

PSYCHOLOGY
FROM
AN EMPIRICAL
STANDPOINT

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5. What positive criterion shall we now be able to provide? Or is there perhaps no positive definition which holds true of all mental phenomena generally? Bain thinks that in fact there is none.* Nevertheless, psychologists in earlier times have already pointed out that there is a special affinity and analogy which exists among all mental phenomena, and which physical phenomena do not share.

Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental)⁹ inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object⁹ (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing),¹⁰ or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.[‡]

This intentional in-existence is characteristic exclusively of mental phenomena. No physical phenomenon exhibits anything like it. We can, therefore, define mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves.¹¹

~~But here, too, we come upon controversies and contradiction. Hamilton, in particular, denies this characteristic to a whole broad class of mental phenomena, namely, to all those which he characterizes as feelings, to pleasure and pain in all their most diverse shades and varieties.¹² With respect to the phenomena of thought and desire he is in agreement with us. Obviously there is no act of thinking without an object that is thought, nor a desire without an object that is desired. “In the phenomena of Feelings—the phenomena of Pleasure and Pain—on the contrary, consciousness does not place the mental modification or state before itself; it does not contemplate it apart—as separate from itself—but is, as it were, fused into one. The peculiarity of Feeling, therefore, is that there is nothing but what is subjectively subjective; there is no object different from the self—no objectification of any mode of~~

⁹ Brentano here uses “content” synonymously with “object.” He later came to prefer the term “object.”

¹⁰ As we have noted, Brentano subsequently denies that we can have anything “irreal” as object; we can have as object only that which would be a substance or *thing* if it existed.

* *Lecture on Metaphysics*, I, 432.

¹¹ Brentano later acknowledged that the way he attempted to describe consciousness here, adhering to the Aristotelian tradition which asserts “the mental inexistence of the object,” was imperfect. The so-called “inexistence of the object,” the immanent objectivity, is not to be interpreted as a mode of being the thing has in consciousness, but as an imprecise description of the fact that I have something (a thing, real entity, substance) as an object, am mentally concerned with it, refer to it. There are more details on this point in the Supplementary Essays and the Introduction. The Table of Contents speaks more appropriately of “reference to an object.” See note 20.

¹² Here, too, we are concerned with the question already mentioned in Note 1, whether it belongs to the essence of every act of consciousness to be a consciousness of something. Opinions are still divided on this most elementary question in psychology. There is still a distinction drawn today, as there was before Brentano, between objective acts of consciousness and mere states of consciousness. Brentano assails this doctrine with arguments which have remained unrefuted and indeed have gone largely unnoticed. His *Untersuchungen zur Sinnespsychologie* has, in particular, been largely ignored.

6. Another characteristic which all mental phenomena have in common is the fact that they are only perceived in inner consciousness, while in the case of physical phenomena only external perception is possible. This distinguishing characteristic is emphasized by Hamilton.*

It could be argued that such a definition is not very meaningful. In fact, it seems much more natural to define the act according to the object, and therefore to state that inner perception, in contrast to every other kind, is the perception of mental phenomena. However, besides the fact that it has a special object, inner perception possesses another distinguishing characteristic: its immediate, infallible self-evidence. Of all the types of knowledge of the objects of experience, inner perception alone possesses this characteristic. Consequently, when we say that mental phenomena are those which are apprehended by means of inner perception, we say that their perception is immediately evident.

Moreover, inner perception is not merely the only kind of perception which is immediately evident; it is really the only perception in the strict sense of the word.† As we have seen, the phenomena of the so-called external perception cannot be proved true and real even by means of indirect demonstration. For this reason, anyone who in good faith has taken them for what they seem to be is being misled by the manner in which the phenomena are connected. Therefore, strictly speaking, so-called external perception is not perception. Mental phenomena, therefore, may be described as the only phenomena of which perception in the strict sense of the word is possible. This definition, too, is an adequate characterization of mental phenomena. That is not to say that all mental phenomena are internally perceivable by all men, and so all those which someone cannot perceive are to be included by him among physical phenomena. On the contrary, as we have already expressly noted above, it is obvious that no mental phenomenon is perceived by more than one individual. At the same time, however, we also saw that every type of mental phenomenon is present in every fully developed human mental life. For this reason, the reference to the phenomena which constitute the realm of inner perception serves our purpose satisfactorily.

~~7. We said that mental phenomena are those phenomena which alone can be perceived in the strict sense of the word. We could just as well say that they are those phenomena which alone possess real existence as well as intentional existence. Knowledge, joy and desire really exist. Color, sound and warmth have only a phenomenal and intentional existence.¹⁴~~

~~There are philosophers who go so far as to say that it is self-evident that phenomena such as those which we call physical phenomena *could not* correspond to any reality. According to them, the assertion that these phenomena have an existence different from mental existence is self-contradictory. Thus, for example, Bain says that attempts have been made to~~

† [Translators' note: The German word which we translate as "perception" is "*Wahrnehmung*" which literally means taking something to be true. The English word does not reflect this literal meaning so this paragraph only makes sense if we bear in mind the German word.]

* *Mental Science*, 3rd ed., p. 198.

¹⁴ This passage also makes clear what Brentano intended as the object of outer perception; "color, sound, heat," in brief, sense-qualities, that someone having a sensation senses—what is sensed—but not "landscapes" or "boxes."

II

Inner Consciousness^{*}

1. Disputes about what concept a term applies to are not always useless quarrels over words. Sometimes it is a question of establishing the conventional meaning of a word, from which it is always dangerous to deviate. Frequently, however, the problem is to discover the natural boundaries of a homogeneous class.

We must have a case of the latter sort before us in the dispute about the meaning of the term "consciousness," if it is not to be viewed as mere idle quibbling over words. For there is no question of there being a commonly accepted, exclusive sense of the term. The surveys of the different uses of this term made by Bain,[†] in England, and by Horwicz[‡] in Germany, show this beyond any doubt. Sometimes we understand it to mean the memory of our own previous actions, especially if they were of a moral nature, as when we say, "I am not conscious of any guilt." At other times we designate by it all kinds of immediate knowledge of our own mental acts, especially the perception which accompanies present mental acts. In addition, we use this term with regard to external perception, as for example when we say of a man who is awakening from sleep or from a faint that he has regained consciousness. And, we call not only perception and cognition, but also all presentations, states of consciousness. If something appears in our imagination, we say that it appears in consciousness. Some people have characterized every mental act as consciousness, be it an idea, a cognition, an erroneous opinion, a feeling, an act of will or any other kind of mental phenomenon. And psychologists (of course not all of them) seem to attach this meaning in particular to the word when they speak of the unity of consciousness, i.e. of a unity of simultaneously existing mental phenomena.

For any given use of the word, we shall have to decide whether it may not be more harmful than helpful. If we want to emphasize the origin of the term, doubtless we would have to restrict it to cognitive phenomena, either to all or to some of them. But it is obvious that there is rarely any point in doing so, since words often change from their original meaning and no harm is done. It is obviously much more expedient to use this term in such a way as to designate an important class of phenomena, especially when a suitable name for it is lacking and a discernible gap is thereby filled.* For this reason, therefore, I prefer to use it as synonymous with "mental phenomenon," or "mental act." For, in the first place,

* Just as we call the perception of a mental activity which is actually present in us "inner perception," we here call the consciousness which is directed upon it "inner consciousness."

† *Mental and Moral Science*, Appendix, p. 93.

‡ *Psychologische Analysen*, I, 211 ff.

* Cp. the remark of Herbart, *Lehrbuch zur Psychologie*, I, Chap. 2, 17, and *Psychologie als Wissenschaft*, I, Sect. II, Chap. 2, 48.

the constant use of these compound designations would be cumbersome, and furthermore, the term "consciousness," since it refers to an object which consciousness is conscious of,[†] seems to be appropriate to characterize mental phenomena precisely in terms of its distinguishing characteristic, i.e., the property of the intentional in-existence of an object, for which we lack a word in common usage.

2. We have seen that no mental phenomenon exists which is not, in the sense indicated above, consciousness of an object. However, another question arises, namely, whether there are any mental phenomena which are not objects of consciousness. All mental phenomena are states of consciousness; but are all mental phenomena conscious, or might there also be unconscious mental acts?

Some people would just shake their heads at this question. To postulate an unconscious consciousness seems to them absurd. Even eminent psychologists such as Locke and John Stuart Mill consider it a direct contradiction. But anyone who has paid attention to the foregoing definitions will hardly think so. He will recognize that a person who raises the question of whether there is an unconscious consciousness is not being ridiculous in the same way he would be had he asked whether there is a non-red redness. An unconscious consciousness is no more a contradiction in terms than an unseen case of seeing.[‡]

Most laymen in psychology, however, will immediately reject the assumption of an unconscious consciousness, even without being influenced by false analogies associated with this expression. Indeed, two thousand years had to go by before a philosopher appeared who taught such a thesis. Naturally philosophers were well familiar with the fact that we can possess a store of acquired knowledge without thinking about it. But they rightly conceived of this knowledge as a disposition toward certain acts of thinking, just as they conceived of acquired character as a disposition toward certain emotions and volitions, but not as cognition and consciousness. One of the first men who taught that there is an unconscious consciousness was Thomas Aquinas.* Later on, Leibniz spoke of "*perceptiones sine apperceptione seu conscientia*," and "*perceptiones insensibiles*,"^{††} and Kant followed his example. Recently, the theory of unconscious mental phenomena has found numerous proponents even among men who in other respects may adhere to doctrines which are not exactly congenial. The elder Mill, for example, states that there are sensations of which we are not conscious, because of habitual inattention. Hamilton teaches that the train of our ideas is often connected only by intermediate steps of which we are not conscious. Lewes, likewise, believes that many mental acts take place without consciousness. Maudsley considers the existence of unconscious mental activity a proven fact, and makes it one of the principal considerations in favor of his physiological method. Herbart speaks of ideas of

[†] [Translators' note: "*von welchem das Bewusstsein Bewusstseinst.*" This linguistic support for the recommended usage of "*Bewusstsein*", depending as it does on the structure of the German word, does not apply to the English word "consciousness."]

[‡] We use the term "unconscious" in two ways. First, in an active sense, speaking of a person who is not conscious of a thing; secondly, in a passive sense, speaking of a thing of which we are not conscious. In the first sense, the expression "unconscious consciousness" would be a contradiction, but not in the second. It is in the latter sense that the term "unconscious" is used here.

* See below, Sect. 7.

^{††} *Nouveaux Essais*, II, 1. *Monadology*, 14. *Principles of the nature and of the grace*, 4.

which we are not conscious, and Beneke believes that only those ideas which possess a relatively high degree of intensity are accompanied by consciousness. Fechner, too, says that psychology cannot ignore unconscious sensations and presentations. Wundt,[‡] Helmholtz, Zöllner and others maintain that there are unconscious inferences. Ulrici advances a whole series of arguments in support of his claim that not only sensations, but also other mental acts such as love and desire often go on unconsciously. And von Hartmann has worked out a complete “Philosophy of the Unconscious.”

Nevertheless, however numerous the ranks of those who speak in favor of unconscious mental phenomena have become, the theory is still far from having attained general recognition. Neither has Lotze adopted it, nor have the famous English psychologists Bain and Spencer rallied to it. Even John Stuart Mill, who generally expresses the highest respect for the opinions of his father, has not refrained from opposing his doctrine on this issue. Moreover, even among those who assert that there are unconscious ideas, there are many who do this only because they attach a different meaning to these terms. This is true of Fechner, for example, who, when he speaks of unconscious *sensations* and *ideas*, clearly gives the terms “sensation” and “idea” different meanings from the ones we ascribe to them—so much so that he does not understand them to mean a mental phenomenon at all.¹ According to him, all mental phenomena are conscious, and, therefore, with regard to this matter, he is an opponent of the new conception.* By using the term “consciousness” in a different sense, Ulrici, likewise, denies any unconscious mental act in our sense.[†] We may well say that Hartmann, too, uses the term “consciousness” to refer to something different from what we do. He defines consciousness as “the emancipation of the idea from the will... and the opposition of the will to this emancipation,” and as “the bewilderment of the will over the *existence* of the idea, which existence the will does not want but which, nevertheless, is sensibly present.” This definition, if it does not just refer to something purely imaginary, at least seems to bear upon something different from what we called consciousness.[‡] The reasons which he advances, however, at least show that he is an advocate of unconscious mental activities in the sense in which we speak of them.

[‡] At least in his early work, *Vorlesungen über Menschen- und Tierseele*. Some passages of his *Physiologische Psychologie*, as it stands now, seem to indicate that he has retreated from the acceptance of unconscious mental activities.

* This is clearly shown in a passage of his *Psychophysics*, II, 438: “Psychology cannot abstract from unconscious sensations and ideas, nor can it even abstract from the effects of unconscious sensations and ideas. In what way, then, can a thing which does not exist produce an effect? Or in what manner does an unconscious sensation or idea differ from a sensation or idea which we do not have at all?” In answer to the first question, Fechner states that there is really no sensation but something with which sensation stands in a functional relationship. “Sensations, ideas, have, of course, *ceased actually to exist* in the state of unconsciousness, insofar as we consider them apart from their substructure. Nevertheless, something persists within us, i.e. the psychophysical activity of which they are a function, and which makes possible the re-appearance of sensation, etc.”

[†] In *Gott und Mensch*, I, 283, he says that “in general we have an immediate feeling of our inner states, processes, impulses and activities,” and that there is no doubt “that this feeling accompanies all sensory impressions (perceptions), even those which are most commonplace,” that in this way “we also feel *that* we see, hear, taste, etc.”

[‡] *Philosophie der Unbewusstsein*, 2nd ed., p. 366.

¹ Contemporaries also use the word in this sense.

The lack of unanimity among psychologists on this point cannot come as a surprise, since we have encountered disagreements at every step of our investigations. But in this case it provides no reasonable ground for concluding that the truth cannot be known with certainty. On the other hand, the peculiar nature of the question is such that some people may believe that the impossibility of answering it is obvious on the face of it and, therefore, while it can be the object of ingenious intellectual games, it cannot be the object of serious scientific investigation. For it is self-evident and necessarily the case that there can be no unconscious ideas in the domain of our experience, even if many such ideas should exist within us; otherwise, they would not be unconscious. It would seem, therefore, that one cannot appeal to experience as proof against them. For the same reason, however, one cannot testify to their existence, either. Forsaken by experience, how are we supposed to decide the question?

In answer to this charge the defenders of unconscious consciousness have rightly pointed out, nevertheless, that what cannot be directly experienced can perhaps be deduced indirectly from empirical facts.* They have not hesitated to gather such facts, and to offer a great variety of arguments as proof of their contention.²

3. There are four different ways in which one might proceed here with some hope of success.

First, we could try to prove that certain facts given in experience demand the hypothesis of an unconscious mental phenomenon as their *cause*.

Secondly, we could attempt to prove that a fact given in experience must bring about an unconscious mental phenomenon as its *effect*, even though none appears in consciousness.

Thirdly, we could try to show that in the case of conscious mental phenomena *the strength of the concomitant consciousness is a function of their own strength*, and that, because of this relationship, in certain cases in which the latter is a positive magnitude, the former must lack a positive value.

Finally, we could attempt to prove that the hypothesis that each mental phenomenon is an object of a mental phenomenon leads to an *infinite complexity* of mental states, which is both intrinsically impossible and contrary to experience.

~~4. The way which was, and still is, most frequently tried is the first.~~

~~Usually, however, not enough attention has been paid to the particular conditions under which this path can lead to its goal. In order to be able to draw any conclusion concerning an unconscious mental phenomenon as a cause, from a fact which is supposed to be its effect, it is necessary, first of all, that the fact itself be sufficiently established. This is the first condition. For this reason the attempted proofs which are based on the phenomena of so-called clairvoyance, presentiment, premonition, etc., can *only* be of dubious value. Hartmann himself, who cites them,* is fully aware of the fact that the starting point of the proof cannot inspire great confidence. Therefore, we shall be able to by-pass these arguments~~

* Cp. Kant, *Anthropologie*, 5.

² The question is, whether there can be a state of consciousness not accompanied by a secondary consciousness. *Unconscious determining factors* (Freud) are quite compatible with this.

* *Philosophie der Unbewusstseins*, 2nd ed., pp. 81 ff.

The intensity of the act of presentation is always equal to the intensity with which the object that is presented appears to us; in other words, it is equal to the intensity of the phenomenon which constitutes the content of the presentation. This may be taken to be self-evident, and thus psychologists and physiologists, almost without exception, either explicitly assert it or tacitly presuppose it. Hence we saw above⁸ that E.H. Weber and Fechner assume that the intensity of sensation is equal to the intensity with which the physical phenomenon appears in sensation. It is only on this condition that the law they established is a psychological law.

If this is true, if the intensity of the presentation is always equal to the intensity of the phenomenon which constitutes its content, it is clear that the intensity of the presentation of a presentation must also be equal to the intensity with which this latter presentation manifests itself. So it is simply a question of how the intensity which our own conscious presentations appear to have relates to their actual intensity.⁹

But there can be no doubt in this regard. Both intensities must be equal, if inner perception is indeed infallible. Just as inner perception cannot confuse seeing and hearing, neither can it mistake a strong auditory sensation for a faint one nor a faint for a strong one. So we come to the conclusion that the intensity of the presentation of every conscious presentation is equal to the intensity of that presentation.

From this we can in fact establish a mathematical relationship between these two intensities, namely, the simple relationship of complete equality. If, however, this relation, which is the simplest of all possible functional relations, shows us that a change in the intensity of the concomitant presentation is the necessary consequence of every increase and decrease in the intensity of the mental phenomenon it accompanies, this is a far cry from proving the existence of unconscious mental acts. It is so far from it, in fact, that we have to draw the opposite conclusion instead. There are no unconscious mental acts, for wherever there exists a mental act of greater or lesser intensity, it is necessary to attribute an equal intensity to the presentation which accompanies it and of which this act is the object. This seems to be the opinion of the great majority of psychologists, and, even among those psychologists whose words make it appear that they hold the opposite view, there are some whose opposition disappears and is transformed into full agreement as soon as we translate their statements into our own terminology.

There is yet a fourth way, however, which, according to some, proves not only the falsity, but also the absurdity, of the assumption that every mental activity is conscious. Before drawing our final conclusions, let us take a look at this type of argument, too.

7. Hearing as the presentation of a sound is a mental phenomenon and certainly one of the simplest examples of one. Nevertheless, if all mental phenomena are conscious, a simple act of hearing seems not to be possible without an infinite complication of mental states.

⁸ Pp. 66 ff.

⁹ See *Untersuchungen zur Sinnespsychologie*.

First of all, no mental phenomenon is possible without a correlative consciousness; along with the presentation of a sound we have a presentation of the presentation of this sound at the same time. We have, therefore, *two* presentations, and presentations of very different sorts at that. If we call the presentation of a sound “hearing,” we have, in addition to the presentation of this sound, a presentation of the hearing, which is as different from hearing as hearing is from sound.

But this is not the end of it. If every mental phenomenon must be accompanied by consciousness, the presentation of hearing must also be accompanied by consciousness, just as the presentation of the sound is. Consequently, there must also be a presentation of it. In the hearer, therefore, there are three presentations: a presentation of sound, a presentation of the act of hearing, and a presentation of the presentation of this act. But this third presentation cannot be the last one. Since it too is conscious, it is present in the mind and in turn its presentation is also presented. In brief, the series will either be infinite or will terminate with an unconscious presentation. It follows that those who deny the existence of unconscious mental phenomena must admit an infinite number of mental activities in the simplest act of hearing.

It also seems self-evident that the sound must be contained by way of presentation not only in the act of hearing but also in the concomitant presentation of the hearing. In addition, the sound will be presented again for a third time in the presentation of the presentation of the act of hearing, while the act of hearing will only be presented for the second time. If this is the case, we have here a new ground for infinite complexity, inasmuch as the infinite series of phenomena is not made up of equally simple phenomena, but is a series of phenomena whose individual components themselves become more and more complex, *ad infinitum*.

This hypothesis seems to be very doubtful, in fact it is obviously absurd,* and no one will want to adhere to it. So how can we possibly persist in the denial of unconscious mental acts?

If we do not suppose the existence of an unconscious consciousness, there is only *one* hypothesis which seems to allow us to avoid the conclusion that there is an infinite complication of mental life. This hypothesis assumes that the act of hearing and its object are one and the same phenomenon, insofar as the former is thought to be directed upon itself as its own object. Then either “sound” and “hearing” would be merely two names for one and the same phenomenon, or the difference in their meaning might consist only in the fact that the term “sound” is used to designate the external cause, which formerly had usually been considered to be similar to the phenomenon within the person hearing and was therefore said to manifest itself in the act of hearing, while in fact it eludes our presentation.

~~Several English psychologists advocate such a view. In the previous chapter, we discussed a passage by Alexander Bain in which this philosopher fully identifies the act and the object of touch sensations, and indicates that the same relation of identity between the act and the object of the act applies to all the other types of sense-impressions. Certain remarks of John Stuart Mill’s seem to reveal this same view.† But neither does this view seem to me to be true, nor if it were true, would it completely eliminate the difficulty. I claim that it is incorrect, because inner perception shows us with immediate evidence that~~

* In recent times Herbart has touched upon these difficulties (*Psychologie als Wissenschaft*, Part Two, Sect. II, Chap. 5, No. 127; cp. *ibid.*, Part One, Sect. I, Chap. 2, No. 27). In antiquity Aristotle has emphasized them (*De Anima*, III, 2), but did not regard them as insurmountable.

† Both in his work on the philosophy of Hamilton and in his notes to James Mill’s *Analysis*.