

THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

A SUGGESTION TOWARD A REINTERPRETATION OF INTROSPECTION

CHANGES in general standpoint must always be followed at a considerable distance by changes in particular applications. This is especially true just at present in psychology. Even within the last decade it seems that the generally accepted standpoint in psychology has been changing from a dualism to a qualified monism. While ten years or so ago the majority of psychologists would have begun their analyses with the assumption that mind and body were two distinct entities which could be immediately known as distinct, it is probable that a statistical count would show that the greater number now accept as their starting point an experience which in itself is neither subjective nor objective. It is no longer generally asserted that there is a great gulf fixed between the mental and physical, subjective and objective, but the distinction is drawn as by Wundt in the difference of attitude that is taken toward the common experience, or the difference is made to lie, as for Külpe, in the way in which the two groups of phenomena are excited, with a slight corresponding difference in the qualities of the two processes.

Among the topics which have been largely unaffected by the changes in the general standpoint is introspection. It is still frequently treated from the older standpoint, and it would seem that its important place among psychological methods would make it worth while to attempt to reinterpret the generally accepted facts from the position of the newer theories. From the newer conception we can no longer dismiss introspection with the statement that it is the peculiar method of psychology, or be satisfied with the statement that it is by introspection alone we can turn our gaze inward upon the mental states with which psychology deals. The philosophers of experience regard both mental fact and physical fact as parts of the single datum, so that whatever observation goes on must be directed toward the same general kind of material in the same place, so far as spatial terms can be applied to the common

experience at all. And we can not regard introspection as the process of watching the mind at work from some standpoint still more removed from the external world than the mind itself. For if from the doctrine of experience the known and the knower coincide, it is still truer that the knower and the knower of the knower must be identical.

A careful observation of the actual processes involved in introspection convinces the writer that what does distinguish it from observation is simply the attitude of mind at the time the two processes run their course. To repeat Wundt's statement, when introspecting we regard the given mental processes subjectively; when observing we regard them as objective. When we regard a given experience objectively, the question in mind, expressed or implied, is as to what the object may be in itself or in relation to other objects. When we introspect, on the contrary, we ask what the experience means to us and what its relations may be to other mental processes. Exactly the same experience may, and usually does, furnish the starting point for both. If, for example, we are attracted by a distant light, we are observing so long as the problem that concerns us is the nature of the light, whether a lighthouse, a moving boat, an anchor light or a lamp in some cottage on an island. In making this determination there must come up certain definite associations that complete the bare sensation and make it take on a definite form. What associations shall come up, what the light shall mean for us, depends upon what the present mood of the observer may be, upon his knowledge of his surroundings and of his earlier experiences in general. With changing mood and growing knowledge the interpretation will change, but observation under the same condition, external and mental, always results in the same perception. To regard this same experience subjectively means to observe the first completed perception in very much the same way that the sensation was observed, and with almost identical results. As you introspect you have in mind a query as to how the perception was constituted, as to why that particular mood was present and why you saw the light as on shore rather than on sea, or why you were attracted by this particular light rather than another—in short, to work out concretely and in detail the factors that we have hinted at in the preceding sentences. With this problem in mind there must group about the perception new associations, other comparisons must be made, and the nature of this completion again will depend largely upon the problem the introspector has in mind and upon his general knowledge. In both processes the general laws are identical, and the elements involved may be very much the same. The original stimulus that occasioned the perception may still be acting, and

the associates that were called up during observation persist for the most part during the introspection. So far as the structural elements are concerned, the only difference lies in the presence of a few new associates. Functionally the difference lies merely in the mental dispositions, in the difference in the problems which are pressing forward for an answer.

The difference between the psychical dispositions of introspection and observation may be no greater than in the observation of facts from the standpoints of two objective sciences, or between the mental attitudes that are dominant in the consideration of different psychological problems. When, for instance, the biologist and the chemist regard the vital phenomena manifested by the lower animal forms, the one sees in them nothing but attraction and repulsion of ions, the other only tropisms, taxes and instincts. Both the mental attitude and the resulting interpretation are as different as in our illustration was the light as physical emanation and the perception as mass of associations. On the psychological side Professor Külpe has well illustrated the difference in his experiment on attending with two questions in mind. When, it will be remembered, the subject was asked to look at a mass of letters exposed for a brief instant and say how many letters there were, he could answer with fair accuracy, but could say very little as to what letters were exposed; but when he had been asked to say what letters there were he could answer that question, but could only say how many there were after counting in memory. It is this same difference in mental attitude, of the problem in mind, that distinguishes observation and introspection.

A solution of the question as to whether introspection may go on side by side with observation and of the validity of introspection follows from an acceptance of the interpretation of the nature of introspection. The first problem must be decided against Spiller and in harmony with the traditional belief. You can no more introspect at the same time you observe than you can look at an animal at one and the same instant as a chemist and a biologist, or at a man as friend and as physician. One point of view necessarily excludes the other if the two involve the answer to two different questions. To go back to our illustration, you can not ask what the light is and why you are interested at the same time. If you could ask why you are interested or how you know what light it is, you could learn nothing of the light itself. This again is not without its analogue in physical observation. An astronomer can not be busy wondering what correction in longitude his observation is likely to bring about as he takes his transit. If he falls into this attitude his observation is very likely to be at fault. In all scientific work the same law holds. You must first be completely attentive to the observation, to

the acquirement of data, and only concern yourself with its meaning or interpretation after the first observation is complete. The same material is involved in the observation as in its interpretation, but the attitude of mind is different in each case. This, then, it seems to the writer, is all that can be meant when we say that it is impossible to introspect a process during its course. You can not have two attitudes toward the same fact at once. In so far the traditional statement is true, and when Spiller, and others assert the contrary they are both at fault in their observation, and forget the facts concerning the distribution of the attention.

That the identification of introspection and retrospection necessarily invalidates introspection, as Spiller argues, does not in the least follow. The interval that must elapse between observation and introspection is not sufficiently great to permit the process to undergo any change; in fact, experiments prove that the lapse of a short interval renders our knowledge more rather than less adequate. Again, if it is argued that the additions which are made to the mental process in introspecting distort it, it is only necessary to answer that the associations which are added in the observation of any physical object would also similarly distort that. If introspection is to be discarded on this ground, so also must observation, and we are left with absolute scepticism. The only way we can know is by an interpretation, and that consists largely in the addition to the mental process or sensation of associations, in comparing it with other processes, in bringing it into connection with knowledge as a whole. All this does not interfere with the fact that you have had the perception or bit of reasoning for itself, nor does it destroy the truth of the mental fact, any more than it prevents the perception itself from being accepted as true because there must always be additions to the immediate sensations. You have your choice of knowing a process psychologically, of knowing it physically and of not knowing it at all, but if you are to know it there must be something added in the process; there is no escape from this but ignorance. It is useless to argue that knowing is a distortion, for the perception does not exist until known, the distortion is a part of the existence of the mental state as known psychologically, just as the physical interpretation is a part of the object as we know it physically.

It would seem, then, that introspection differs from observation only in the attitude of mind as we examine the mental process, that we can not introspect a process during its passage merely because we can not have two different attitudes of mind at once, and that there is no more reason to assume that the results of this post-mortem examination are erroneous than to assume that all observation is misleading.

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