he earlier objects to Schwitzgebel’s description of the experience of reading, and suggests that (contrary to popular belief) typically we have no experience of the text we’re looking at when we’re

reading. (p. 50) And he remarks that when DES subjects speak out loud they usually have *no* visual (or any *sensory*) experience at all. (p. 138) (In fact, he seems to say they then simply have *no experience* of any sort (neither “inner” nor “outer”).) And I think he wants to suggest that this is how things commonly are for us, whether we ordinarily think so or not.

These claims make it hard to see why Hurlburt would want to grant that Melanie has accorded herself at least a little visual experience in her paper viewing episode. In any event, some of the things he says suggest he thinks that it is fairly common for DES subjects to believe correctly they just saw and were looking at something, even while lacking visual experience *entirely*. More astonishingly still, he suggests that they (and we) are ordinarily actually like this for much of our day. For if I usually don't have visual experience while reading and talking, it's unclear to me when I do—but surely it can't be *very often*. Hurlburt's view of visual experience is radically “thin” (to use Schwitzgebel's terminology).

I myself think my visual experience is abundant in ways that Hurlburt apparently aims to contest. I would say that I enjoy highly variegated visual experience throughout the course of an average day, even while I'm reading or talking. But Hurlburt (if I understand him) would suggest my beliefs about my experience are largely erroneous, because I make a faulty use of introspection, to be corrected by DES. The suggestion is, in effect, that I use the DES introspections to correct my own homegrown (“armchair”) introspections. And the revision would be far from minor. The account of typical *visual experience* that emerges on his account is something more like that I might have *expected* for *visual imagery*: infrequent and very sketchy. Meanwhile—although I'm not sure exactly where he comes down on this—he tends to see visual imagery as commonly elaborate and detailed (for some people anyway). This disparity between Hurlburt's picture of mental life and my own seems pretty remarkable.

Because I find myself inclined to dissent more strongly from Hurlburt's views on these basic issues than from Schwitzgebel's, it seems almost inevitable that my initial critical response to the book will dwell on Hurlburt. That, and the fact that these disagreements are too complicated to be treated quickly, mean that here I will refer more to Hurlburt than to Schwitzgebel. However, I will, towards the end, focus on how my assessment of the situation compares with Schwitzgebel's. I might add that I found very thought-provoking much of their discussion on topics I will not be able to address now (e.g., imageless thought and inner speech; (unacknowledged) use of metaphor in the description of experience; the experience of emotion). My neglect of these here is certainly no sign of a lack of interest. I could undoubtedly learn much from what they say about these other issues (and, in the case of imageless thought at least, I could find much more common ground with Hurlburt). But I unfortunately will have to leave these questions to another occasion.

So, I want initially to organize my response to *Describing Inner Experience?* around this issue: should I abandon my view of visual experience in favor Hurlburt's apparently much diminished view? My hope is that this will illuminate the general issue of how to use and correct introspection.

To sharpen my focus, it seems we need to try to sort out just what I should count as evidence that subjects *correctly believe they have little or no visual experience*. For evidently their (anti-"abundance") introspections are to be taken as a guide to what human experience is generally like, so as to overrule the allegedly less credible (non-DES) introspections I may have to the contrary. This would seem to be key to correcting my gross exaggeration of experiential abundance. To anchor this discussion, let's go back to what Melanie says, and consider whether we are given reason to think *she* believes that she had "little or no" visual experience just prior to the beep in the first sample. And let's start with the 'no experience' half of this 'little or no experience' disjunct. Is there reason to think she believes she had *no visual experience whatsoever* at the relevant time? And what would show that she—or any DES subject—did?

Now you might think it should be straightforward what Melanie believes. If she says, with evident sincerity, "I had no visual experience of what I was looking at just before the beep," then she believes this. If she says the opposite, she believes *that*. But, in *Describing Inner Experience?* things do not unfold so simply. Melanie does not start off remarking on how much "visual experience" she had, or by uttering anything like the sentence I just put in quotation. As far as I can tell from the book, she is never directly asked whether she would assent to such a statement. (So I don't actually see why Schwitzgebel says Melanie "explicitly denies" having visual experience. (pp. 231-3)) What happens instead: she starts by saying or affirming that (on the occasion in question) she was *looking at* the paper and *saw* it. Hurlburt then asks her whether "that" (seeing the paper, presumably) seemed to be "in [her] awareness." (p. 71) To *this* question, she responds negatively. And from this response it seems we are to infer that she thinks she had little or no visual experience of the paper.

However, it's not clear to me just why we should conclude this. And this is the very sort of thing we *need* to understand, if we're to be clear generally about our basis for using DES reports to reach conclusions about the abundance or paucity of experience. So let's try to sort this out. Just what is Hurlburt asking Melanie when he asks her whether "that" (seeing) was "in her awareness"? Is he asking her:

- (a) Just before the beep, were you attending to, and thereby aware of, the fact that you were seeing the paper? Or:
- (b) Just before the beep, by looking at the paper, were you aware of it (i.e., were you visually aware of it)?

One might take Hurlburt's "was that in your awareness?" question either way. One might, in other words, take him to be asking Melanie either: (a) Was seeing the paper at that moment an *object* of your awareness? Or: (b) Was seeing that paper then a *constituent* of your awareness?

It seems that Melanie herself (who hasn't even been told that her "visual experience" of the paper is at issue) takes Hurlburt to be asking something more like (a). For she elaborates on her ("not in awareness") answer by immediately adding that (just before the beep) she was not aware of her *bodily orientation or posture* or of *her bodily actions*. She says of the moment in question: "I'm not aware of how my body is positioned or what I'm holding..." (p. 71) It's hard to see why she would even bring this up, unless she were responding to something more like (a) than (b). Her response seems to bear on her lack of an attentive awareness to her *point of view* on the scene at the time, and her absorption instead in her *thoughts* about the paper. ("It's very much just in my head," she says. Hurlburt: "You're paying more attention to your thought process...". Melanie: "Yes, exactly."), Hence plausibly, her remarks about what's "in her awareness" speak to a lack of attention to the fact of her *seeing*, as her attention is at that moment absorbed in what's going on "in her head."

But this sort of ambiguity—(a) vs. (b)—is not addressed here. However, it *is* brought out in connection with *another* sample (pp. 79-80), where it becomes fairly clear Melanie is interpreting Hurlburt's "seeing in awareness?" query in manner (a). Assuming then that Hurlburt's question to Melanie about what was "in her awareness" *is* something along the lines of (a), we then need to ask: what does that have to do with the issue of whether she believes she had *visual experience* at a given time (and if she had it, how much)? Would it not be enough for Melanie to have had visual experience of the paper she was looking at, simply that she was *aware of it by looking at it*, and that it *looked some way to her*? Shouldn't we just ask her whether *that* was going on, if we simply want to know whether she thinks she had some visual experience of the paper? It's certainly not clear that, merely to have had visual experience at the time, she then had to have been *attending to her own seeing* (by becoming aware of, and attending to, her perspective on what's before her, as determined by her bodily posture). I don't see how the presence or absence of that kind of self-directed attention at the time in question is *relevant* to whether she then had visual experience (or how much she had). If this is what we're interested in, then it seems we should let Melanie know that, and ask her question (b), rather than (a).

My concerns here, though related to one expressed by Schwitzgebel (pp. 232-3), are distinct from his. He worries that Hurlburt encourages Melanie to identify what's "in awareness" with the focus of attention, thereby tilting reports in favor of a "thin" view of experience. My concerns are these:

- (i) Hurlburt seems to assume that when Melanie first says she saw or looked at a paper she means this in a *non-experiential* sense in which one

can see and look at a paper of which one has *absolutely no experience or awareness*. But it's unclear that Melanie recognizes this, or intends to be interpreted in this way, and whether vision without visual experience is even a kind one is normally in a position to report.

(ii) Hurlburt (perhaps unwittingly) encourages Melanie to interpret his “what’s in awareness?” query as asking about whether at the time she was attending to (and had reflective awareness of) *her own seeing*, when it is supposed to be about whether she then had visual awareness (or experience) of *the paper*.

It's possible that the two assumptions work together to hide their effect. If Melanie does not realize the default assumption is that she's employing a *non-experiential* sense of ‘look’ and ‘see’ when she talks about herself—a sense that leaves entirely open whether one has any awareness or experience at all of what one is looking at or seeing—then, once she's already said she saw and looked at the paper, it may be harder for her to hear a further question about what's “in her awareness” as a question about whether she was aware *of the paper*. (For hasn't that question *already been covered*?) And so she may naturally be drawn to interpret the awareness question as bearing on something *more* than mere awareness of the paper—an awareness of her (visual) awareness, an awareness of her seeing—where this would involve an unusual attentiveness to perspective and to her bodily situation and activity. But however exactly it happens that the focus shifts to (a) rather than (b), the basic question about her visual experience of the paper is obscured.

3. Evidence of Denial; Evidence of Absence

Let's refocus then on what's supposed to be at issue: when, if ever, would a subject be rightly taken to say that, just before the beep, she was seeing and looking at something, but had no visual experience of what she was seeing? To return to Melanie, I would understand her to be denying she had visual experience at a given time, only if she would say that she was not then *visually aware of anything at all*, and that *nothing* in her surroundings *looked any way to her*. I would want to ask her: “Right before the beep, did things look to you just the way they look to you when you are in a tightly sealed lightless room—i.e., *not any way at all*?” And I would take her to be *denying* visual experience only if she would say: “*yes, that's exactly how it was in the moment before the beep.*” Now Melanie doesn't actually say this; the question is simply not posed. But *were* it posed, I would be surprised if she did say this. Again, it's not clear to me why Hurlburt turns out not to think she is denying she had any visual experience just before the beep. But that is part of why *I* don't think she's denying visual experience.

I focused on this juncture in the conversation, because I was trying to understand how DES might be used to radically undermine my belief in the abundance of visual experience. And at this point, that only seems more remote. Melanie is not denying visual experience. I am not doing so. Where are the grounds to doubt its abundance then? Perhaps I should now ask how some other DES subjects, including perhaps a *counterfactual* Melanie, *might* provide evidence that they correctly deny having had visual experience. And then I can consider how a case for the general paucity of experience, including my own, could be built up from there.

So suppose now, hypothetically, Melanie *did* respond to my question with a surprising denial of visual experience prior to the beep. And on further questioning, it becomes clear she is not just saying she *doesn't recall* whether she had visual experience, she is emphatically saying she did *not*. Now I want to know: whether I should believe her denial; how to get from this to attributing to her a *general* dearth of visual experience; and how to bring this to bear on my own case. Here is how I would proceed. (I will depart from Hurlburt's procedure; later I will consider whether I do so illegitimately.) First, I would pose Melanie some targeted questions about her current experience (or lack thereof). For example, in good light, I would ask her: "And now, as we are talking, when your eyes are open, do things you are looking at look some way to you, or not?" Suppose in such circumstances, she regularly says "yes, they do." Then I would wonder, "Hmm, why does she say she *does* have visual experience when queried directly about her current condition, but sometimes *denies* it when surprised by a beep that asks (in effect) generally what sort of experience she had in the prior moment? Is it that, not just prior to the beep, but commonly as she goes around looking at things, she has no visual experience of them at all, but somehow my direct query about visual experience actually *causes* her to start having some?"

To answer that question, once she agrees she's got some visual experience, I could suggest to her that she note what it's like for her visual experience of what's before her to *cease* when she voluntarily shuts her eyes, and then for it to *return* when she opens them. And then I could say, "When I initially asked you whether things looked somehow to you, did things then *just begin* to look somehow to you, somewhat as when you open your eyes—except in this case, you went from 'no visual experience of them' to 'some visual experience of them' while you *already had* your eyes open?" Suppose to this she responds: "No, things didn't *just start* looking somehow to me when I heard your question, somewhat as when I opened my eyes a little while ago."

Then apparently, while it is rather common for her to believe (correctly) that she has visual experience, sometimes, in the context of retrospective beeper reports, she *denies* having had it during a brief interval. Now the beeper sound presumably cannot bring about antecedent losses of visual experience by backwards causation. It seems there is nothing that could plausibly have briefly

extinguished her visual experience just prior to the beep. Under the circumstances then, a reasonable hypothesis would be that sometimes, just before the beep, she is far too absorbed in matters other than her visual awareness for her to retain a memory of it after being interrupted by the “What did you just experience?” beep; this absorption in other matters keeps her from retaining a memory of her visual experience in that moment, at least memory of a sort that would be readily accessed by such an open-ended question. And in the confident denial of visual experience we are imagining her to make in later follow-up, she mistakes an absence of memory for a memory of absence. And that, plausibly, is why she denies having it, if she does.

Even with this hypothetical case, we still seem to be nowhere near charting a course from DES denials of pre-beep visual experience to more general, far-reaching denials. So far I haven’t even got a scenario where we have reason to think that sometimes, even briefly, DES subjects look at things of which they have no visual experience. But let me press on. Again, suppose (counterfactually) Melanie gave us reason to think she did intend some denial of pre-beep visual experience. But now suppose, even more surprisingly, she outright denied having visual awareness of *anything*—even now, *as I am speaking to her*. Suppose she said, “While I am and have been looking at things in front me, they don’t look anyhow to me, and haven’t appeared any way to me in the recent past.” *Then*—in this extraordinary turn of events—I would have reason to seriously consider, as one live hypothesis, that perhaps most of the time she has no visual experience. More precisely, in this circumstance Melanie’s responses would give me reason to think either:

- a. She has plenty of visual experience, but is making a peculiar extended joke at my expense; or
- b. She may or may not be like me visually, but in any case she doesn’t mean what I do by ‘looks,’ ‘visual experience,’ ‘aware of,’ etc. (and I don’t understand what she means); or
- c. She has some strange dissociative disorder (like “hysterical blindness”) preventing her from reporting on her visual experience; or finally,
- d. She is *radically different from me visually* (I have lots of visual experience; she has none).

I would see (a-d) as my options because of how I myself would answer some of the questions I have imagined posing to her. That is, in ordinary circumstances, if I ask myself at any given moment whether what I’m looking at looks some way to me, and whether what I was just looking at had been looking some way to me, I would say: *yes indeed, on both counts*. Moreover, I am *never* (so far as I can tell) inclined to say I am (or was) looking at something that doesn’t (or didn’t) look anyhow to me. In fact, I frankly don’t even understand how I am supposed to tell what I’m *looking at*, when this doesn’t *look* any way to me. That is, I can certainly imagine that my eyes might be positioned in such a way that something reflected light onto and activated my retinas, even when (because

of brain damage) the area before me did not look any way to me. I do not even rule out that I might retain some kind of visual function in this situation (e.g., perhaps I am still able to avoid obstacles in my path better with my eyes open). But were this to happen, it would not constitute “looking at” the area in question, or “looking at” anything in it—as I normally understand this. I can frame a notion of some kind of “vision without visual experience,” “seeing” things that don’t look anyhow to me, but that’s not the sort of vision I would normally think I had—rather it’s the kind of thing I believe is going on in brain damaged “blindsight” subjects.

Let me take stock. I have been trying to understand what would justifiably lead me to think Melanie correctly claimed to have had little or no visual experience just before the beep, because I’m trying to see how we are supposed to get from DES denials of visual experience to general doubts of its prevalence. The evidence provided in *Describing Inner Experience* does not support the claim that Melanie is *saying* she has no visual experience in the case in question, hence there’s no reason to think she then *has* none. And thus far there is no reason to think visual experience is at all *unusual* for her. But beyond this, unless Hurlburt’s other subjects would answer the relevant questions in the way needed to make *them* visual experience deniers, I would say the same about them. Without the appropriate questions and responses in the dialogue phase, I would not be convinced that they were correctly denying that they had visual experience. And this makes me doubtful of Hurlburt’s claims that many of his subjects “persuasively deny” they had any visual experience just before the beep. Further, even if we did find some subjects that retrospectively denied pre-beep visual experience, we shouldn’t conclude that it is at all *unusual* for them to have it, unless they went on to answer additional questions regarding their *current* experience in negative fashion. And then, even if things got *that* strange, I still would not have reason to conclude *I* rarely had visual experience.

Now I might continue to pursue even more peculiarly counterfactual scenarios and ask what my epistemic situation would be *then*. (What if *everyone in the world but me* were a bona-fide lifelong experience-denier—what then?) I suspect pushing things this far strains intelligibility. (How would they even understand what they’re denying? How, in this nightmare world, could I have ever learned to talk about my experience?) But we needn’t try to pursue these matters now. For the more outlandish these scenarios, the less relevance they have for assessing the prospects of undermining belief in experiential abundance—which is the present concern.

The point remains: I still don’t have an acceptable account of how DES introspections should, or even *might* (given a lot of counterfactual assumptions) rightly lead me to conclude I am wrong to think I ordinarily have visual experience quite frequently—most of the time I’m awake, in fact. I haven’t argued that I *couldn’t* possibly somehow be radically mistaken about my visual experience,

only that, so far, DES doesn't show me how I might be justified in arriving at such a conclusion.

4. Only a *Little* Visual Experience?

As I sized up the epistemic situation, I envisaged some reliance on present tense claims in response to targeted questions about visual experience. Now perhaps this will be declared illegitimate. If we really want to know how abundant visual experience is, we should forbid any such reliance. I will return to this idea. But there is something else I need to pursue first.

Recall Melanie was supposed to have believed she had "little or no" visual experience of what she was looking at prior to the beep. And this led me to consider what would show she had (and thought she then had) *none at all*. But it seems we should get back to the other half of that disjunct, and address the notion that she had (or thinks she had) just "a little." This seems relevant, because the background issue here is how DES might flip me from an "abundance" view of my experience to something more like the extreme "paucity" view Hurlburt suggests, then I ought to consider the prospect—not of being persuaded that I hardly ever have any visual experience at all—but that even when I do have it, I just never get to have *very much* of it; I only ever have a *little*—anyway I have a *lot less* of it than I think I do. Maybe DES promises to overthrow my introspection in *that way*.

To examine this, we clearly need to consider just what we might mean in this context by saying someone had "little visual experience" of something. The meaning of such a claim is initially unclear, and needs cautious handling (like that of claims that experience is or is not "rich"). Now by saying one had only a little visual experience of something, one might mean something like: one had *no more than a glance* at it. That is to say: one had a visual experience of it that was *not very long*. Of course, DES subjects would correctly report having in *that* sense "only a little" visual experience of something just prior to the beep, because they are being asked about a *brief period of time*: the "moment"—what happened "just before"—the beep. But that picks no quarrel with my introspection, and it has no consequences for the abundance of visual experience generally, since it's not true that we rarely get more than a glance at anything we see.

What else then might be meant? By saying one had little visual experience during a certain period of time one might instead mean something like: "the way things *looked* to me then was relatively *homogeneous or undifferentiated*. An extreme case would be the experience of a uniformly lit, monochromatic expanse: a "Ganzfeld." And one could also have, in this sense, relatively little visual experience of something because of *poor lighting*, or because of *visual defects* that severely affect acuity. So, looking at an elaborately patterned

Persian rug, or a detailed city map, or the circuit board of a computer, I have little experience of it, *when the lights are quite dim*, relative to what I have *when the lights are turned up*. And, even with good lighting, my legally blind friend Mike has little experience of it, relative to what *I* have. Now it seems, Melanie (and other DES subjects) might indeed have *relatively* little visual experience of what they were looking at, just prior to the beep, in this sense as well—little, that is, relative to what she would have had over a longer period of visually examining it. But none of this suggests that, in some sense, *usually* she or we have “only a little” visual experience of the things that we see. So again, I don’t see the prospects for some big overthrow of my pre-DES introspective convictions.

So what *else* might be meant by saying someone has little visual experience? I suppose you might mean something like: during a given time, you do not have visual experience of *many things you can identify in the course of that experience*. A list of items you can visually identify during that time (i.e., classify by how they look to you) would *not be very numerous*. Surely this is true of the pre-beep moments reported by DES subjects. But it also would be upheld by introspection outside DES. Suppose, for example, you look over the rug for awhile (take your time), and are asked to classify the patterns or shapes and areas of color you see as you do so. Or the rug is removed from view and immediately you are asked to list just what patterns and shapes and colors you then saw. The number of classified objects you provide in your list is likely not to be very large—certainly not relative to the number of distinguishable patterns, shapes, and areas of color *that are there*. Again there doesn’t seem to be much threat to ordinary introspection from DES here.

Anyway, if *this* is what is meant by saying we have “little visual experience,” then it seems true enough. However, I would note this would also be misleading. For recognizing this limitation in our capacity to visually identify what we visually experience over a given stretch of time is compatible with recognizing that the appearance of what is experienced is often much more various than this. The things before me may—and usually do—appear to me much more heterogeneously with respect to color, shape, and position, than is reflected in the number of distinct classifications of seen objects I will actually report, for that particular duration of experience, if queried.

Now let me sum up. If what I’ve been saying is correct, the evidence from Melanie we have in the book gives us no reason at all to think she denies that she had visual experience prior to the beep in the first sample. And here at least, it seems I agree with Hulburt. But my reasons for this make me doubt his other subjects are (any more than Melanie) typically denying they have any visual experience just before the beep. And, if on some such occasions they would deny having had it, it’s unclear we should believe them, and even if we should, we’d still have no reason to think they don’t *usually* have it—unless they would also deny this, when directly asked about their *current* state. And even if, amazingly, some did deny this as well, then that still wouldn’t show that visual

experience is for *me* a rare treat. Finally, if we consider the suggestion that whenever subjects have visual experience, they have only a *little*, we always need to ask: “*little*” in what respect, and relative to what? If we mean “little variegated, relative to other experience we have,” or “of much shorter duration than other experience we have,” then clearly there won’t be a good prospect of showing we usually have only a little visual experience. For again, we are not limited to getting only a glance at things. And we are not usually limited to Ganzfeld experiences or the experiences of the severely visually impaired, and aren’t always stuck with poor lighting. So far then, I see no prospects for using DES to overthrow my introspective judgment that my visual experience is considerably more abundant than Hurlburt seems to claim.

Let me be clear: this is not meant to discredit DES itself. Nor is it supposed to cast doubt on Melanie’s beeper reports. Rather it is an attempt to pursue more deeply matters that arise in the dialogue phase of DES, in ways that show why, based on the evidence I’ve got, I don’t think DES supports—or has any prospect of supporting—the radical denials of experience suggested by many of Hurlburt’s remarks.

5. Must I Wait for the Beep?

In extending the dialogue as I have, I have at times relied on first-person judgments about experience that are neither themselves beeper reports, nor based on such reports. I have so far put off a certain objection this might arouse. Perhaps Hurlburt would object: “At crucial points, you would have us give some evidential weight to your ‘armchair’ introspective judgments made outside of, and unconfirmed by, DES beeper reports. And that is illegitimate. We use DES to reveal the paucity of experience by allowing *only* its near-term retrospective reports about experience in response to an open-ended prompt. If it’s not to be found in such reports, it’s not in experience. Since many beeper reports mention very few types of experience, and whole categories (e.g., visual, aural) are often simply missing, we should conclude those kinds of experience are infrequent, and experience as a whole is much poorer than you think. For *other* reports of experience deserve no credence at all, unless they are backed up by the appropriate beeper reports.” (See pp. 50, 109, 185-6, 269-270.)

In response to this, I would want first to note that, in this context, I regard it as a little prejudicial to use the term “armchair” to describe introspective judgments that we make on our own initiative, differing from DES beeper reports by being *present-tense* or responsive to *targeted* questions. There is certainly a pejorative feel about “armchair.” It suggests that the judgments in question are unwarranted speculations, somehow not respectably “empirical,” as beeper reports are. But this shouldn’t be taken for granted. So I propose we set this label aside. The issue is really whether we should suspend reliance on any first-person

judgments about experience, except for near-term retrospective judgments in response to an open-ended prompt.

Now even if we did try to privilege these reports as proposed, it's far from clear this would pave the way to undermine other introspective judgments, so as to leave in its wake a barren experiential landscape. It would need to be clear that one's responses to *open-ended questions* about a given time would in fact usually simply be missing whole classes of experiences (e.g., visual, aural) commonly self-attributed in response to *targeted questions regarding one's just-past experience*. But my examination of how the vision/visual experience distinction is handled in Melanie's case leads me to wonder if we appear to get the "missing experience" result from subjects' beeper reports, by imposing dubious (and rather obscure) requirements on what is to count as an attribution of experience. So again, even though subjects report they *saw* or *looked at* something, we don't take them to report *visual experience*, because we implicitly assume they are understanding 'see' and 'look at' in their remarks in a sense in which one can see and look at something of which one has no visual experience or awareness. And we also wind up surreptitiously presupposing that genuine visual experience requires a *concurrent attention to one's own seeing*, or at any rate a kind of *concurrent reflective awareness of one's own seeing*.

But if we understand the relevant terms in *another* way, as I have suggested, then what we have is not evidence for a relative paucity of visual experience, but at most evidence for a relative paucity of *contemporaneous reflective self-consciousness about one's visual experience*. And that is something else entirely. So I would question whether confining our evidence for experience to beeper reports should actually result in such a drastic reduction in our estimate of it. Also, I note that Schwitzgebel's "beeper" subjects, who were briefed differently than Hurlburt's, and not instructed to look only for "inner" experience, seemed to have been considerably more generous in their self-attributions of visual experience. (pp. 228-231) This too should give us pause.

Next I think we need to ask whether we really have sufficient reason to discard responses to questions about (e.g.) how things look to us as we are looking at them, in favor of responses to surprise generic queries about what we just experienced a moment ago. Suppose subjects don't mention a type of experience in response to an *open-ended* question, which they report in a *targeted* one. Why should we believe the former report, and not the latter? Hurlburt is concerned that targeted questions will presuppose certain types of experience are occurring, where that should be left open—and an open-ended prompt has the desired neutrality. (p.25) But if we risk inducing confabulations because eager-to-please subjects think we're telling them they *should* be having a certain type of experience, we can explicitly tell them from the start that we do not mean to suggest this, much as we might assure them at the outset that it's ok to say they don't remember, to help guard against *denials of past experience* when a disavowal of *memory* would be more prudent. Such precautions are

imperfect, undoubtedly. But the dangers of relying on targeted present tense questions appear overall at least no *greater* than the dangers of confabulation and poor memory that, as Hurlburt admits, attend DES (pp. 284-5).

Note also that if we limit ourselves to DES reports, we assume in effect that only the sort of thing that shows up in such reports is to be found in experience. And that seems like a big assumption. One reason to question it is this. Confining ourselves to responses to an open-ended past tense question may actually build in an unwarranted bias in favor of “thin” experience, precisely because it gives the subject no clue about what is important or what to look for. (This “openness” is not necessarily a strength.) For if one is faced with the wide-open question, “What did you just experience?” with no context to orient attention, and no guidance about what is salient, one may be inclined to notice retrospectively *only what recently so strongly dominated one’s attention as to be virtually unignorable in memory*—“unforgettable.” But why assume this will include everything that is ever “in experience”?

Furthermore, it may well be that our capacity for detailed articulate memory of experience *we weren’t noticing or attending to at the time of occurrence* is very limited. Subjects may record a few aspects of their experience in their notes, and in that time lose access to other aspects, which they might have retained if they had happened to focus on that instead. And, when interviewed about these episodes hours later, and asked simply, “Was there anything else in your experience/awareness at that moment?”, they may be less than vigilant in distinguishing between: “I don’t recall anything else,” and “I recall there was nothing else,” and thereby slip into an unwarranted underestimate of experience.

In general I would have to say: I agree with Hurlburt that we should seek to minimize many of the sources of error and distortion in first-person judgments that he decries. But I also agree with Schwitzgebel (pp. 222-5) that this doesn’t justify according to beeper reports a place of such high *epistemic privilege* that these should serve as a sort of tribunal, before which *present* tense judgments, and those made in response to more *targeted* questions, can be tried. For there are serious potential drawbacks to treating beeper reports as furnishing complete records of experience, and insufficient reasons have been offered to think other reports are overall inferior to them. Nor is it even clear the court Hurlburt convenes would yield the harsh verdicts he suggests, were it furnished with appropriate rules of evidence.

Finally, there is this basic problem in trying to accord DES beeper judgments such commanding epistemic authority that they might in principle threaten to sweep all other first-person characterizations of experience aside. And that is this. That subjects enjoy a certain competence in reporting on their own experience is *presupposed* when they are deemed fit subjects for DES—or fit interviewers for that matter. But that competence could not have been

acquired and exhibited only in *past tense judgments* in response to *open-ended questions*. If I am not entitled to assume that, as things are, I can frequently make accurate judgments in response to targeted questions that I am now *seeing* something, that I am *looking at* something, that something *looks* or *appears* somehow to me, and if I cannot coordinate these uses with my use of terms like 'visually experience,' 'visual awareness' and their cognates, then I am not entitled to assume I have enough competence in the use of these expressions to employ them in beeper reports worth taking seriously. If I am no good at answering you now, when you ask me, "Does A look to you bigger than B?", then I have no business reporting on whether, a moment ago, A *looked* to me bigger than B. *Nor*, it seems to me, failing such competence, would I understand the crucial terms adequately to make me fit to participate in the dialogue phase of DES.

This is not just about me. *None* of us is equipped to get in the game, unless we bring to the table some such prior competence in the application of these terms to our own case. And that assumes the accuracy of extra-DES introspection.

6. On Introspective Error

I have been arguing, among other things, that there are limits to the manner in which we could expect DES research to debunk introspective judgment, because of how it presupposes a background introspective competence. But I certainly do not deny that introspection can fail significantly in revealing to us the character of experience.

I do not even purport to rule out a discovery that someone's application of certain terms or distinctions suffers from defects so grave as to deprive the first-person reports that employ them of all authority, and rob them of all force in evidence or argument. In the most extreme case, we would find that every use of a type of expression by a particular person to assert something about themselves would be thus disqualified. (Think, for instance, of blind people who suffer from Anton's syndrome, and of their claims to "see" and "look at" things.) But the question remains: *should* I in fact regard myself as thus disqualified in my use of 'visual experience,' 'looks,' and 'aware of'? We should be cautious about such a dire conclusion. And we must distinguish this from subtler, but still significant cases, where a speaker's grasp of a relevant distinction, or their care in handling it in a given instance, should be put in question.

I now want to discuss briefly some examples of this, drawn from Hurlburt's and Schwitzgebel's discussion of visual imagery. This will help me to illustrate and bolster my argument that there are certain built-in limits to how much DES (or any method that relies on introspection) can do to undermine an individual's first-person present tense judgments about experience in response to targeted

questions. But at the same time it will also help me show that we can rationally discover—through dialogue—how introspection can go wrong, and what would make it better.

Example #1: “A discernible difference?” Consider in this connection Melanie’s reports of visual imagery, and the discussion of how much “detail” was originally “in the image.” We are in a position to use a subject’s report to justify claims that she visualized something just prior to the beep, and just what she visualized, only if we assume, for example, that she can with some accuracy generally report when she is *seeing* something, and when instead she is only “*seeing it in her mind or imagination.*” This is a competence she needs before she signs up for DES. Otherwise she won’t be able to provide worthwhile data. For suppose when you ask her something like, “Do you really see a traffic light before you now, or are you just *imagining* it?”, she simply cannot regularly correctly judge *which* is going on. How could we rely on the self-reports of such a subject to reach any warranted conclusions about visual imagery and its level of detail relative to visual experience?

Now I don’t at all doubt that Melanie, Hurlburt, Schwitzgebel—and we their readers—share this basic competence. But it is a further matter whether we are always sufficiently attentive in relevant ways to the difference at issue (seeing vs. imagining), in the context of certain *unusual, picky* questions about, say, whether this or that detail was “already in the image.” So, for example, when Melanie reports having “had a mental image of” being at an intersection, Hurlburt asks her (p. 167) whether “that” was “*just like* being in the car.” And she answers that it was. Now this response *might* be taken to imply she believes she had visual imagery just as “detailed” as ordinary visual experience. On the other hand, it might be a mistake to read this into her response. For it might *also* be taken (and perhaps *should* be taken) to have by itself *no immediate bearing at all on this “detail” question.* For she might be saying simply that *what she imagined* (or had an image of) on this occasion (a.k.a. the “scene”) was a normal situation of being in a car before a red traffic light—and thus a sort of *situation* none other than (in no discernible way different from) that she sometimes *perceives* she’s in when she’s *actually in the car.* That is to say: she was not imagining being before some *peculiar* traffic light or intersection—just the typical, ordinary sort of scene. But this does not entail that the *experience of imagining* being at the stoplight was for her utterly indistinguishable from the *experience of seeing* that same type of situation, when she is in the car—or even anything close to this. She can, after all, we are assuming, generally tell when she’s seeing a traffic light, and when she’s just imagining one. And it just may be that part of what makes the experiences distinguishable is that the one in some sense contains a level and type of “detail” that the other does not. But before we can even consider that issue, we need to distinguish between asking whether *what was imagined* on an occasion was the *very sort of situation one sometimes sees,* and asking whether the *experience* of imagining it is indistinguishable (with respect to type and level of detail) from the *experience* of seeing it.

Part of what I wish to convey here is that, even while we rightly assume a certain introspective competence in reporting episodes of *imagining* as opposed to *seeing*—and in reporting what one sees and what one imagines—this can leave us vulnerable to mistakes about questions like: are my visual experience and my visual imagery *similarly detailed*? For, without explicit care to distinctions of the sort just mentioned, either I myself, or an audience relying on my introspective reports, might wrongly take my response to a question like Hurlburt’s to commit me to claiming that the detail of imagining is equivalent or comparable to the detail of seeing. And in this way introspection could lead to error about “image detail.”

Does Melanie commit such an error? Schwitzgebel worries that Melanie “overdescribes her imagery” (p. 175) and Hurlburt says she “describes substantially more image detail” than Schwitzgebel expects (p. 176). But it’s not clear to me, in some of these cases, she is even saying she experiences or imagines all that much detail, or just what detail she is claiming that Schwitzgebel doubts was there.

Example #2: Embellishment? A second illustration of the general point (again crucial to using imagery reports to address “level of detail” questions), has to do with a difference whose importance Schwitzgebel emphasizes (pp. 97, 102, 239-40). This (as I would put it) is the difference between:

- (a) Recalling what one earlier imagined by *re-imagining* it *with some additional embellishments*, and
- (b) Simply recalling what was earlier imagined.

In order to distinguish (a) reports from (b) reports, subjects and interviewers both must have the basic prior competence with the seeing/imagining distinction already discussed. But if we want to use their reports to address the *level of detail* question about imagery they need more. They need some introspective competence in distinguishing (a) and (b). Unless they have this, *and* take care to try to heed it the distinction in reports and dialogue, we won’t be able to draw any worthwhile conclusions about the relative level of detail in the (original) image by using DES. For consider subjects who first assure us in follow up questioning that they imagined a prodigious wealth of detail in some moment before the beep. As we request more and more detail about what was imagined, they happily continue to supply it. But then when we mention the distinction between (a) and (b), and ask them whether they are confident they are not adding in some new details after the fact, they say they aren’t clear on the distinction, or seem confused by the question. Or perhaps they say they now get the distinction well enough, but weren’t really trying to apply it in giving their earlier reports. Or (more worrisome still, though less likely) they say they grasp the distinction, but don’t know at all how to heed it in their responses, because when they imagine

something, they can *never* tell whether they are imagining more than they had already imagined. Or maybe they say they get the distinction, and are heeding it in their reports, and yet, as it happens—they never or almost never seem to worry that they are embellishing a past image, as opposed to strictly recalling what was “in” it; they just keep piling on more and more detail, blithely assuring us it was already there in that image briefly formed some hours ago.

All these eventualities could reasonably put into question the reliability of first-person reports in this context. Subjects might have satisfactory competence with the “seeing/imagining” distinction, but lack it for the “imagined-already/imagining-new-stuff” distinction. Or they might not have understood the distinction very well. Or they might have understood it, but not have taken care to apply it. Or they might say they’re applying it, but do so in a suspiciously lopsided fashion. Which if any of these pitfalls undercuts the usefulness of their testimony needs to be sorted out. And unless we have made reasonable efforts to avoid and remedy these problems, we can’t use introspective judgments about imagery (including DES judgments) to tell us anything about how detailed someone’s imagery experience is. To some extent at least, such worries can be raised and dealt with in the “dialogue phase,” even while we rely in various ways on a background of introspective competence. But whether this will leave irremediably large indeterminacies in reported detail would then remain to be seen.

It is unclear to me just which of these problems, if any, may be afflicting Melanie’s reports in various places. I do not think the question of whether imagery detail is enriched by focusing on or “looking at” a portion of “the image” (the question discussed on p. 105) is just the same as whether (and in what respect) the original imagery experience has been embellished in re-imagining. So it is hard to know just what Melanie can be taken to have claimed about the detail she has visualized at a given time, and how trustworthy her claims are.

Example #3: Semantic slippage? Here is just one more example of how trouble might arise for introspective judgments about imagery even against a background of basic introspective competence. Again, assume a competence in wielding ‘see’ and ‘imagine,’ as well as the relevant “embellishment vs. simple recall” distinction, on the part of all relevant parties. Still we may go astray when we discuss what was imagined, in a way that abandons explicit “image” talk for talking simply in terms of what one “saw,” and what was “in the visual experience” of it (as happens, for instance, on p. 172). We should be alert to a danger that our observations will lose their relevance for the topic of imagery, without our noticing, because we have heedlessly slipped back into thinking of vision, not visualization.

So I may well note that if I saw something that looked to me like a real building (neither, say, a *potential* (i.e., half-finished) building, nor a prop or fake (a *trompe l’oeil*, a facade)—then the real-looking building (and the detail that makes it look “real” to me) are “in my visual experience” in some sense. The difference

in visual experience, between the way a real building looks, and the way an incomplete or prop building looks, we may say often has to do with the appearance of details in the former not apparent in the latter. But it's not clear what, if anything, this tells us about the level of detail experienced in corresponding *mental imagery*.

For instance, the observations just made about the experience of seeing don't warrant the conclusion that, in *visualizing* a real building, one experiences, or forms, a *more detailed image* of the building, than when one visualizes a merely "schematic" (incomplete?) building. It seems one might visualize a real, complete building in no more detail overall than one does an *incomplete* building. And this remains so even if, in vision, a building *looks real* (and not e.g., incomplete or fake) partly in virtue of the appearance of more detail in it than is apparent in an incomplete or fake building. But we may lose track of these distinctions, and these points, if we address introspection of imagery in terms drawn straight from the visual context—asking about what was "in visual experience," how it "looked," and what one was "looking at," even when one is ostensibly talking about *visual imagery*. And so again the use of introspection *could* lead us astray, if we are not careful with the distinctions we use in it, and in the interpretation we give of it (as revealed in the inferences we draw). And without attention to these matters, it is hard for us to know what Melanie is claiming or implying about the detail of her imagery in some of her remarks.

I am really trying to make two main points in this section. The first is this. We can employ DES to address the desired questions about the character of experience—by providing usable data in the form of beeper reports—only if we can *already* make rudimentary first-person applications of terms to be used in the beeper reports, fairly accurately, *even prior to hearing our first beep*. And that is to assume some entitlement to such judgments that is not derived from DES. So my argument in the previous section (against denying the abundance of visual experience) does not *illicitly* go outside DES for introspection. For DES itself presupposes the acceptability of extra-DES introspective judgments. We need to assume that people have a reliable (I don't say infallible!) competence in distinguishing (for example) when something looks somehow to them, from when it doesn't, and when it looks somehow to them, from when they are only imagining it, *prior* to joining in DES research, if they are even to be suitable participants. It follows that there are limits to how much that method can rationally throw this competence into doubt.

The second general point I want to make is this. Even against the background of assuming the sort of basic competence I have illustrated, there is still considerable potential for error in what we say based on introspective reports about our experience—error of the sort that can be exposed in dialogue. Previously, I illustrated how (in my view) we could make unwarranted denials of experiential abundance, and just now—how we could make unjustified claims of great detail in visual imagery. And in both cases these are exposed through the

dialogue in which we try to clarify what we mean, draw distinctions, and consider the implications of what we say. But the fact that they are exposed through such dialogue also gives us hope they might be prevented and corrected by it.

7. On Introspective Self-Correction

If we are but fallible reporters on the character of our experience, how do we detect and correct our errors? One dispiriting possibility is that introspection, working from its own resources, is (in an unfavorable sense) *incorrigible*. On this view, introspection is merely a (sometimes faulty) gauge of some sort. One can correct its faulty “readings” only “from the outside” so to speak. Sometimes introspection spits out judgments that line up with purely “third-person” evidence, sometimes not—and it’s only by appeal to occasions of the latter sort that one can set it aright. It may indeed seem difficult to envisage just how introspection could be self-correcting, as ordinary perceptual experience can be. We can often correct visual illusion by “getting a better look” at something, or by appeal to other modalities with which it is unified. (For example: when I reach where something appears to be, I come up empty-handed.) But even if one takes the dead metaphor of ‘introspection’ seriously, there seems to be no comparable way to employ “inner sense” to check itself.

One way of responding to such a challenge would be to isolate a certain class of introspective judgments or reports as pre-eminently trustworthy: something about the manner in which they’re formed or about their content makes them less liable to error than others. So if we can argue that a conception of experience based on such reports conflicts with what is alleged in the *unfavored* class of reports, then we can use this to discredit the latter, even if this requires a massive revision, leaving us with a radically different view of ordinary human experience. I see Hurlburt as pursuing a version of this strategy. We grant “most favored introspection” status to near-term retrospective reports in response to a random, open-ended prompt (once these are suitably refined and elaborated under questioning). Then we argue that the picture of experience these provide puts the lie to that we get when we admit present tense reports or concurrent judgments, in response to targeted questions. And this is thought to result in a wholesale purge of our experiential lives.

Both the account of introspective self-correction suggested by my criticisms, and the outcome of applying it, are quite different. Not only do I not think DES reports constitute a privileged class of introspective judgments, I am not convinced we can justifiably isolate in a very general way *any* such group of introspective claims, and set them up as a standard before which all others may stand or fall. This is not to deny we can address introspective controversy by trying to reduce our claims, locate and retreat to less controversial ones, and see whether we can reason our way back to conclusions from there. But identification of the relatively “firmer, safer” ground to which one can withdraw should be done

only on a contextual, case-by-case basis, and I don't assume there is some entirely epistemically self-sufficient isle of safety to which we can repair. (This brings up the tricky issue of "bracketing presuppositions" which I regret I cannot explore here in more detail.)

On my approach one would instead strengthen and enhance introspection by dogged pursuit of the sort of questioning that Hurlburt initiates in his DES interviews. It seems then that we agree at least on this: we will *not* improve introspection by trust in the "noble savagery" of raw introspective reports "unexposed" or unrefined by critical questioning. We must press sensitively worded questions to probe the content and implications of introspective judgments, to see which are worth retaining. But Hurlburt and I apparently differ regarding just what it is crucial to ask, how far to push such questioning, and the dangers of prematurely abandoning it—and it seems, the extent to which the questioners should also similarly examine themselves, while engaging in their own first-person reflection on experience. It seems—and this is my deepest worry about Hurlburt's method—that the very habits of self-reflection I would have us *cultivate*, he would evidently have us *suppress*, since he thinks they only breed error of the sort DES is called in to correct. But on my view we need just such habits of articulate alertness to our own on-going experience, and of self-examination, if we are to bring the "personal" into the "theoretical" as Hurlburt laudably wishes (pp. 257-60). It is just such habitual self-examination that we need to nourish the rational correction of introspectively-based conceptions of experience.

This difference in approach has led me also to a rather different result than Hurlburt's—arguing against his stark conception of visual experience, in favor of my more fulsome view. And it has made me cautious about claims of richly detailed, near instantaneous imagery. But notice, though our views are introspectively grounded, it would not be fair to bring against us both the charge that, because of this, we have been driven into some dead-end of opposed introspections where reason has no recourse. Our disagreement is more diffuse, and seemingly traceable to differences in the standards we assume, the questions we pose, the distinctions we recognize, and our interpretation of these—all of which are indefinitely open to further rational discussion.

Well, that's just the problem, you might think. For now it seems that, on my view, taking introspection seriously ties it closely to the kind of individualistic, idiosyncratic dialectical inquiry that makes philosophy seem so endlessly disputatious. If responsible introspection must have a prominent "Socratic aspect," that does not bode well for securing widespread agreement, even if, assiduously pursued, it may sometimes afford us improved self-understanding on an individual level. So it may be that psychology's openness to *introspection* will sometimes be an invitation to *philosophize*, and so at least sometimes a threat to establishing the study of consciousness around a solid body of professional consensus. It may be that here again the "personal" and the "theoretical" are in

uneasy tension. Though I would urge this is not because embracing the personal requires us to abandon the discipline of reason.

This brings me to the matter of where I stand with respect to Schwitzgebel, my colleague in philosophy. Although much of what I have said here (I think!) puts me close to what he says in his exchanges with Hurlburt, I would describe myself as a “proponent,” not (as he does) a *skeptic*, about introspective description of experience. I would apply his label to myself only if (somewhat in the style of the ancient skeptics) I thought we were doomed to directly conflicting reflections supported by equally balanced arguments. But I don’t see that as our situation. In this arena I do believe in intellectual *progress*, achieved through the use of reason, even if I am not particularly sanguine about the prospects for *consensus*. Since I see these (progress and consensus) as distinguishable, I anticipate that even when someone makes progress, questions about just *who* has made more progress, and about *what*, are part of what will remain (perhaps interminably) disputed. But this should not make us give up, or succumb to the “paralysis” Schwitzgebel reasonably warns would ensue if we did not presume some defeasible authority for our own introspective judgments. (p. 109) Rather, it should make us strive for humility, and shun complacency, and seek to learn from those whom we think mistaken—until the day we die. This is also part of why I believe I am more reluctant than Schwitzgebel to conclude that introspective disagreements persist even when conditions are “most favorable” to introspection. For I would say that conditions are *most favorable* only when we have examined the distinctions shaping our judgment, and our understanding of them, and heeded them adequately to declare nothing serious can be had from doing more of this. And I *am* skeptical about determining conclusively that this condition has been fulfilled.

Finally, this leads me to comment briefly on Schwitzgebel’s characterization of my own approach to the study of consciousness. Referencing my writings, together with those of William James, Julian Jaynes, Daniel Dennett and John Searle, he says,

“[T]he debate about the richness of experience has thus far been conducted largely impressionistically, or in terms of questionable general theories of consciousness...A version of the beep-and-interview method gives us the opportunity to explore the question in a different and maybe better way...” (pp. 233-4)

Though I am certainly grateful for the citation (and the illustrious company!), I admit I am a tiny bit apprehensive that a reader encountering this passage might come away with the idea that Siewert’s approach to consciousness consists in making hazy (impressionistic), theoretically loaded remarks about his own experience. However, I should hasten to note that Schwitzgebel also kindly glosses my approach in a way I find easier to endorse (p. 226). But let me just say for the record that, here and elsewhere, I have striven to my utmost to

discipline my description of experience with a precise critical discussion of relevant distinctions and reasoned responses to objections. And I strongly believe this kind of rigor *essential* to forming responsible judgments about large questions regarding consciousness—such as worryingly vague ones about the “richness” of experience. This is integral to what I mean by “phenomenology.”

If, despite my efforts to be precise and responsive to opposing ideas, my writings still seem impressionistic and theory-driven, it is not for want of trying to hold myself to higher standards! Anyway, I would not agree, as Schwitzgebel seems to suggest, that some version of the beeper research offers a *substitute* for what I have at least been *attempting* to do, one which will more likely allow us to resolve questions about, say, the richness of experience in a responsible fashion. For the interpretation of data often depends crucially on involved reasoned investigation of the conceptual framework that we impose, or that surfaces in reports and discussions—inquiry that involves critical reflection on one’s own experience and on what one means by what one says. I have tried to illustrate and support this point through my discussions here. And—with respect to the particular research that Schwitzgebel initiates regarding the “richness” question of *just which sensory modalities* are usually experientially active at once—it also seems to me that critical reflection on experience still has a role to play. We need to engage in Socratic introspection (if I can call it that), in order to get needed clarity about difficult notions such as: attention and “levels” (“degrees,” “amounts”) of attention, “background” experience, “indeterminacy” in experience, and the distinctness of—and relationship among—the sensory modalities. Without this, beeper methodology will get us only so far.

Now one might find irrelevant the sort of clarification of which I am so enamored. This seems to be suggested by some of Hurlburt’s comments, when he responds to Schwitzgebel’s worry that he has been too cavalier with terms like ‘awareness’ and ‘experience’ without distinguishing different ways they might be taken. Hurlburt remarks:

“My methods simply don’t address such issues... I ... explicitly try to use a variety of phrases more-or-less interchangeably, thereby indicating I do not favor any one set of advantages/connotations/implications: “Is...in your awareness?” “Do you experience...?” “Is...in your inner experience?” “Are you paying attention to...?”...My subjects are almost never confused by these terms and, like me, treat them interchangeably. It is clear enough what the questions are about that the particular label is irrelevant.” (p. 181)

However, as I have argued above, we neglect precise, explicit examination of “such issues” at a cost. For how we handle certain distinctions, and whether we heed them, can affect enormously how we use evidence to support conclusions about the abundance of visual experience, and the detail of visual imagery. For example, in the first case discussed, I argued that because of an unacknowledged ambiguity in the “was that in your awareness?” question, we

actually lose touch with what was ostensibly the topic of discussion: whether the subject had *visual experience* at a given time, and how much. And we are implicitly nudged into conflating *this* question with another—that of whether the subject was *reflectively attending to her own seeing* at the time. Meanwhile, one researcher (Hurlburt) seems to conclude that the subject has only denied having more than a little visual experience at the time in question, whereas another (Schwitzgebel) thinks she has explicitly denied having *any*. And it is unclear (to this reader at least) just why they reach those divergent conclusions, and how they understand what is being asserted or denied.

It's true that people may not feel confused when neglecting examination of the relevant distinctions. And in many ordinary contexts attention to them probably does not matter—and indeed, what we are saying or asking is often “clear enough” without all this protracted semantic fuss. All the same, such neglect can undermine our efforts, when, in a theoretical context, we want to draw conclusions about decidedly *unordinary* questions, such as “how rich is visual experience?” and “How detailed, or how indeterminate, are visual images?” What is clear enough in most contexts in which terms like ‘awareness’ and ‘experience’ appear is not *always* clear enough.

In fact, Schwitzgebel seems to agree with me that care with such distinctions is crucial to the conduct and assessment of DES research, for his concerns about Hurlburt's interviews with Melanie overlap with mine. So I think he should not suppose we can address ourselves rigorously to questions about “richness” and “detail” by foregoing entirely my project of critical phenomenology, and replacing it with some version of DES. That is not to say the two efforts must be *antagonistic*. In fact, we can see my approach as continuous with the sort of questioning that Hurlburt rightly recognizes as necessary. And far from supposing I can ignore the sort of research he does or dismiss its relevance, I have done my best to learn from it. While admittedly I have focused here on restraining the use of DES to drastically depopulate consciousness, I hope it is clear that I do not aim to undermine it generally. If my criticisms have been well-reasoned, they may only show Hurlburt's method better suited to help demonstrate that certain contested forms of experience (such as imageless thought) *are* prevalent, than that those commonly claimed (visual experience) are *not*. And I cannot overemphasize how strongly I agree with his belief in the necessity of interview, and his conviction that mere questionnaires cannot expose self-conceptions that deserve our credence, in the absence of direct dialogue.