

PSYCHOLOGY AND SUBJECTIVITY

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To ask 'Can psychology be a science?' is not an idle question. It is an axiomatic assumption of Western philosophy that the inner world of Man and the external world of Nature are sharply and completely separated. Whatever goes on inside of us, our feelings, wishes and fears, are supposed to be personal, private, and subjective, while the objects outside of us are impersonal, public, and objective. By definition, science is public and objective knowledge. Psychology, however, investigates human beings: their feelings are part of the subject-matter to be studied. Thus, it is assumed that all reference to feelings must be avoided; they must be 'translated' in some manner into physical, observable behaviour, if psychology is to be a science. Words, or the reports of a person about what and how he feels, are not accepted as evidence for a hypothesis: only the immediately observable, physical behaviour. The objectivity of science is achieved, so it is thought, when we refer exclusively to the objects of the physical universe. We must leave out therefore whatever conscious (or unconscious) material may be obtained as evidence through introspection or self-observation.

This is how D. E. Broadbent, a leading British behaviourist, describes the position. 'This frame of reference in which most civilised thought proceeds is one which sharply distinguishes between an impersonal world and an internal, acutely personal one. The concepts employed within the latter — wishes, anxiety, memories — are altogether different in kind from those used to describe the physical world.'

THE SCIENTIFIC VALIDITY OF SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

There are, of course, reasons for adopting such an intransigent attitude. Historically, during the long period

of development of Western science, animism has been a big obstacle to our understanding of mental-emotional processes. The belief in an ethereal soul and a disembodied mind has not completely vanished even today, though it is often disguised behind some pseudo-technical jargon. It is, however, one thing to reject such foolish beliefs and quite another thing to deny consciousness as a subject-matter of investigation, as behaviourists do. Indeed, my argument will be that it is impossible to leave out language — that is, reports based on self-observation — as evidence for a hypothesis, if we want to have a science of psychology.

Even behaviourists, in fact, make use of such evidence, though they deny its value. A modern version of behaviourism, for example, describes everything human beings do or say in terms of the physical operations involved. All the same, we hear that 'to formulate operations in which some of the terms are words, not the physical date of words but the *meanings* ... is a risky business and likely to undo the value of all operational effort.' (E. G. Boring)

Verbal evidence, however, is quite respectable, scientifically: its supporting strength for any hypothesis can be evaluated in exactly the same manner as so-called physical evidence. This is not a merely philosophical point I want to score here: it has important consequences in practice. For it has been claimed that psychoanalysis is unscientific because its theories are based upon verbal reports to a large extent. (It is, by the way, not true that 'psycho-analysis only works with thought-material', as has been recently asserted by McLeish. Physical and social behaviour, etc., is always taken into account.) I shall argue, then, that it is not justified to dismiss psychoanalysis which has, in fact, given us so much scientific knowledge about ourselves. I do not speak against

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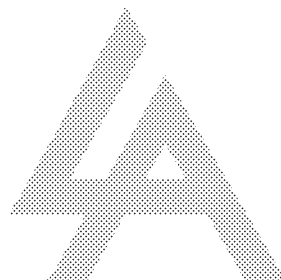
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behaviourism as such: its findings are acceptable so far as they go. All I claim is that the observation of physical behaviour is, literally, superficial and limited in scope. Or, I maintain, that behaviourism — either as ideal or as achievement — is insufficient to explain the mental-emotional life of a human being.

A CAUTION ABOUT INTROSPECTION

Let me say at once that I do not wish to argue in favour of the method of introspection as it was advocated by some psychologists of the last century. This ‘old-fashioned’ introspection and the method of observation restricted to physical events both exhibit the same error. It is what E. G. Boring has called ‘the great delusion of psychology’ — namely, that direct experience immediately and veridically provides us with scientific knowledge.

Experience — whether as sensation, or sense-datum, or perception — does not represent knowledge though it is evidence for it. Mere awareness or observation is not enough. Although in a familiar setting a glance may suffice to make us accept the existence of some object, this is all the same due to a long chain of inference from the sensory cues. Or, you may call it the result of an interpretation that, through repetition over many years, has become almost automatic and reasonably reliable. We construct the objects of the physical world from our sense-data: something like this is what most psychologists and philosophers are agreed upon as the basic process of perception. We distinguish between sensation as such, the ‘raw feel’, and the finished result of the cognitive process which may be expressed in words.

Certainly, scientific objects like atoms or genes are not directly visible; their existence must be established indirectly. Even if we take sense-experience to describe objects (instead of describing it as sense-data, etc., in the customary manner), we must admit that we do not always see the object completely in all its aspects. An infant, for instance, learns very slowly to accept the existence of objects and, at first, can grasp only what is called a ‘part-object’. This argument, I think, suffices that experience does not immediately provide us with scientific knowledge, that is, with statements referring to material objects or physical situations. Behaviourists themselves are quite agreed upon this too. Tolman says that ‘experience *qua* experience ... does not enter as such into the laws ... of psychology.’ Boring, too, asserts that ‘science is always proceeding by indirection. It uses experience ... but always as symbolic of something else.’

It is therefore a mistake to believe, as the behaviourist does, that he can obtain direct knowledge through observing physical behaviour and that he cannot do so through listening to verbal reports based on self-observation. For this belief he must have, implicitly if not explicitly, since he assumes that physical objects observed by physical means are the only raw material of a

science. But observation and self-observation are on the same level. The behaviourist using an ‘objective’ method of observation — e.g. a recording made by a machine — is just as ‘subjective’ and indirect as the introspectionist. For the immediate sense-datum — the printed record — is merely an indication of what has happened, a sign, to be used as evidence for behaviour. The record is not the behaviour itself.

Moreover, no observation is possible without self-observation. This is a point which has often been made. The black line on paper — the record obtained from a machine — is, first of all, a sense-datum. We must register it as such before we can make use of it as evidence for our theories. All the same, people feel that there is an enormous difference between observation and self-observation, although, logically, no such difference can be established. Behind the feeling is hidden, I think, an *a priori* assumption. It is that a stimulus coming from the outside world is immediately recognisable and reliable, while the stimulus arising from inside our bodies is not. But the sensation or perception is exactly the same. How do we know, then, that the stimulus originates in the physical world? It is, of course, for the adult a matter of long experience: he has learned to draw the line between inner and external happenings. However, we are often misled if we make it too readily. Illusion and hallucinations occur. We do ‘see’ objects, or ascribe properties to them, when in fact this is not so. It is an error to confuse the stimulus with the object from which it seems to arise. It is a mistake to believe that we can immediately and veridically relate a sensation to an object in the external world.

OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

However, we do connect ‘objectivity’ with the objects of the external world and contrast it to our ‘subjective’ feelings. For our ‘inner’ world seems to be changing all the time; its ‘objects’ are not solid, and they are connected with conflicting emotions, while the ‘external’ objects are usually almost free of such ambiguities and ambivalence. At the same time, however, the inner and the external worlds are assumed to be totally separated.

Clearly, this attitude is inconsistent and is seen to be unjustified the moment it is formulated. It is certainly the hallmark of a science to be impersonal, in the sense that our theories and the observations on which they are based should not be affected by our personal wishes. They must depend solely on ‘objective’ material. But can we ever exclude our feelings so completely? Is it in fact reasonable to suppose that we could?

To believe that we can dismiss our emotional involvement in anything we do is not rational, but a rationalisation. All we can hope to achieve is to minimise any distortions which our wishes and fears may engender in our knowledge. Man is a rational animal: his rationality, however, is an ideal, not an achievement, and he always remains an animal.

There can be no hard and fast distinction between inner and outer worlds. The two worlds are not logically cut off from one another as is implied when we say that one yields objective and public data, while the other is private and subjective. It is not by a logical dichotomy, but by our skins that the inner and external worlds are separated. Both worlds are the product of the same process of mental-emotional development. From the moment we are born we interact with our environment, with other human beings and with the objects of the material world. Slowly, our feelings, wishes, and fears become known to us and, equally, the social and physical reality outside of us. Indeed, we learn about both at the same time.

A very permeable membrane, and not a logically impenetrable barrier, divides the inner from the external world. Thus it is quite false to say that the one is subjective and private and the other objective and public. Traditional philosophy has helped to mislead us here by the use of the term 'sensation' (or its equivalents) for describing the basic, mental mechanism. Therefore it becomes natural to say that inner experience is represented by sensation, while external experience is of objects. The two appear to be fundamentally different; and we forget that the objects of the external world must be registered, too, by our sensations. Thus they partake of the same 'defects' as our 'inner' objects.

THE STATUS OF SENSE-PERCEPTION

It is equally false to say that sense-perception is private. The idea is that no one can ever know what I am feeling except myself. In one sense, this is an empty truism. All that is asserted is that I am the person who has the feeling. This is a grammatical fact concerning the use of the first person singular. In another sense, the privacy of experience is simply an incorrect description. It is not true that I know immediately and veridically what objects I experience or what feelings I have at a given moment. Other people's agreement, or advice, is often needed to tell me what is going on inside of me, even though I am the person who 'owns' the feeling. We always need to interpret the raw material; and sometimes an outsider is better qualified to do so than the person producing the material. This is once more the 'delusion of psychology' — the idea that mere experience is the same as knowledge. The term 'private knowledge' is self-contradictory. Even I can know about myself only by reference to other bits of knowledge that are already established and therefore public. Otherwise I cannot relate my present experience to any other experiences I have had and form a coherent and consistent system of thought that alone can be called knowledge.

The 'solipsistic' streak in Western philosophy shows up, too, in behaviourism. 'When a man sees blue', so Broadbent says, 'his experience is intensely real to him, but the essence of it cannot be communicated. ... No man can tell whether another is really feeling the same as he does himself when he looks at a colour.' This sup-

posed solipsism, then, is the reason why we can investigate the mental-emotional life of a human being only through his physical behaviour and not through his verbal reports. Again, Broadbent asserts that '... if I say that I experience mixed feelings nobody can prove or disprove the accuracy of my observation. On the other hand, statements about the bodily actions, the behaviour, of men and animals should be verifiable by anybody if they are true.' Moreover, the directly observable, physical behaviour provides all the evidence we can accept. No reference to invisible, or hidden, physical actions like those of physiology is allowed. Broadbent is more strict in his requirements than the American behaviourists. He says that '... the reason for avoiding physiological explanations is that in fact, and to some extent in principle, they are speculative. Nobody really knows what happens in the brain when even simple actions occur.'

THE FALLACY OF REDUCTIONISM

This 'hard headed' attitude towards what constitutes scientific evidence has a certain appeal at first glance. But a second glance suffices to show that if we adopt the attitude there can be no psychology at all. We have here to do with the doctrine of 'reductionism', in an extreme form.

This is the view that all theories must follow the paradigm of a theory in physics. It is to demand that any hypothesis, even one concerning the mental and emotional processes within a human being, must be confirmed exclusively by physical happenings in the physical world. If physical movement and action is the only evidence allowed, to the movements of atoms (of whatever other particles are taken as the basic, ultimate, constituents of Nature). Physics, then, becomes the only science there is.

This forces us to make the assumption that no experience — internal or external — of a person is ever lost without leaving a trace in the observable pattern of his physical behaviour. At least two conditions are presupposed. (1) The person must have an infinitely long life. He cannot die — for inner processes can become manifest only after a delay, however short: no action can proceed with infinite speed. Thus at the moment of death, there will be experiences that have not yet been expressed in overt behaviour. It is therefore in principle impossible to assume that observable behaviour suffices to represent all experiences of a person. (2) Apart from being a completely efficient mechanism, a human being must be so constructed that there is a one-to-one correspondence between internal processes and overt behaviour. If it is not true — that is, if different internal processes result in the same observable behaviour — then we have to refer to 'invisible', 'hidden', internal mechanisms in order to make sense of the behaviour. The need to do so is, however, denied by the behaviourist. Both conditions, then, cannot be satisfied, so that be-

haviourism as a programme of scientific research fails to achieve its aim.

Reductionism is false. It is too simple a doctrine and certainly does not lead to a science of psychology. Nor are we forced to introduce 'metaphysical' entities like the soul or the mind when we reject the idea that, at bottom, life and consciousness are phenomena which are 'nothing but' the motion of material particles. We need not deny the fact that 'living' matter is richer in properties than the 'dead' material of atoms and molecules; for example, organisms duplicate themselves and grow while atoms certainly do not.

In physics, for instance, we may explain the visible properties of a crystal by its invisible, atomic constituents. No one would say that the atomistic explanation, in terms of the ordered arrangement of the atoms in a lattice, reduces the crystal to a heap of atoms. For the crystal as a whole has more properties than the sum of its constituents, e.g. the forces of chemical valency that act between the atoms and hold them together in a crystal. There are always many interactions that come into play only in a group of particles; and they make the assembly of isolated constituents into a system. We would not want to reduce, say, an atom to its constituent nucleus and electrons, since the characteristic, atomic properties would then be lost. The same holds of a 'living' system, or organism, or human being.

THE FALLACY OF SCIENTISM

There is no reason for insisting that psychology should conform to physics, still less to a kind of Newtonian physics, as Broadbent does, when he admits only visible behaviour and rejects invisible brain processes. (This is contrary, too, to our scientific tradition. Ever since the Greeks, we have explained the visible in terms of the invisible; and it was this type of explanation that, by allowing for ever-increasing abstraction in our ideas, made the growth of knowledge possible.) We may — and, indeed, we must — refer to internal processes, to conscious and unconscious feelings and thoughts, if we want to explain human behaviour. This introduces no more mystery than when, in physics, we refer to the properties that belong to a complex system, like an atom. Any number of processes go on inside our skins. 'Everything counts in causality,' as McLeish says, propounding his version of behaviourism. Internal processes may or may not show up in physical movement. These processes are represented also in other ways, namely, by meaningful speech, which is the fact most characteristic of mental life in a human being.

Nobody wants 'ghosts' — that is, to claim that mental phenomena need no physical basis. But there are other ways of relating one to the other than by reduction. We may speak of 'levels of integration' when explaining human behaviour; and we may use the ideas of information theory. I indicate this very briefly. I want to dispel the notion that mysticism is the only alternative to reductionism, as many people seem to think.

The physical levels are the lower, more elementary ones. By necessity they have less order and therefore less information capacity than the higher, more organised levels of biological and psychological processes. There is less to know about simple, physical mechanisms than about complex, mental processes. This is so whether the levels are concerned with atoms or with visible bits of matter, i.e. whether they are molecular or molar, physical levels. Thus physical behaviour alone cannot reveal the information contained in the higher-level processes. Because of the manifold interactions within a more highly organised system, levels belonging to it are not reducible to lower levels where such interactions do not occur. After all, life ceases when an organism is cut up into its molecular constituents. If we want to explain life or mind, reductionism is the one method that cannot work, by definition: for the phenomenon to be explained disappears.

THE FALLACY OF BEHAVIOURISM

Behaviourism as ideal for a science of psychology collapses. This is acknowledged by Broadbent. He says: 'The great attraction of sticking purely to observation is that it ought to banish speculation. We know what an animal does: let us not worry about supposed mechanisms which cannot be seen ... state simply that when A occurs, B will shortly follow. Unfortunately, behaviour does not altogether lend itself to rules of that sort. On a simple observational level, an animal placed in the same situation does not always do the same thing ...'

The very moment we accept that even the most observable, physical behaviour is only a clue to be interpreted, not an item of immediate knowledge, we must admit that an introspective report is needed, linking external behaviour to internal feelings. When we give up the 'delusion of psychology', we are free to frame hypotheses about internal, indirectly observable processes — e.g. about the unconscious.

If we find then, too, that physical, and overt, behaviour does not suffice to represent the mental-emotional processes in a human being, we are forced to refer to 'invisible' mechanisms. (Watson made thinking into 'subvocal speech' and this, in turn, 'incipient laryngeal movement'; and so his programme of behaviourism was self-defeating since he had to re-introduce an invisible movement.) A vast amount of information is stored in the internal, physical, physiological, biological, psychological processes which are hidden from outside observation. It is accessible only through self-observation, and this necessitates the use of language, not as mere physical sound but as meaningful utterance. Psychology without a psyche is not a science.

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