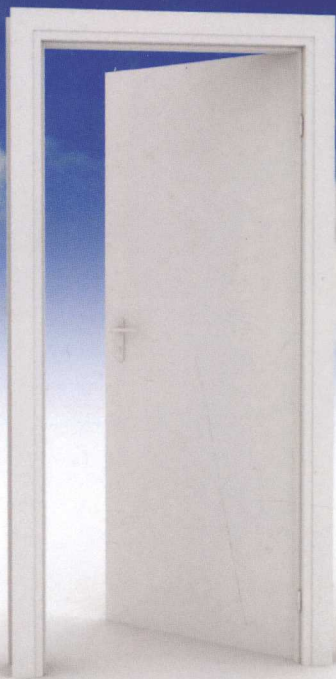


Investigating Pristine Inner Experience



MOMENTS OF TRUTH

Russell T. Hurlburt

AMBRIDGE



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Investigating Prisoner Experience

MOMENTS OF TRUTH

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INVESTIGATING PRISTINE INNER EXPERIENCE

You live your entire waking life immersed in your inner experiences (thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc.) – private phenomena created by you, just for you, your own way. Despite their intimacy and ubiquity, you probably don't know the characteristics of your own inner phenomena; neither does psychology or consciousness science.

Investigating Pristine Inner Experience explores how to apprehend inner experience in high fidelity. This book will transform your view of your own inner experience, awaken you to experiential differences between people, and thereby reframe your thinking about psychology and consciousness science, which banned the study of inner experience for most of a century and yet continued to recognize its fundamental importance.

The author, a pioneer in using beepers to explore inner experience, draws on his thirty-five years of studies to provide fascinating and provocative views of everyday inner experience and experience in bulimia, adolescence, the elderly, schizophrenia, Tourette Syndrome, virtuosity, and so on.

Russell T. Hurlburt pioneered the investigation of inner experience, inventing (in 1973) the beepers that launched “thought sampling,” the attempt to measure characteristics of inner experience. Despite the sophistication of his thought-sampling measurements, Hurlburt concluded (by about 1980) that science needed a better understanding of inner phenomena themselves. Therefore he developed “Descriptive Experience Sampling” (DES), the attempt to apprehend inner experience in high fidelity. That has led to four books: *Sampling Normal and Schizophrenic Inner Experience* (1990), *Sampling Inner Experience in Disturbed Affect* (1993), *Exploring Inner Experience* (with Chris Heavey, 2006), and *Describing Inner Experience: Proponent Meets Skeptic* (with Eric Schwitzgebel, 2007). A special issue of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (January 2011) was devoted to DES. Hurlburt is Professor of Psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and is also the author of a highly regarded statistics textbook, *Comprehending Behavioral Statistics* (fourth edition 2006).

PREFACE

Here's a thought experiment: I have invented a machine I call the Expero. You strap yourself inside, like an astronaut into a rocket, except the Expero takes you to someone's *inner* space, not outer space. You get to choose a person, called the Objective – maybe a friend, or a lover, or a celebrity, or a perfect stranger. The Expero personnel painlessly, safely, and surreptitiously slip tiny electrodes into the Objective's brain and heart while the Objective continues going about her everyday business as if nothing had happened. When you, safely in the Expero, push a button, the electrodes transmit to you in high fidelity a moment of the Objective's thoughts, feelings, and sensations – you get to think, feel, and sense exactly what she happened to be experiencing at the instant you pushed the button. Push the button again and you get another helping of her inner experience. The thought experiment is: Would you queue up for a chance to ride the Expero?

This book is for those who answer yes. The Expero doesn't exist, sorry to say, but the idea that the Expero would lead to fascinating discoveries exists widely. People have been fascinated by inner experience ever since there were people: The earliest known writings (*Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*) described the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Psychology was founded on the attempt to “introspect” the contents of consciousness, an attempt so problematic that the mere mention of “introspection” or “consciousness” became psychological heresy for most of the twentieth century.

In the early 1970s, I began to consider how to investigate inner experience in a scientifically adequate manner. In 1973 I invented a random beeper (Hurlburt, 1976) and, in 1974, began to use beepers in psychological research (Klinger and Csikszentmihalyi, working independently, launched similar studies using pagers within a few months). I called my method “random sampling of cognitions” (or “thought sampling” for short): Subjects carried beepers into their natural environments and, at the time of the random beeps, described their thinking by filling out a series of Likert scales, which I subjected to a

variety of sophisticated analyses (correlational, factor analytic, etc.). The methods that are now called the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) and Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) are quite similar to thought sampling; such methods are now considered at the cutting edge of mainstream psychology.

By the early 1980s, as the result of ten years of research, I had concluded that (a) the understanding of inner experience was indeed central to psychology; (b) ecological validity such as provided by beepers in natural environments was necessary to the understanding of inner experience; (c) therefore thought sampling and similar methods were the best psychology had to offer for the exploration of experience; but (d) thought sampling and similar methods had not and probably could not productively investigate inner experience until an adequate exploration of the phenomena of experience had been accomplished.

So in the early 1980s I abandoned thought sampling and set about creating a new method aimed directly at exploring the phenomena of inner experience. That method has come to be called Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES), which uses beepers to trigger the careful description of phenomena. *Investigating Pristine Inner Experience* demonstrates that the apprehension of inner experience can be fascinating and that modern psychology has not adequately attended to the methodological requirements that the investigation of experience imposes. That is, *Investigating Pristine Inner Experience* shows why psychological and consciousness science must go through the same kind of transformation that I personally underwent in the early 1980s: Science must learn how better to explore psychological phenomena *and only then* to operationalize and measure psychological constructs. *Investigating Pristine Inner Experience* therefore suggests a far-reaching rejuvenation of psychological science. It contains, to be sure, a criticism of modern psychological method, but that criticism is always constructive. Alongside every criticism I show what I think is a better way, based on DES investigations I've been performing for thirty years.

I hope in *Investigating Pristine Inner Experience* to show you what it takes to apprehend inner experience in high fidelity. I hope to demonstrate that many people, probably most people, including many if not most consciousness scientists and very likely you, are mistaken about the nature of their own inner experience and that of others. I hope to reveal some genuinely fascinating and entirely surprising features of inner experience.

All of that may seem a lot to ask from the description of a few beeped moments. However, if you will meet me in Chapter 1 and let me walk with you through these experiences, I think you will come out at the other end with a changed perspective on moments of experience and on psychological and consciousness science.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is built around the investigation of moments of pristine experience. Those experiences are always personal and private, often unforeseen in form or content, sometimes embarrassing or unflattering, occasionally unnerving or unsettling. To you who willingly shared in the struggle to be forthright about moments of your experience, I am deeply grateful; I have tried to honor your participation, to deserve your trust, to help us keep our footing in difficult terrain. I have learned from you and been deeply moved by you. To those whose names I have used, I thank you and trust that the reader will respect the courage you have shown by allowing others a glimpse into inherently private matters.

I am indebted to Chris Heavey, who has been a trusted colleague and collaborator as we have tried to sort through this subject matter; to Marta Meana, the foil for many discussions about issues at the core of this book and a thorough reviewer of an earlier draft; to Sarah A. Akhter, whose influence can be felt throughout the book; to Eric Schwitzgebel, who honed my thinking with his good-natured, precise, and persistent requests for refinement; to Susan Stuart, who helped me grapple with some core issues; and to the students at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who had the courage to venture into the unknown.

I am grateful to my coauthors Heavey, Akhter, Ricardo Cobo, Sharon Jones-Forrester, Michael J. Kane, and Arva Bensaheb for their substantial contributions to this work.

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Moments of Truth

[A warm mid-July evening, clear with high clouds. Sunset, bright oranges and golds. Jack and Jennifer stand on the beach, holding hands. Quiet and still.]

JENNIFER: "What are you thinking?"

JACK: "Right now?"

JENNIFER: "Yeah!"

JACK: "Just how spectacular the sunset is – and about sharing it with you."

JENNIFER: "Me too." [Leans closer to him.]

The omniscient being knows that at the moment Jennifer began to ask "What are you thinking?" Jack was seeing in his imagination Barry Bonds-at-bat in the All-Star Game he had been watching when Jennifer suggested walking to the beach to see the sunset. As he had clicked off the TV, Bonds was just coming to bat with a man on second. Now, as they stood on the beach, Jack was, in his imagination, seeing Bonds as if seen from the pitcher's mound, seeing Bonds tap the front of the plate with his bat, seeing his left elbow rock high in the air as he prepared for the pitch, hearing the crowd roar. The omniscient being knows that Jack's experience was, at that moment, totally absorbed in Bonds's at-bat, knows that Jennifer's question interrupted Jack's Bonds-at-bat experience and brought the sunset and Jennifer into the foreground of Jack's experience.

The omniscient being also knows that at the moment Jennifer began to ask "What are you thinking?" Jennifer was feeling a dryness in her throat and a caving-in sensation in her chest – a worry/guilt/tension about whether someone had told Jack that she had flirted with the sales rep that afternoon. The omniscient being knows that when Jennifer asked "What are you thinking?" her real question was whether Jack knew about her flirting.

Jack did not tell Jennifer about his real chain of inner experiences. Jennifer did not tell Jack about her real chain of inner experiences.

PRISTINE INNER EXPERIENCE

This little melodrama illustrates that quite a lot happens in Jack's experience in the second it takes Jennifer to ask, "What are you thinking?" Jack's experience changes from innerly seeing Bonds-at-bat to something about the sunset and Jennifer. Let's call Jack's Bonds-at-bat experience his *pristine inner experience*. By *inner experience* I mean directly apprehended ongoing experience, that which directly presents itself "before the footlights of consciousness" (as William James would say) at some particular moment. A thought, a feeling, a tickle, a seeing, a hearing, and so on count as experience by this definition. Seeing a baseball player in your imagination is an experience; seeing the orange-and-gold of a real sunset is an experience. Elsewhere (Hurlburt, 2009; Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007) I have explained why I refer to this as *inner* experience when it includes things like seeings, hearings, smellings of the outside world, but let's not get distracted by terminology yet. Here suffice it to say that inner experience means directly experienced, apprehended directly before the footlights of consciousness. Sometimes, when there is little room for ambiguity, I will refer to inner experience as simply "experience."

By *pristine* I mean naturally occurring in natural, everyday environments, *not* altered, colored, or shaped by the specific intention to apprehend it (Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006). I use *pristine* in the same sense as we would say a forest is pristine – before the loggers clear-cut, before the Park Service installs the walkways and the signage, before the visitors leave their plastic bags and bottles. Pristine does not necessarily mean "clean" or "tranquil"; much of a pristine forest is mucky, bloody, brutal, and so on. Jack's pristine inner experience at the moment Jennifer's question begins is his innerly seeing Bonds-at-bat. Jennifer's pristine inner experience at that moment is her throat-dryness and chest-pressure, and her worry about whether Jack knows about her flirting.

Jack's reply to Jennifer ("Just how spectacular the sunset is – and about sharing it with you.") is *not* a description of his pristine inner experience; let's say it is about his *reported «experience»*. Let's examine Jack's pristine experience first; then we'll return to his reported «experience». For now we need only observe that in the second it takes Jennifer to ask her question, Jack's pristine inner experience disappears, chased away by Jennifer's question and his response to it, and is replaced by his reported «experience».

Bonds-at-bat was, at the moment Jennifer began her question, arguably the most interesting thing in the universe for Jack. At that moment, Jack's pristine experience could have been focused on the orange-and-gold of the sunset (but it wasn't); he could have been focused on the warmth of Jennifer's hand in his (but he wasn't); he could have been remembering Obama's speech at the 2004 convention (but he wasn't); he could have been focusing on the story he had heard about Jennifer with the sales rep (but he wasn't). Out of the millions

of things that Jack could have been experiencing at that moment, Jack created a seeing of Bonds-at-bat.

We mustn't make too much of one moment of Jack's pristine experience. His at-that-moment creation of Bonds-at-bat does not necessarily imply that he prefers baseball to Jennifer. Jack created, say, 200 moments of pristine experience between the clicking off of the TV and the setting of the sun; maybe (as known to the omniscient being) this was the only moment that happened to involve the All-Star Game, and Jack's other 199 moments had been occupied by enjoying the sunset and being with Jennifer. Or maybe he's been thinking about the All-Star Game in nearly every moment, the imaginary seeing of the game alternating with resentment over the interruption. Or maybe this thinking about the All-Star Game was (finally!) a relief that replaced his insecurity over Jennifer's flirtation. The omniscient being knows about the stream of Jack's pristine experiences; we can't know from this one snippet.

But we mustn't make too little of it, either. Jack's pristine experiences are his creations, one momentary experience after the next, created by Jack himself, created for Jack alone, created just how Jack created it at that moment, not tied to or constrained by reality or by anyone else. Seeing Bonds-at-bat is a moment of truth about Jack's by-Jack/for-Jack/how-Jack pristine experience. It embodies Jack's interest at that moment, displays that interest in precisely the way Jack knows how to – and does – display it. This Bonds-at-bat is created by Jack for Jack, just how Jack creates it and understands it. There is no producer, screenwriter, or director standing between Jack and his experience, interpreting Bonds-at-bat for Jack – Jack is his own producer/screenwriter/director of his experience. There is no viewer or critic other than Jack himself – no fellow viewers with whom to compare notes. Even granting that Jack was to think about the All-Star Game, there was no necessity for him to *see* Bonds or to see anything – he could have been *talking* to himself about the All-Star Game (but he wasn't – he was *seeing* it). Even granting that he was seeing Bonds, there was no necessity for Jack to be seeing him from the pitcher's mound, or that the seeing was in motion – it could have been more like a snapshot (but it wasn't); it could have been a silent seeing without crowd noise (but it wasn't); it could have been in black-and-white (but it wasn't). *Everything about this momentary pristine experience is Jack*: created by Jack, created for Jack, created just how Jack creates it, created free of any real-world constraints (although perhaps reflecting some aspects of the real world).

Jack lives his life occupied by a series of these moments of personal truth, pristine experiences well and truly created by, of, and for Jack. These moments of truth are Jack's property, his own private way of apprehending the world of reality and imagination. There is no one telling Jack that it would be better if he saw Bonds-at-bat from the batter's perspective, no one saying "Rewind that – I want to see it again," no one else clicking Jack's experience to a different channel. Jack sees Bonds-at-bat *exactly* Jack's way until Jack's interest takes him elsewhere.

«EXPERIENCE» IS NOT EXPERIENCE

When Jennifer asks “What are you thinking?” Jack could have described his pristine experience, could have said, “I was imaginarily seeing Barry Bonds at the plate in the All-Star Game, as if I were seeing him from the pitcher’s mound.” But he didn’t. Instead he «described» his «experience» of the spectacular sunset. It may seem that describing Bonds-at-bat and «describing» the spectacular sunset are two very similar occurrences, but nothing could be further from the truth. Jack’s seeing Bonds-at-bat is a moment of pristine experience – something that Jack directly apprehended, something that presented itself directly to Jack, something that appeared directly before the footlights of Jack’s consciousness – and therefore it makes perfect sense to say that Jack could *describe* his Bonds-at-bat *experience*. However, the spectacular sunset was *not* a moment of pristine experience, was not directly before the footlights of Jack’s consciousness, was not directly experienced by Jack in the moment about which Jennifer inquired (he was absorbed in Bonds-at-bat, not the sunset). Therefore, *it is not possible* for Jack to describe his pristine experience of the spectacular sunset – there *was no pristine experience* of the spectacular sunset to be described. Therefore, I have put «describing» and «experience» in angle braces to indicate that “Just how spectacular the sunset is – and about sharing it with you” *appears* to be a description of experience but is in fact not a description and not of experience.

Q: That’s not fair. By the time Jennifer gets to the *end* of her question, Jack had a direct experience of the sunset – Jack stopped experiencing Bonds-at-bat and started experiencing the sunset. So both are experiences; the only difference is that one is a second or so after the other.

A: It is indeed *possible* that Jennifer’s question caused Jack immediately to experience the sunset. If so, seeing the sunset is not his *pristine* experience – it is his experience *after* Jennifer asks him to inspect his experience. And it is not the experience about which Jennifer presumably inquired – “What are you thinking?” is not a question about what his experience *will* be as he tries to respond to her question. Furthermore, it is possible that Jack’s experience did *not* shift immediately to the sunset but rather involved a series of experience-lets that may be characterized by *Oh! I can’t tell her I’m thinking about the game! I’m still mad to have been forced to leave the game. What does she want me to say?!? Ah yeah! She said let’s go see the sunset. Of course! The sunset!* In that case, the sunset itself might never have been directly experienced.

It is also possible that Jack’s experience *ceases to exist* for the second or so that is required to say “Just how spectacular the sunset is – and about sharing it with you.” Jennifer’s question might have triggered a *mélange* of processes, like those characterized above but also about how much he trusts Jennifer to recognize that this moment may or may not be typical of his other moments, by how he wants to present himself to her, about how Jennifer’s friends might react if she were to tell them he was thinking about baseball, about what

Jennifer's mother might think, about what Jack's friends would say, and so on. However, none of those processes are necessarily *experienced* in that second where Jack is required to say *something* in response to Jill's query. There may well be no direct experience at all in that interval (hold your fire on this point until after Chapter 9).

Thus it is likely that Jack's [I'm thinking about] "just how spectacular the sunset is" is an impure mixture of his real experiences and fabrications, aimed at some impure take on what Jennifer really wants to hear and what he supposes she wants to hear. There is no easy and probably no possible way of sorting through the strands that twist and melt together to contribute to what Jack says.

APPREHENDING PRISTINE EXPERIENCE

Jack's pristine experience is Jack for Jack by Jack how Jack. It is pure Jack, an elixir, eau de Jack. Jack's innerly seeing Bonds-at-bat is one drop of pure Jack. Jack's reported «experience» is a mess, an inextricable combination of Jack and not Jack, of Jennifer and the Jennifer of Jack's imagination, of Jennifer's friends and mother (both of reality and of Jack's imagination), of Jack's experience and supposition.

Pristine experience exists only one drop at a time – one momentary experience after another – but there are lots of drops – twenty or thirty a minute, maybe. If the omniscient being revealed a dozen randomly selected drops of Jack's pristine experience between the clicking off of the TV and the setting of the sun, a dozen pure Jack-for-by-how-Jack moments, then we'd have some insight into whether the All-Star Game dominated his experience, whether he was angry, hurt, or neither about Jennifer's flirting. If the omniscient being revealed enough randomly selected moments of truth over a long enough period, we could know with some assurance whether imaginarily re-created seeings dominate Jack's experience; we could know quite a lot about Jack.

With this little melodrama, and with this entire book, I'm trying to deepen our appreciation of Jack by/for/how Jack, of what pristine inner experience is and is not. Here's what the melodrama suggests (it doesn't prove or demonstrate anything – that is the task of the remainder of the book):

- Precisely defining the moment is of fundamental importance. In a second or so, Jack's pristine Bonds-at-bat experience is replaced by an inextricable mess.
- Carefully defining experience is of fundamental importance. Jack's pristine Bonds-at-bat experience is fundamentally different from Jack's spectacular-sunset «experience».
- There is some important technique involved in the apprehending of experience. Jennifer's asking Jack about his experience was not good enough to reveal his pristine experience.

I also observe that Jack's pristine experiences are Jack's alivenesses, Jack's scintillations, Jack's idiosyncratic Jack-y-nesses, Jack before he puts on the mask and filters that hide/distort some, much, most, or all of his pristine experience from external view. At that moment, pure Jack was *interested* in Bonds-at-bat. Of the millions of things he could have been interested in at that moment, he created Bonds-at-bat.

Pristine experience is fundamentally interesting because we know what we're talking about. Jack's Bonds-at-bat is pure Jack. Otherwise, we don't know what we're talking about. When Jack says "Just how spectacular the sunset is," we don't know whether we're talking about Jack, or Jennifer, or Jennifer's friends or mother, or some mush of all of them together.

All we need is an omniscient being to reveal Jack's pristine experience, but as it happens, no omniscient being is forthcoming. Jack for Jack by Jack how Jack remains Jack's private, confidential preserve; if we're interested in it, we'll have to ask Jack to tell us about it.

Q: Isn't "asking him about it" just what Jennifer did? Yet you criticized that thoroughly.

A: No it isn't. Jennifer did *not* ask Jack about his pristine experience. Instead, she expressed, in a disguised manner, her worry about being caught flirting. She used words that *sounded like* an inquiry about Jack's pristine experience, but were not *in fact* an inquiry about his pristine experience.

Jack and Jennifer engaged (knowingly or otherwise) in a collusion about inner experience: Jennifer used words that seemed to be asking about Jack's inner experience (but weren't really) in the expectation that Jack would respond in a way that seemed to be answering about his inner experience (but wasn't really), so that both could avoid revealing their actual pristine experience.

This book is about the possibility of structuring situations in which Jack (and others) can tell us in pretty darn high fidelity about his pristine experience. This telling will doubtless fall short by the omniscient being's standards, but I'm pretty sure we can learn how to talk about *mostly* Jack for, by, and how Jack. We'll have to develop some skills in doing so, learn to avoid the misrepresentations and disguised interests à la Jennifer, figure out how to develop Jack into being a good describer of his pristine experience, to earn his trust, to teach him what pristine experience is and is not, to separate out pristine experience from other candidates for conversation. And we will have to discover whether such a structuring is worth the effort.

I'm convinced that it is possible to get pretty darn faithful descriptions of pristine experience. I assure you that encountering Jack for/by/how Jack is a fascinating endeavor, fascinating for Jack himself and fascinating for the explorer. I hope to demonstrate that fascination in this book. I hope to demonstrate that describing Jack for/by/how Jack is necessary for a science that concerns itself with persons and/or with experience.

Q: Are you claiming that Jack's pristine experience reveals the *essence* of Jack?

A: No. There may well be important aspects of Jack that do not figure directly in his pristine experience. Pristine experience is a fascinating view of the true Jack, not necessarily a complete view of the essence of Jack.

Catch-484

In a *Catch-22*, you have to do *X* before you can do *Y*, but it is impossible to do *Y* before you have done *X*. Webster's example is that you can't publish a book before you have an agent, but it is impossible to get an agent before you have published a book. *Moments of Truth* reflects a second-order Catch-22 (perhaps we should call it a Catch-22² or a Catch-484): It is impossible to understand moments before you have understood truth and experience; it is impossible to understand truth before you have understood moments and experience; and it is impossible to understand experience before you have understood moments and truth.

Q: It is impossible, ultimately, to access these moments from the outside. Right? Isn't all this an approximation at best?

A: Yes, but this book will show how we might increase the fidelity of our approximations.

The way out of a Catch-484 (this applies also to a Catch-22) is to start anywhere, but start small. Start with a little bit of *X* so that then you can understand a little bit of *Y*, so that then you can understand a little bit of *Z*, so that then you can understand a bit more of *X* and then a bit more of *Y*, and so on. It is a screwy (meant literally) approach; each turn of the screw takes you a little deeper, a little more securely, into exactly the same *X*, *Y*, *Z*, *X*, *Y*, *Z*, *X*, *Y*, *Z* place that you started from. There is no progress, except in depth. This approach requires patience because of the appearance of lack of progress and repetitive redundancy. However, that appearance is deceptive: There is indeed progress, but it is downward, into security.

I adopt this approach in this book and beg for patience from the reader. Our Jack/Jennifer melodrama serves as the first turn of the screw. That melodrama was a fiction, meant to soften us up, to whet our appetites for a sustained interest in the facts of inner experience and its exploration. It introduced us to *X* (the importance of precisely defining moments), to *Y* (what is and is not experience), and to *Z* (that some methodological sophistication will be required). Those early turns of any screw are very insecure – it's easy to aim a dismissive argument at the Jack-and-Jennifer melodrama and knock the screw clean out. The deeper into the book you go, however, the harder it will be to dismiss.