THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Apr '20 *Philosophy is Everybody's Business* № 1034

INTELLECT: MIND OVER MATTER

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PART THREE: IS OUR MIND OBSERVABLE?

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At the beginning of this century an American psychologist, Professor John B. Watson of John Hopkins University, wrote a book entitled *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist*. When I was a junior instructor in psychology at Columbia University in the early 1920s, I used Watson's book in the elementary psychology classes that I taught.

The doctrine was extremely simple, almost simplistic. We come into this world with a relatively small number of innate reflexes, some congenital, some not. These are, of course, directly observable in the behavior of the infant. All further behavioral developments result from the conditioning of these reflexes, and those conditioned reflexes are also directly observable. When it expresses itself in overt, verbal behavior, even thought is observable, but it still remains a series of muscular acts of subvocal speech when the thinking that goes on is inaudible.

The basic terms of behavioristic psychology were stimulus and response both observable entities. Behaviorism departed from its methodological rule of confining itself to the observable when it allowed itself to infer the existence of mediating nervous centers that connect stimuli with responses. That one inference did not alter its insistence upon observing the behavior elicited by the applied stimuli.

From the standpoint of the behaviorist and his stimulusresponse approach, no difference existed between the laboratory study of human and animal behavior. In sharp contrast, the older introspective psychology that behaviorism sought to replace was necessarily a study of the human, not the animal, mind.

If psychology were ever to become a science comparable to other natural sciences, Watson contended, it would have to proceed by

restricting itself to perceivable phenomena— phenomena that were public in the sense that they were open to observation by any number of independent observers. That, of course, ruled out introspective observation of the mind's acts and contents by any one individual in a position to make such observations.

Watson went further and denied that there was a mind (as distinct from the brain and central nervous system) in which there existed anything observable, even introspectively. At that point he went beyond being a behaviorist for the sake of scientific method in psychology. Like Professor Skinner later, Professor Watson took sides on a philosophical issue, aligning himself with materialists who denied the existence of anything except bodies, and therefore, he reductively identified minds with brains.

Watson was both right and wrong. He was right in thinking that if minds did exist in any way that was distinct from brains, they, unlike bodies, were intrinsically unobservable by the senses. Only bodies and their motions are thus observable. But he was wrong in concluding that because minds are not observable in the way that bodies are they therefore do not exist. That piece of reasoning is the classic non sequitur of materialism.

What Watson failed to realize is that the existence of the unobservable can be affirmed as a result of inferences made from observed phenomena. Far from being a departure from scientific method, making such inferences, when necessary, is acceptable procedure.
In dismissing introspective observation as entirely chimerical, Watson also went too far. He was right in maintaining that thoughts themselves cannot be observed but wrong in denying that thinking persons are not aware that they are thinking when that activity is occurring in their minds. You and I and everyone else are directly acquainted with the acts of our own minds. We know the difference between thinking and remembering, between remembering and imagining, between imagining and perceiving, between perceiving and desiring, between desiring and feeling or emotion.
One of the special properties of the human mind is its reflexive awareness of its own acts and, through that, its ability to distinguish the mind's different activities from one another. To this extent, and only to this extent, is the mental as well as the physical observable, the one introspectively, the other by sense-perception.
I said a moment ago that though Watson went too far in dismissing introspective observation as entirely chimerical, he was correct in denying that the contents of the mind— the products of its acts— are open to inspection by the mind itself. We can be aware that we are thinking, or imagining, or perceiving, but we cannot, by look-

ing inside our minds, find any thoughts or concepts, any images or any perceptions there.

To say that we cannot observe them by introspection is not to say that they do not exist. Rather, it is to say that they are there and that they function in a self-effacing manner to present to the mind the objects that we experience when we are conscious, objects that are public in the sense that others either do or can experience them, too.

Let me stress that if the contents of my mind (its thoughts or concepts, memories, images, perception, or desires) were introspectively observable objects, *as they are not*, they would be private, not public, objects, observable by me and by me alone.
One exception to this statement must be added at once. Certain bodily feelings that I have had, such as a toothache or the soreness of a muscle, are experiences for me alone. They are purely subjective experiences to which I alone have privileged access. You, too, have such purely subjective experiences that cannot be objects of my awareness.

In sharp contrast to such uniquely subjective experiences, whatever is for me an experienced object is or can be an experienced object for you also. Therein lies the meaning of the word "objective," signifying what either is or can be the same for two or more individuals.

I have already acknowledged that the view I have just expressed concerning the unobservability—even by introspection of the mind's contents (with the one exception noted) is a view not held by people in general. It is my impression that most people today make the same mistake that was made for centuries by introspective psychologists who supposed they could look into the mind and explore or examine its contents.

That mistake had its origin at the beginning of modern philosophy when such thinkers as René Descartes in France and John Locke in England regarded the ideas in each person's mind as its primary objects—in fact, the only objects with which that person had direct acquaintance. In expounding this view, they used the word "idea" to stand for all the diverse contents of the mind, the products of all its acts.

I have no difficulty in explaining how these philosophers made that mistake.* But I find it difficult to explain how so mistaken a view could have become generally prevalent among ordinary folk.

It is, of course, possible that the mistake filtered down or flowed over from academic circles to the public generally, but that seems unlikely. A more reasonable explanation is that the wrong view is simply easier for anyone, including philosophers, to grasp. The correct view of the matter does involve some refinements and subtleties that require one to use language with greater precision than usual.

*In the first chapter of *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (1985), 1 accounted for the origin of the error by calling attention to a distinction made earlier in philosophical thought that Descartes and Locke either missed or ignored. That distinction is between ideas as that by which (*id quo*) the mind apprehends the objects of thought, and those objects as that which (*id quod*) are thereby apprehended.

Let us consider your having a toothache at this moment, which you can tell me about but which ‘ I cannot experience at the same time, though I understand what you are telling me because, 1, too have had a toothache in the past. Let us also consider us to be engaged in conversation about a painting on the wall of the room in which we are both sitting. We are talking about one and the same painting, which is a visual object that we are both looking at. We are not talking about our individually different acts of looking at the painting, nor are we talking about the visual percept in your mind and the visual percept in my mind, which are produced by the act of vision when each of us looks at the painting on the wall.

In the case of the toothache, the subject of our conversation is just one thing: your subjective and private feeling, with which I have some sympathy as a result of my having had similar feelings. In the case of the painting, the subject of our conversation is also just one thing: the visual object that we are both looking at. But in the case of the painting, other factors are involved in our being able. to have that one object before us as *that which* we are talking about.

The two words “that which” give us the clue to what else is involved. Your visual percept and my visual percept, the one in my mind produced by my act of perceiving, the other in your mind produced by your act of perceiving, are *that by which* we are able to have the same visual object before us for discussion. When your toothache is *that which* we are talking about, what enables us to talk about it is, on your part, the feeling you are directly experiencing and, on my part, my memory of having had a similar feeling. When the painting on the wall is the object of our conversation (*that which* we are talking about), what enables us to do so (that by

which we are able to do so) are the perceptions each of us has as the result of our acts of perceiving it.

If my perception of the painting and your perception of the painting were the objects of our *separate* minds (*that which* each of us introspectively observed), then we would not and could not be talking about the painting on the wall. Only if the perception in your mind and the perception in my mind are *that by which* we are aware or conscious of the painting on the wall can that be a common or public object which we are able to discuss.

This removes the puzzle about how we can know that our minds do have contents (such as perceptions, memories, or thoughts), which are the products of our mental activities (such as perceiving, remembering, and thinking), even though we cannot introspectively discover the existence of such mental products by looking into our minds and becoming aware of their presence there. The solution of the puzzle is an inference on our part, an inference we cannot avoid making if we acknowledge that effects must have causes.

That which we have before our minds as an object (the painting on the wall) presupposes *that by which* one and the same object exists for both of us (the perception of it in my mind and the perception of it in yours). Each of us is directly aware of his own act of perceiving. And even though we are not directly aware of the perception that that act produces, we infer that it exists as a result of the act of perceiving because it is for each of us *that by which* we have the same object before us as a subject for discussion.

If the supposed introspectively observed contents of the mind—its percepts, memories, images, and thoughts, concepts, or ideas—called attention to themselves, they would necessarily distract our attention from the objects that we consciously experience. If they drew attention to themselves exclusively, such attention would exclude those objects entirely from our conscious experience.

The objects we consciously experience are of two sorts: private and public. Private are all bodily feelings and emotions—feelings of pleasure and pain, of hunger and thirst, of fear and anger. These private objects of consciousness belong exclusively in the experience of this individual or that. Public are the objects that we and others apprehend in common, and being the same objects experienced by two or more individuals can be talked about by them.

This distinction between public and private objects of our conscious experience calls for a parallel distinction between two kinds

of mental processes: cognitive and affective. The affects are directly experienced bodily feelings and emotions. They are always *that which* we experience, never *that by which* we experience something. In sharp contrast, cognitions—perceptions, memories, imaginations, and thoughts are always that by which we experience the objects they make present to our minds. They are never the experienced objects themselves, never that which is apprehended by the mind.

In denying an introspective awareness of the cognitive contents of the mind, I would describe myself as a methodological behaviorist. I agree with Professor John B. Watson that, apart from subjectively experienced bodily feelings, the contents of the mind cannot be introspectively observed. At the same time, I disagree with his metaphysical materialism—his assertion that only bodies and their motions exist and his denial that anything mental exists.

To be a methodological, but not materialistic, behaviorist is to take the position that whatever can be said about the mind and its contents, or its processes and products, neither of which can be directly observed, must be inferred from behavior that is directly observed. From the observable fact that you and I are discussing a painting on the wall, I need not infer that each of us is perceiving it, for that is an act of our minds that each of us can introspectively observe. But I must infer that there is in my mind a percept and in your mind a percept—products of our acts of perceiving, *that by which* the painting has become an object we can discuss with one another.

That is the first inference I must make as a methodological behaviorist. A second inference is that each of us, being reflexively aware of the acts of his or her own mind, can infer that minds have certain generic powers, and also as many different specific powers as there are distinct types of mental acts that we are able to perform. On what basis do we distinguish the diverse powers of our mind or the diverse acts that are the basis for inferring the existence of these powers?

The answer, given briefly here and explained more fully in chapter 12, is that the acts of the mind are differentiated from one another as different types of mental activity and by differences in their objects. It follows, of course, that different types of mental activity presuppose generically different types of mental power.

Let us assume for the moment a point that will be defended later: that the human mind is the same mind in all human beings. This

means that each of us has the same set of mental powers. Yet though we all have the same powers, we do not all behave in the same way. From those behavioral differences we infer that some of us perform mental acts not performed by others.

Why not, since all of us have the same mental powers? That being so, why do we not all perform the same mental acts? The answer must be that the mental powers some of us possess were developed by nurturing of a certain sort. Through such nurturing, we have formed habits not possessed by those who lacked that nurturing.

Are those habits of mind directly observable? No, they are not observable by those who possess them. But their existence can be inferred from what is distinctive about the observable behavior of the persons who have such habits.

Finally, we come to the mind itself. It certainly is not observable as bodies are. But if all the foregoing inferences from observable behavior are justified, and if they are taken together with the reflexive awareness that each of us has of his or her own mental activity, then we should have no difficulty in inferring the existence of the mind—the seat of mental powers, the performer of mental acts.

At this point we encounter a paradox. The materialists who deny the existence of anything that is not a body, and, therefore, reductively identify the mind with the brain, must hold the view that, insofar as the mind is identical with the brain, it is just as observable as any body or bodily organ. But if that is the case, why use the word "mind" at all?

Either the word "mind" has some meaning that is distinct from the meaning of the word "brain," in which case mind is not observable, or "mind" and "mental activity" refer to nothing that is distinct from the brain and its processes, in which case mind is observable.

Points that have been covered in this chapter obviously have a bearing on the issue we will come to in chapter 4. 1 should go further and add that what has been said here precludes an acceptance of the extreme form of the identity hypothesis, which completely reduces mind to brain. 

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
is published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS
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