

Phil 490: *Consciousness and the Self*

Handout [18]

Eric Schwitzgebel: *The Unreliability of Naive Introspection*

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§ Main Theses:

1. We are prone to gross error, even in favorable circumstances of extended reflection, about our own ongoing conscious experience, our current phenomenology. Even in this apparently privileged domain, our self-knowledge is faulty and untrustworthy.
2. Most people are poor introspectors of their own ongoing conscious experience. Infallible judgments about ongoing mental states are simply banal cases of self-fulfillment.

§ Skepticism of Current Conscious Experience

Where is the skeptic who says: We have no reliable means of learning about our own ongoing conscious experience, our current imagery, our inward sensations – we are as in the dark about that as about anything else, perhaps even more in the dark?

Though infallibilism – the view that we cannot err in our judgments about our own current conscious experience – is now largely out of favor, mainstream philosophical criticism of it is surprisingly meek.

§ Problems with Introspective Reports

Claim: Most people are poor introspectors of their own ongoing conscious experience.

Examples:

We fail not just in assessing the causes of our mental states or the processes underwriting them; and not just in our judgments about non-phenomenal mental states like traits, motives, and skills; and not only when we are distracted, or passionate, or inattentive, or self-deceived, or pathologically deluded, or when we're reflecting about minor matters, or about the past, or only for a moment, or where fine discrimination is required. We are both ignorant and prone to error. There are major lacunae in our self-knowledge that are not easily repaired; and we make gross, enduring mistakes about even the most basic features of our currently ongoing conscious experience (or "phenomenology"), even in favorable circumstances of careful reflection, with distressing regularity. We either err or stand perplexed, depending – rather superficially, I suspect – on our mood and caution.

1. Emotions

Even the grossest features of emotional experience largely elude us. Reflection doesn't remove our ignorance, or it delivers haphazard results.

2. Visual Experience

Most naive introspectors are badly mistaken about their visual phenomenology when they first reflect on it, when they aren't warned and coached against a certain sort of error, even though they may be patiently considering that experience as it occurs. If naive introspectors are as wrong as they seem to be, as wrong as they later confess they are, about the clarity and stability of visual experience, they're wrong about an absolutely fundamental and pervasive aspect of their sensory consciousness.

3. Pain sensation

The case of pain is not always as clear as sometimes supposed. There's confusion between mild pains and itches or tingles. There's the football player who sincerely denies he's hurt. There's the difficulty we sometimes feel in locating pains precisely or in describing their character. I see no reason to dismiss, out of hand, the possibility of genuine introspective error in these cases.

4. Inner Speech

Does inner speech typically involve not just auditory images but also motor images in the vocal apparatus? Is there an experiential distinction between inner speaking and inner hearing?

* Summary:

- (1) In my view, then, we're prone to gross error, even in favorable circumstances of extended reflection, about our ongoing emotional, visual, and cognitive phenomenology.
- (2) The introspection of current conscious experience, far from being secure, nearly infallible, is faulty, untrustworthy, and misleading – not just possibly mistaken, but massively and pervasively.

Why, then, do people tend to be so confident in their introspective judgments, especially when queried in a casual and trusting way? Here's my suspicion: Because no one ever scolds us for getting it wrong about our experience and we never see decisive evidence of error, we become cavalier. This lack of corrective feedback encourages a hypertrophy of confidence.

§ The Unreliability of Introspection

1. There are two kinds of unreliability.
 - (i) Something might be unreliable because it often goes wrong or yields the wrong result, or
 - (ii) it might be unreliable because it fails to do anything or yield any result at all.
2. Introspection is unreliable in both ways. Reflection on basic features of ongoing experience leads sometimes to error and sometimes to perplexity or indecision.
3. The self-attribution of current thought contents and emotional states (as opposed to the phenomenal form and structure of those thoughts and emotions) may be more expressive or reactive (like a spontaneous "I hate you!") or simply self-fulfilling than introspective, if we're going to be strict about what properly falls in the domain of introspection.

4. And of course the accuracy of emotional self-attribution is disputable; as, I think, is the accuracy of our self-attribution of recently past thought contents.

§ Concluding Remarks

1. Descartes had it quite backwards when he said the mind – including especially current conscious experience – was better known than the outside world.
2. My experiences flee and scatter as I reflect. I feel unpracticed, poorly equipped with the tools, categories, and skills that might help me dissect them. They are gelatinous, disjointed, swift, shy, changeable. They are at once familiar and alien.
3. Descartes thought, or is often portrayed as thinking, that we know our own experience first and most directly, and then infer from that to the external world. If that's right – if our judgments about the outside world, to be trustworthy, must be grounded in sound judgments about our experiences – then our epistemic situation is dire indeed. However, I see no reason to accept any such introspective foundationalism. Indeed, I suspect the opposite is nearer the truth: Our judgments about the world to a large extent drive our judgments about our experience. Properly so, since the former are the more secure.

I know better what's in the burrito I'm eating than I know my gustatory experience as I eat it.

