

Unsymbolized thinking is a clearly defined phenomenon: A reply to Persaud

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Consciousness and Cognition, 2008. doi:10.1016/j.concog.2008.07.004

Persaud (this issue) does a service by raising important and frequently asked questions about unsymbolized thinking (Hurlburt & Akhter, this issue). First, he asks whether in unsymbolized thinking people merely know what they are *thinking about* but not what they are *thinking*. Our answer is decidedly *No*. Abigail, an example from Hurlburt & Akhter (this issue), was not merely *thinking about* Julio's truck; she was specifically wondering whether Julio would be driving that truck or his car when he picked her up that afternoon. Dorothy, for example, was not merely *thinking about* her feet; she was specifically thinking that her foot dragging sounded like an old lady, even to the point of being able to discriminate *it sounds* like an old lady from *I sound* like an old lady, even though no words were present. The same can be said about the Benito, Charlene, and Diane examples cited by Hurlburt and Akhter (this issue). It is therefore striking that Persaud would ask a question that, we think, is answered by all the examples of the original paper. How can that be explained? Perhaps our paper wasn't clear. Perhaps Persaud wasn't adequately attentive. More likely, it seems to us, is that this is symptomatic of the pervasive presupposition, that we described in Hurlburt & Akhter (this issue), against accepting the existence of the experience of unsymbolized and yet differentiated thinking.

Second, Persaud asks why people have difficulty determining the form of their thoughts, why they need to be interviewed at all about the characteristics of their thinking. Our answer is that most people are not skilled observers of their own phenomena, that the DES interview is needed to train subjects to make more skillful observations. Persaud's consideration/revision of the E.M. Forster quotation provides an example that illustrates why skills must be acquired if phenomena are to be observed and reported faithfully. When Persaud transforms Forster's "How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?" into "How can I tell *how* I think till I see what I say?", it seems on the surface that he is simply changing Forster's focus from the content (*what* I think) to the form (*how* I think). But, apparently without noticing, Persaud is also changing the meaning of the word "think." In the original Forster quotation, "to think" means "to have an opinion"; the original Forster was saying that his opinions become clarified by the act of writing about them. In this original-Forster sense, to think is to have an enduring point of view (e.g., global warming is a serious issue) that will be more or less the same tomorrow as it is today. However, in Persaud's revision of Forster, "to think" means "to have currently in mind"; the Persaud-revised Forster is asking about the phenomenal characteristics of the current mind-contents. In this revised-Forster sense, to think is to engage in a momentary activity (e.g., seeing a mental image of Al Gore, in gray suit and open-collared blue shirt, pointing with his left hand to a photo of a barren Mount Kilimanjaro, understood to be a recreation of a scene from the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*) that will differ dramatically from one second to the next.

This distinction between thinking-as-enduring-opinion and thinking-as-momentary-act is of fundamental importance, both ontologically and

phenomenologically, and is made difficult by the fact that the word “think” is used for the two fundamentally different entities. To make such distinctions carefully is vitally important to any phenomenological investigation and to DES in particular. Persaud asks why DES needs an interview, and the answer, as he demonstrates, is that people need to be trained to make such distinctions. We believe that that training is usually best done iteratively, over a series of DES expositional interviews (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006; Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006). Unsymbolized thinking, for example, refers to an important particular phenomenal characteristic of thinking-as-momentary-act, but has no relationship whatsoever to thinking-as-enduring-opinion. If unsymbolized thinking is to be discovered by a phenomenological investigation (such as by DES), subjects will have to be trained (as by the DES expositional interview) to distinguish skillfully between these two kinds of thinking.

Third, Persaud asks how the act of reporting the form of thoughts affects the recall of those thoughts; he suggests that laboratory tasks might be undertaken to explore this question. We agree that any method of exploration (including DES) colors the discovered phenomena to some degree, and we entirely agree with the desirability of triangulating our observations with other disparate methods. This question is a major theme of the debate between Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel (2007), in which Schwitzgebel repeatedly calls for objective exploration of inner experience and Hurlburt acknowledges the potential value of such exploration. But Hurlburt cautions (in chap. 11, particularly pp. 274-276 of Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007) that to be useful, such laboratory/objective explorations need to be informed by a careful exploration of the phenomena under consideration.

Beyond responding to the specific questions Persaud has raised, we wish to draw attention to a feature of his comment that we think reflects an important and common misunderstanding of the DES method. He summarized the DES method like this: “They randomly interrupted thoughts as they occurred in everyday life with a beeper and had people describe the thoughts they were just having.” We did not interrupt “thoughts”; we interrupted *people* (who may or may not have been having thoughts), and we did not have them “describe the thoughts they were just having,” we had them describe the *experiences* they were just having (which may or may not have included thoughts).

These are important distinctions for two reasons, one substantive and the other methodological. Substantively, Persaud’s way of characterizing DES probably reflects the common presupposition that thoughts are what is most important about inner experience. Hurlburt himself knows that presupposition well: when he first started using beepers in the 1970s, he called his method “thought sampling,” and then “cognition sampling,” and then (beginning to see the incompleteness of this presupposition) “thought and mood sampling.” Only after about a decade of substantial work was he secure in the notion that whereas thoughts were indeed important, they were not necessarily the *most* important features of inner experience, and he began referring to his work as “experience sampling.”

Methodologically, it is, we think, a large (although frequent) mistake to ask subjects to describe the thoughts they were just having. Making that request presumes that people are always “just having” thoughts, and that, we believe, is not true. Examination of the original data summarized by Heavey and Hurlburt (2008) shows that in approximately 25% of all beeped moments, there was nothing ongoing that might

reasonably be called a thought. Two of their 30 subjects had no experienced cognition whatsoever in 60% of their beeped moments. An investigation that asks subjects to report the thoughts they were just having is likely always to get reports of thoughts even when thoughts are not occurring. That is a problematic way to build a science of experience.

References

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