Eric Schwitzgebel
Perplexities of Consciousness.
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2011.
xii + 225 pages
$27.95 (cloth ISBN 978–0–262–01490–8)

Suppose that you want to know about the features of your conscious experience—for example, something about your current visual or tactile experience. It is natural to think that the appropriate method here is introspection: details aside, you should simply attend to the relevant features of your conscious experience, your 'phenomenology'. It is also natural to think, as various figures in the history of philosophy have, that you can trust the deliverances of introspection: that while perception, as our means for gathering information about the environment around us, can and does lead us astray, introspection is considerably more reliable and trustworthy. In this way, knowledge about certain features of your own mind—namely, the features of your conscious experience—is more secure than your knowledge about the surrounding environment.

Eric Schwitzgebel's *Perplexities of Consciousness* is a sustained critique of this picture. Through a series of case studies he argues that we know very little about many seemingly obvious features of our stream of consciousness, and that it may not be possible to improve upon this unfortunate epistemic situation, either through improved introspective methods or by appealing to psychophysical science. His targets include our knowledge of the following: the coloration of dreams (Chapter 1); the experience of depth and how things visually appear (Chapter 2); conscious visual imagery (Chapter 3); human echolocatory experience (Chapter 4); the richness or 'abundance' of conscious experience (Chapter 6); emotional experience, phenomenal thought, and the breadth of the field of visual clarity (Chapter 7); visual experience with closed eyes (Chapter 8). Chapter 5 reflects on the methods for improving introspection developed by introspective psychologists in the early 20th century, but emphasizes the 'daunting obstacles for any such program' (74).

Each chapter of *Perplexities of Consciousness* can be read independently of the others, and all except for Chapter 8 draw from earlier published work. Schwitzgebel displays a formidable grasp of the relevant scientific literature, stretching from early introspective psychology through contemporary cognitive science and consciousness research. *Perplexities of Consciousness* is written in a lively and engaging manner, and apart from its skeptical ruminations, it provides an accessible entry into contemporary issues in consciousness studies, complete with extensive references for further research.

As Schwitzgebel notes (xi), certain skeptical strategies recur throughout the case studies. The first, and most prominent, emphasizes conflicting judgments about the features of conscious experience across historical periods, in distinct individuals at a given time, and within an individual across time. For example, in Chapter 1 he catalogues the disparate results generated from dream studies conducted over roughly the past hundred years, including the spike in those claiming to dream only or predominately in black and white around the middle of the 20th century. Likewise, in Chapter 6, he notes that, based at least in part on introspection, some have

concluded that experience is *abundant*, 'bristling with phenomenology in a wide range of modalities simultaneously', while others have judged that it is *sparse*, 'limited to a few things at a time' (91). Related considerations arise in the discussions of visual imagery, human echolocatory experience, phenomenal thought, and closed-eye visual experience.

Schwitzgebel argues in each case that given such disparate judgments, the most plausible conclusion is that some of the judgments must be wrong (see for example 6, 19, 41, 91–4, 127–9). In particular, he denies that the divergent judgments are plausibly attributed to conceptual differences or confusions. Likewise, Schwitzgebel denies that the disparate judgments about experience are plausibly taken to correspond to genuine differences in conscious experience or phenomenology. For example, he denies that changes in judgments about the coloration of dreams over the past hundred years should lead us to conclude that dreams themselves have changed (7–8), or that from divergent judgments about the sparseness or abundance of experience we should infer corresponding divergence in actual phenomenology. But in this case, given that we are indeed 'speaking the same language', the conclusion is that some of us must be mistaken (18), and that differences in introspectively-based reports do not reliably track differences in underlying experience (35).

The second recurring skeptical strategy consists in arguing that, aside from very obvious cases—perhaps, say, knowing that one is having visual experience at all—seemingly straightforward questions about conscious experience generate confusion and uncertainty. Consider the case of visual imagery. Suppose you close your eyes and attempt to form an image of your house. Schwitzgebel asks: 'How much of the scene can you vividly visualize at once? Can you keep the image of the chimney vividly in mind at the same time that you vividly imagine your front door, or does the image of the chimney fade as you begin to think about the door? How much detail does your image have? How stable is it? ... In general, do the objects in your image have color before you think to assign color to them, or do some colors remain indeterminate, at least for a while?' (36)

These seem to be well-formed, coherent questions about the gross aspects of what many will take to be a kind of conscious experience, the experience of visual imagery. But it is very natural to feel uncertainty about these and related questions; yet this uncertainty suggests that we can easily go wrong about our stream of consciousness. Indeed, the uncertainty is itself problematic: as far as the usefulness of introspection is concerned, failing to generate any result at all may not be much better than generating the wrong result (135).

Schwitzgebel doubts, moreover, that psychophysical research can fully alleviate these worries and so generate reliable conclusions about the relevant features of conscious experience. While his view about the interplay between introspective report and third-person psychophysics (for example, neuroscience and cognitive science) could be more fully developed, it is not hard to see why we may think that there is a problem here. A theory about the neurophysiological basis of conscious experience, for example, seems to depend on knowing what neurophysiological states correlate with which experiential states, but it is hard to see how this could be settled without appealing to introspective report. Though not entirely pessimistic, Schwitzgebel fears that this is a tight and potentially inescapable circle (113–14).

Schwitzgebel's emphasis on our divergent judgments about the features of conscious experience, and the seeming intractability of questions about the features of experience, may remind the reader of Daniel Dennett's ruminations in *Consciousness Explained* and elsewhere. What is distinctive about Schwitzgebel's position is that despite his skepticism about the reliability of introspection and our capacity to know, introspectively or otherwise, seemingly gross aspects of conscious experience, he nonetheless insists that introspection is 'possible, important, and central to the development of a scientific understanding of the mind' (118). To elaborate: given the aforementioned perplexities about consciousness, it may be tempting to follow Dennett in marginalizing the value of introspection and, indeed, questioning the very concept of consciousness at work in these perplexities. But this is not Schwitzgebel's position, and he refuses to take difficulties in forming reliable judgments about conscious experience to call into question the reality of conscious experience as such or the very coherence of the concept. In sum, consciousness is a genuine feature of the world and thus a full scientific understanding of the world requires a scientific understanding of consciousness, but a scientific understanding of consciousness requires introspection and introspection is unreliable, perhaps irremediably so.

Schwitzgebel's discussions are often exploratory, and the skeptical challenges that he raises may not be terminal. For example, the possibility of improved methods of introspection deserves further discussion, as does the possibility of third-person theory resolving introspectively irresolvable disputes (see, for example, some of the more optimistic thoughts about the interplay between first-person report and psychophysical science in Owen Flanagan's *Consciousness Reconsidered*). And some of Schwitzgebel's skeptical challenges may be more forceful, and more surprising, than others. For instance, it is not implausible to think that at least some of the problems we may have in answering questions about emotional experience may be traced to the cognitive and dispositional aspects of emotion. Indeed, the epistemological target of his challenges is not always transparent—just how unreliable are we? This is significant, for even if introspection is not infallible, we may hope that a weaker but nonetheless substantial thesis about the reliability of introspection can survive the kind of skeptical challenges that Schwitzgebel advances. Finally, and related to the previous point, aside from a few pages in Chapter 7 (130–3) Schwitzgebel has little to say about the positive considerations that have been offered in favor of the reliability of introspection.

While the aforementioned concerns warrant further discussion, *Perplexities of Consciousness* provides an important challenge to a traditional, and intuitive, view of the epistemic efficacy of introspection, and to the prospects for a successful science of consciousness and mind; it merits the attention of anyone interested in these issues.

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