

PSYCHOLOGY
FROM
AN EMPIRICAL
STANDPOINT

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II

Psychological Method with Special Reference to its Experiential Basis

1. Scientists have begun to pay very special attention to the method of psychology. In fact you could say that no other general theoretical sciences are as noteworthy and instructive in this regard as psychology, on the one hand, and mathematics, on the other.

These two sciences are related to one another as polar opposites. Mathematics considers the most simple and independent phenomena, psychology those that are most dependent and complex. Consequently, mathematics reveals in a clear and understandable way the fundamental nature of all true scientific investigation. There is no better field of study for gaining one's first clear view of laws, deduction, hypothesis, and many other important logical concepts. Pascal had a real stroke of genius when he turned to mathematics to get a better understanding of certain basic logical concepts, and to clear up the confusion which had arisen about them, by distinguishing the essential from the non-essential. Psychology alone, on the other hand, demonstrates all the richness to which scientific method lends itself, by seeking to adapt itself to successively more and more complex phenomena. The two together shed light on the methods of investigation which are employed by the intermediary sciences. The difference exhibited by each successive science in comparison with its predecessor, and the basis of its own distinctive character, the increase in difficulty in proportion to the greater complexity of the phenomena, and the simultaneous refinement of techniques which to a certain extent at least compensate for the increase in difficulty – naturally all this becomes clear when we compare the first and the last link in the unbroken chain of sciences.¹

¹ Compare what was said in the Introduction with the contrast between mathematics and psychology set up here.—That mathematics “considers the simplest and most independent phenomena” is true only insofar as mathematics is independent of the investigation of “physical phenomena,” while natural science does need mathematics. The relationship between mathematics and psychology is also ambiguous because a distinction must be made between descriptive and genetic psychology. Genetic psychology is for the most part psycho-physical; and it is true that it belongs at the other end of the hierarchy of sciences which Comte set up. Descriptive psychology, on the other hand, is independent of mathematics; as set forth in the Introduction and in *The Origin of our Knowledge of Right and Wrong*, descriptive psychology is a science which draws its concepts from inner experience. From these concepts we are then able to ascend to general laws without the help of induction. To that extent, then, it is as *a priori* as mathematics. But while psychology never leaves the domain of concepts based directly on perception, mathematics and geometry immediately turn to the most complicated conceptual constructions. For example, a concept of an ideal geometrical solid, which is never formed by simple abstraction but already involves a process of conceptual attribution not directly based on perception, belongs to such a class of concepts. This is, of course, even more true of a concept such as “3+n dimensions.” Mathematics, on the other hand, is dependent upon descriptive psychology insofar as a clarification of its *basic concepts* and *ultimate axioms* is impossible without analysis of consciousness; hence, of course, we also speak of “philosophy of mathematics.”

More light would undoubtedly be shed if psychological method itself were more clearly known and more fully developed. In this respect there remains much to be done, for only with the progress of the science does a true understanding of its method gradually develop.

2. Psychology, like the natural sciences, has its basis in perception and experience. Above all, however, its source is to be found in the *inner perception* of our own mental phenomena. We would never know what a thought is, or a judgement, pleasure or pain, desires or aversions, hopes or fears, courage or despair, decisions and voluntary intentions if we did not learn what they are through inner perception of our own phenomena. Note, however, that we said that inner perception [*Wahrnehmung*] and not introspection, i.e. inner observation [*Beobachtung*], constitutes this primary and essential source of psychology. These two concepts must be distinguished from one another. One of the characteristics of inner perception is that it can never become inner observation. We can observe objects which, as they say, are perceived externally.² In observation, we direct our full attention to a phenomenon in order to apprehend it accurately. But with objects of inner perception this is absolutely impossible. This is especially clear with regard to certain mental phenomena such as anger. If someone is in a state in which he wants to observe his own anger raging within him, the anger must already be somewhat diminished, and so his original object of observation would have disappeared. The same impossibility is also present in all other cases. It is a universally valid psychological law that we can never focus our *attention* upon the object of inner perception. We will have to discuss this issue in more detail later on. For the moment it will suffice to call attention to the personal experience of any unbiased person. Even those psychologists who believe that inner observation is possible all acknowledge that it involves extraordinary difficulty. This is a clear admission that such observation eludes even their efforts in most cases. But, in those exceptional cases in which they think they have been successful, they are undoubtedly the victims of self-deception. It is only while our attention is turned toward a different object that we are able to perceive, incidentally, the mental processes which are directed toward that object. Thus the observation of physical phenomena in external perception, while offering us a basis for knowledge of nature, can at the same time become a means of attaining knowledge of the mind. Indeed, turning one's attention to physical phenomena in our imagination is, if not the only source of our knowledge of laws governing the mind, at least the immediate and principal source.

It is not without reason that we underline this difference between inner perception and introspection and emphasize the fact that the one but not the other can take place in connection with our mental phenomena. Until now, to my knowledge, no psychologist has drawn this distinction. And the indiscriminate interchange of these two terms has led to many harmful consequences. I know of examples of young people, desiring to devote themselves to the study of psychology, who, at the threshold of the science, began to doubt their own ability. They had been told that inner observation is the main source of psychological knowledge, and they repeatedly made strenuous attempts at it. But all these efforts were in

² In 1906 Brentano said that objects of external perception could not be observed, in the strict sense of the word. On this point see the Introduction and the letter from Brentano to Stumpf reprinted there.

~~Inner perception of our own mental phenomena, then, is the primary source of the experiences essential to psychological investigations. And this inner perception is not to be confused with inner observation of our mental states, since anything of that sort is impossible.~~

3. It is obvious that in this respect psychology appears to be at a great disadvantage compared with the other general sciences. Although many of these sciences are unable to perform experiments, astronomy in particular, none of them is incapable of making observations.

In truth, psychology would become impossible if there were no way to make up for this deficiency. We can make up for it, however, at least to a certain extent, through the observation of earlier mental states in *memory*. It has often been claimed that this is the best means of attaining knowledge of mental facts, and philosophers of entirely different orientations are in agreement on this point.

Herbart has made explicit reference to it; and John Stuart Mill points out in his essay on Comte that it is possible to study a mental phenomenon by means of memory immediately following its manifestation. "And this is," he adds, "really the mode in which our best knowledge of intellectual acts is generally acquired. We reflect on what we have been doing, when the act is past, but when its impression in the memory is still fresh."

If the attempt to observe the anger which stirs us becomes impossible because the phenomenon disappears, it is clear that an earlier state of excitement can no longer be interfered with in this way. And we really can focus our attention on a past mental phenomenon just as we can upon a present physical phenomenon, and in this way we can, so to speak, observe it. Furthermore, we could say that it is even possible to undertake experimentation on our own mental phenomena in this manner. For we can, by various means, arouse certain mental phenomena in ourselves intentionally, in order to find out whether this or that other phenomenon occurs as a result. We can then contemplate the result of the experiment calmly and attentively in our memory.

So at least one of the disadvantages can apparently be remedied. In all the experimental sciences memory makes possible the accumulation of observed facts for the purpose of establishing general truths; in psychology, it makes possible at the same time the observation of the facts themselves. I am certain that the psychologists who believed that they had observed their own mental phenomena in inner perception actually did what Mill described in the passage quoted above. They focused their attention on acts just past, whose impression was still fresh in their memory.

To be sure, this procedure, which we could call observation in memory, is obviously not fully equivalent to genuine observation of present events. As everyone knows, memory is, to a great extent, subject to illusion, while inner perception is infallible and does not admit of doubt. When the phenomena which are retained by the memory are substituted for those of inner perception, they introduce uncertainty and the possibility of many sorts of self-deception into this area at the same time. And once the possibility of deception exists, its actual occurrence is not far off, for that unbiased frame of mind which the observer must have is hardest to achieve in connection with one's own mental acts.

It is for this reason that while some authors extoll the infallibility of self-consciousness, others, for example Maudsley,* consider it entirely untrustworthy. The former appeal to the evidence of inner perception, while the latter call attention to the frequent illusions about ourselves which befall not only the mentally ill, but all men, to a certain extent, one might say. This explains why psychologists have often been in disagreement on this point, even though the solution to the problem was available in inner perception, given with immediate evidence. What opened the door to doubt was the fact that the observation could take place only in memory. If even today there is disagreement on whether every mental phenomenon is accompanied by an emotion, be it pleasure or displeasure, this is the consequence of the confusion which we have just pointed out. Without such a confusion the fundamental question concerning the highest classes of mental phenomena would have been settled and finished long ago. The obstacle is so great that we shall often find ourselves in the position of having to refute by means of formal argumentation and *reductio ad absurdum* opinions which can actually be immediately recognized as false through the evidence of inner perception.

Nevertheless, no matter how great may be the disadvantage which is associated with the inadequate reliability of memory, it would obviously be a foolish exaggeration to deny on this basis that our own inner experience has any value at all. If the testimony of memory could not be used in scientific inquiry, not only psychology but all the other sciences as well would be impossible.

4. There remains another circumstance which threatens to place psychology at a disadvantage in comparison with the natural sciences. All that a person apprehends in inner perception and subsequently observes in memory are mental phenomena which appear within that person's own life. Every phenomenon which does not belong to the course of the life of this individual lies outside of his sphere of knowledge. However rich in remarkable phenomena even one life may be—and every life, even the poorest, exhibits a wonderful abundance—is it not obvious that it must be poor in comparison with what, contained in thousands upon thousands of other lives, is withheld from our inner perception? This limitation is all the more serious since the relation of one human being to another, as far as their inner life is concerned, is in no way comparable to that which exists between two inorganic individuals of the same species, e.g., between two drops of water. In the physiological realm two individuals of the same species always show certain variations; the same is true, but to a much greater degree, in the psychological realm. Even where there exists, as we say, the most intimate spiritual affinity between two people, the difference between them remains so pronounced that there are still occasions in which the one can neither agree with the other nor understand his behavior. And how very great are the differences and contrasts in talents and character which appear in other instances, for example, when we compare the individual aptitudes of a Pindar and an Archimedes, a Socrates and an Alcibiades, or even when we make a general comparison between the masculine and feminine character, not to mention the contrast between normal people and cretins and insane people whom we consider abnormal or sick. Consequently, if we are restricted in our observation to one single individual, what else can we conclude but that our view of mental phenomena is extremely incomplete. Will we not inevitably fall into the error of mistaking individual peculiarities

* *Physiology and Pathology of the Mind*, pp. 9 ff.

for general characteristics? This is undeniably the case, and the disadvantage appears even greater because we are never in a position to investigate the entire development of our own mental life. No matter how far back our memory may reach, the first beginnings of our mental life are still shrouded in an impenetrable mist. Yet precisely these beginnings would best provide us with knowledge of the most universal psychological laws, since the phenomena appear in their most simple form at the beginning, while later on, because every mental impression is retained along with certain after-effects, we find ourselves in the presence of an inextricable and infinitely complicated tangle of innumerable causes.

The disadvantage of such a situation is also revealed in another respect. Just as the object of observation is unique—a unique life of which, as we have seen, we can only observe part—so the observer himself is unique, and no one else is in a position to check his observations. For someone else can no more apprehend my mental phenomena through inner perception than I can those that belong to him. In this respect too, the natural sciences appear to be in a much more favorable position than psychology. The same solar eclipse and the same comet can be perceived by thousands of individuals. The observation made by a single individual which no one else can confirm—for example, the observation of a new planet supposedly seen by an astronomer, but which other astronomers are unable to verify—would be received with less confidence.

The experimental foundation of psychology, therefore, would always remain insufficient and unreliable, if this science were to confine itself to the inner perception of our own mental phenomena and to their observation in memory.

This is not the case, however. In addition to the direct perception of our own mental phenomena we have an *indirect knowledge of the mental phenomena of others*. The phenomena of inner life usually express themselves, so to speak, i.e. they cause externally perceivable changes.

They are expressed most fully when a person describes them directly in words. Of course such a description would be incomprehensible or rather impossible if the difference between the mental lives of two individuals was such that they did not contain any common element. In that case their exchange of ideas would be like that between a person who was born blind and another who was born without the sense of smell trying to explain to one another the color and the scent of a violet. But this is not the case. On the contrary, it is obvious that our capacity for mutually intelligible communication encompasses all kinds of phenomena and that we ourselves are able to form ideas of mental states experienced by another person during a fever or under other abnormal conditions on the basis of his description.* Similarly, when an educated man wants to give an account of his inner states, he is not at a loss to find the necessary words with which to express himself. On the one hand, this fact demonstrates that individual differences among persons and their situations

* [Translators' note: We follow the 1874 edition here; the 1924 edition omits the words in brackets: "Es zeigt sich im Gegenteil, dass unsere Fähigkeit zu gegenseitiger verständlicher Mitteilung sich über [alle Gattungen der Erscheinungen erstreckt, und dass wir] uns selbst von psychischen Zuständen...".]

are not so pronounced as one might have supposed, and that, at least in terms of general kinds of phenomena, every individual experiences the complete range of mental phenomena in inner experience unless he is deprived of a sense organ, is abnormal, or is immature.³ On the other hand, however, this makes it possible for us to integrate our own inner experiences with the phenomena which others have observed within themselves, and, whenever the observations bear upon similar phenomena, to check one's own observations by means of someone else's, just as an experiment with light and heat made by an American scientist is confirmed or rejected by an experiment which another scientist performs in Europe on specifically similar phenomena. The language itself, which two people who speak with one another about their inner lives both have inherited from their people or from earlier science, can also further their knowledge of mental phenomena, just as it facilitates knowledge of external phenomena elsewhere, by displaying a sort of preliminary classification of the different main classes of phenomena clearly organized from the standpoint of their specific relationships.

Finally, the preceding statements show the value which the study of autobiographies has for the psychologist, provided that he takes due account of the fact that in this case the observer and reporter is more or less biased. Feuchtersleben says in this regard that in an autobiography we should pay attention not so much to what is reported, as to what it involuntarily reveals.

Less perfectly, perhaps, but often in a sufficiently clear way, mental states can be manifested even without verbal communication.

In this category belong, above all, human behavior and voluntary action. The conclusions that we can draw from them concerning the inner states from which they derive are often much more certain than those based on verbal statements. The old saying, "*verba*

³ Although it is perfectly true that my mental life can be perceived by no other creature, and is therefore simply transcendent for them, and although it is essential to check the results of psychological research against each other, it must nevertheless be pointed out that according to Brentano's later theory, inner perception does not reveal to me the specific difference by which the subject of my mental experiences is distinguished from another subject. It cannot even be decided directly on the basis of inner perception whether it is of a spiritual or corporeal nature, because *even inner perception exhibits a certain indefiniteness and generality* and conceals our individual differences from us. By virtue of this fact, however, our empirical psychological data are from the very beginning unbound by any individuating factor; rather, they are general ideas or general judgements. From this point, then, the ascent to apodictic truths, i.e. to insights which are obvious and self-evident from the general ideas obtained in this way, is accomplished directly without any inductive steps. As was already noted in the Introduction, the laws of descriptive or phenomenological psychology have an *a priori* axiomatic character. This is true, for example, of the law that judging or taking an interest in something is impossible without a presentation of that thing, and of many other laws. The indirect knowledge of someone else's mental phenomena based on the way they are externalized will tell me whether or not other beings also make judgements, and whether or not they feel emotions, but if they do fall under the concept of someone who judges or someone who loves, it is certain *a priori* that they are also beings who have presentations. Differential psychology, referred to on p. 37, has to do with genetic distinctions; the differences between the endowments of Socrates and Alcibiades, between the masculine and feminine character and so on, are based upon the differences in their dispositions and tendencies.

docent, exempta trahunt,” would not be a truth which can be verified daily if practical conduct were not generally considered as the more reliable expression of one’s convictions.

Besides these voluntary ones, there are also involuntary physical changes which naturally accompany or follow certain mental states. Fright makes us turn pale, fear induces trembling, our cheeks blush red with shame. Even before the expression of emotions was an object of scientific study, as Darwin has recently made it once again, people had already learned a great deal about these relationships from simple custom and experience, so that the observed physical phenomena served as signs of the invisible mental phenomena. It is obvious that these signs are not themselves the things that they signify. It is not possible, therefore, as many people have quite foolishly wanted to make us believe, that this external and, as it was pretentiously called, “objective” observation of mental states could become a source of psychological knowledge, quite independently of inner “subjective” observation. Together with subjective observation, however, it will do a great deal to enrich and supplement our own inner experiences by the addition of what others have experienced in themselves, and thus to correct the self-delusions into which we may have fallen.

~~5. It will be of especially great value if, by means of one or another of the above-mentioned methods, we can gain some insight into the states of a conscious life simpler than our own, whether it is simpler because it is less developed or because it is completely lacking in certain types of phenomena. The first is true of children in particular and the more so the younger they are. For this reason numerous observations and experiments have been made on the new-born. In addition, the study of adults in primitive societies is valuable in this respect. If, on the one hand such a study appears to be of lesser importance, it offers, on the other hand, the advantage of replacing signs which are more or less subject to misunderstanding with the more precise expression of verbal communication. It is for this reason that Locke made use of this method in his time and that recently, in the interests of psychology, scientists have been turning their attention more and more to the phenomena which are characteristic of primitive people.~~

~~An example of the second type of simpler mental life is that of the congenitally blind person in whom the idea of color is missing as well as all other ideas which can be acquired only by means of the sense of sight. Such cases are of two-fold interest: first, in determining to what extent a life of ideas can develop without the assistance of the sense of sight, particularly whether the congenitally blind have the same knowledge of spatial relations as we do; secondly, if a successful operation later on makes it possible for them to see, in investigating the nature of the first impressions they receive.~~

~~To this category also belong observations which are made on animals for psychological purposes. Not only the mental life of lower animals which are deprived of one or another sense, but also that of higher animals appears extremely simple and limited when compared with man’s mental life. This may be due to the fact that they have the same faculties as we do but to an incomparably lesser degree, or it may be that they lack certain classes of mental phenomena altogether. The answer to this question is itself obviously of the utmost importance. If the latter view, which was maintained in earlier times by Aristotle and Locke and is still held today by the great majority of people, were found to be true, we would be in the presence of the most remarkable example of the isolated action of certain mental powers. Moreover, any theory which does not depart from sound common sense so~~

around some famous man who embodied the spirit of an age or a social movement, history provides many facts which are important to psychologists. The clear light in which these facts are presented is extremely useful to psychological observation.

In addition, the course of world history considered in and for itself, the succession of phenomena which are exhibited in the masses, progress and retrogression, the rise and fall of nations, can often render great service to those who want to investigate the general laws of man's mental nature. The most prominent characteristics of mental life can often be seen more clearly when you are dealing with large groups of people, while the secondary peculiarities cancel each other out and disappear. Even Plato hoped to find writ large in the state and in society the same characteristics which the soul of the individual contains on a smaller scale. He believed that his tripartite division of the soul corresponded to the three essential classes in the state: the workers, the guardians, and the rulers. Moreover, he found a further confirmation of this view in the comparison of the fundamental traits of different ethnic groups, such as Egyptians and Phoenicians, courageous Nordic barbarians and culture-loving Greeks. Perhaps someone else would expect to find a manifestation of the different fundamental structures of our higher mental life in the noble phenomena of art, science and religion. It has often been said, and certainly not without truth, that the history of the development of mankind exhibits on a large scale what takes place in an analogous manner but on a small scale in the history of the development of the individual. The observation of mental phenomena in human society undoubtedly sheds light upon the mental phenomena of the individual, the opposite, however, is even more true. Indeed, in general it is a more natural procedure to try to understand society and its development on the basis of what has been discovered about individuals than to proceed the other way around and to try to shed light on the problems of individual psychology by means of the observation of society.

What we have said is sufficient to show from which areas the psychologist gains the experiences upon which he bases his investigation of mental laws. We found *inner perception* to be his primary source, but it has the disadvantage that it can never become observation. To inner perception we added the contemplation of our previous mental experiences in *memory*, and in this case it is possible to focus attention on them and, so to speak, observe them. The field of experience which up to this point is limited to our own mental phenomena was then extended, in that *expressions* of the mental life of other persons allow us to gain some knowledge of mental phenomena which we do not experience directly. Certainly the facts which are important for psychology are thus increased a thousandfold. This last type of experience, however, presupposes observation through memory, just as the latter presupposes the inner perception of present mental phenomena. Inner perception, therefore, constitutes the ultimate and indispensable precondition of the other two sources of knowledge. Consequently, and on this point traditional psychology is correct as against Comte, inner perception constitutes the very foundation upon which the science of psychology is erected.