



## Commentary

## Introspection, isolation, and construction: Mentality as activity. Commentary on Hurlburt, Heavey & Kelsey (2013). “Toward a phenomenology of inner speaking” ☆



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“...our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood; so that, if we would come to the specific characters of them, we must go some other way to work.” *Tristram Shandy*, Vol. 1. Chapter 23.

Although DES is an ingenious and valuable technique, we have doubts that it can achieve quite what it claims to achieve. Our reservations stem from distorting effects produced by the observational stance DES asks subjects to adopt when trying to isolate their “pristine” experiences—as well as the passive model of mentality such a technique presupposes. Our worry is that these two features of DES, rather than serving to isolate or disclose the target explanandum in a high fidelity manner, instead potentially *construct* it—thus handing over an experience for investigation that may be high in fidelity but low in descriptive accuracy (i.e., insofar as it is a faithful characterization of the original experience as lived through). While difficulties with introspective analysis are noted (Hurlburt, Heavey, & Kelsey, 2013, p. 1479), it is nevertheless assumed that introspection and memory (i.e., of the experience just as it has passed) are sufficient to grant access to high fidelity reports of minimally altered experiences.

But why should we assume that an introspective stance is a descriptively neutral way of gaining access to mental contents? After all, we do not normally witness our experiences from a distance the way we observe a play from a seat in the theater; rather, we actively inhabit them—we live *through* them, onto the world and the situations we find ourselves in. In other words, experiences are not discrete inner entities we relate *to*; they are, rather, *relational*. Experiences are ongoing processes of orienting ourselves to the world, and the people and things in it. When we see the expressionless face of a stranger as we board the subway, savor the richness of whisky as it rolls around on our tongue, hear a familiar voice call out to us in a crowded shopping center, or feel the sudden jolt of a pothole as we drive along a road in need of repair, we are not first conscious of an inner sense datum representing features of an external world. We are conscious of the world itself.

Our worry, then, is not merely the concern (widely noted) that introspection is often an unreliable guide to experience (cf. Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007; Vermersch, 1999). Even less is our concern that the verbal reports of introspected experience can never fully do the experience justice. Our concern, rather, is that introspection constructs the “pristine” mental phenomena it purports to discover. Thus, when subjects are made to adopt an artificially passive and observational stance on their experiences, and then issue reports (guided by the interviewer), they transform what are initially world-directed vehicles dynamically lived through into objectified contents abstracted from the concrete relations and context that are part of their essential nature. This transformation is more than a “minimal alteration”.

Our concern can be further highlighted by looking at how DES appears to downplay or overlook the relation between experience and agency. DES presupposes a kind of experiential atomism: the existence of neatly-circumscribed, ready-made

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experiences lying in wait to be discovered and reported in high fidelity. But this atomistic way of thinking about experience misses the central role that agency plays in constituting and sustaining experience. This is because mentality is an activity; the sort of minds we *have* are shaped by the sorts of things we *do*. We experience the world through ongoing patterns of exploratory activities; perception and action are coupled. Beliefs, desires, and intentions do not suddenly arise within us as pre-formed mental constructs. We actively sustain them, giving them content, shape and character by committing to them, acting on them, and altering or revising them in the face of further evidence and experience. Even emotions and affect reflect the input of our agency. We enact the evaluative trajectory of an anger, for example, by raising our voice, clenching our fists and (literally and figuratively) digging in our heels; alternatively, we actively suppress it by taking a deep breath and redirecting our attention to more pleasant thoughts. This is not to deny the existence of some passive mental happenings (e.g., aches, pains, twinges, itches, tickles, urges, disgust, sudden flashes of insight or inspiration, etc.). Even in these cases, however, the character of these experiences is profoundly altered by what we *do* with them. And the point, ultimately, is that these cases of passive experience are the exception, and not the rule.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that there is no value in introspective analysis generally, and in DES in particular. As conscious subjects, we do have inner lives—and introspective reports (particularly by attentive, well-trained subjects) can often tell us interesting things about what goes over the course of these inner lives. In particular, the application of DES to inner speaking sheds new and interesting light on the nature, frequency, and individual differences in the frequency, of inner speaking. However, for the reasons we have discussed, we should remain mindful that introspective methods can only ever give us a limited perspective on the experience of the situated, active mind.

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### **References**

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