

Q&A: INTROSPECTION

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Questions about Introspection

Can we learn about our own mind introspectively in the same way we learn about others's mind?
How reliable and accurate introspective knowledge is?

The whole idea of introspection is that it is a way of learning about one's own mind that cannot be used to learn about others minds. I cannot introspect what you think. I have to use some other way of finding out about others' thoughts—presumably, by inferring it from observations of their outward behavior. But of course, I can also sometimes also learn things about my own mind in this way that I might not have gotten access to through introspection. I might notice that I keep looking at a particular person over and over, and only on the basis of this observation of my own behavior realize that I am attracted to them, for example.

Your second question is one of the main topics of both of our readings this week, and the answer is controversial enough that I can't give a simple answer.

[Schwitzgebel] speaks on the possibility that, perhaps people are largely the same except when they introspect. He argues that we all have the same visual phenomenology most of the time, but the degree to which we each experience stable clarity on our reflections varies. Though he does admit this theory requires us to sacrifice much of our understanding about introspection, it touches upon something deeper, something he brings back at the end of the essay. He closes by saying that, while discussing how our understanding of our external world greatly shapes our understanding of our own experiences, he closes with, "Properly so, since the former are the more secure." I took this as if our personal discoveries about our selves within this world we inhabit, can teach us more universal truths about one another, our environment, and our role in all these doubts and truths. —Brian

It's an interesting question whether our inner lives are all really quite different from one another. I have a friend who is otherwise quite normal but who insists that she is completely incapable of conjuring up mental images of things. Now, I personally seem to be able to experience mental images. I am currently experiencing mental imagery of a place where I used to go swimming when I was a child, picturing it in my mind. Is my friend really incapable of doing this? If so, then her life would seem to be very different from mine on the inside, even if she seems normal to me on the outside. On the other hand, maybe her experiences are roughly similar to mine, but she just objects to describing them as "mental images" for some reason. I'm honestly not sure how we could settle that issue!

I think it's an amazing insight that much of what we know about ourselves is sensitive to the physical and social context in which we have our experiences. This is one of my favorite aspects of Schwitzgebel's essay.

Practically, introspection seems useful—and we shouldn't do away with it just because one can't assess the mind in a manner that is specific to the physical. Understanding the mind by studying physical things is a fruitless endeavor, at least in our lifetimes. —Elizabeth

I think that Schwitzgebel would agree that we shouldn't do away with introspection, and most contemporary psychologists and cognitive scientists rely on it to some degree. As we'll see, behaviorism is widely agreed to have failed.

However! I think it's mistaken that we can't learn about minds from studying physical things. Most of contemporary psychology shows that we can infer complex things about the minds of people and animals without relying on them to introspect and tell us what they find. Developmental psychology is a good example. We have learned so much about how babies think, and it's not even clear that they *can* introspect, much less tell us about it. I hope that you'll come to agree over the coming weeks.

Introspection and ineffability

Introspection has always been a struggle of mine. Trying to understand what i feel, and why i feel it. It is easy to feel but its harder to explain what one feels and why. Also the expression of feelings is limited by human language. —Emmanuel

It is a great point that our experiences (including our introspective experiences) may be shaped in some ways by the vocabulary that we have to talk about them. For example: some languages have more words for distinct colors than others. Does this mean that people who speak those languages see more distinct colors? Similarly, could we make introspection more reliable by developing a better vocabulary to describe our inner lives? Philosophers and psychologists have debated the degree to which this is true, and we'll look at some of what they have to say later in the semester, when we discuss linguistic determinism.

Questions about Schwitzgebel

(p 267) “I think, had it quite backwards when he said the mind— including especially current conscious experience—was better known than the outside world. The teetering stacks of paper around me, I'm quite sure of. My visual experience as I look at those papers, my emotional experience as I contemplate the mess, my cognitive phenomenology as I drift in thought, staring at them—of these, I'm much less certain” =>So, does he compare the “current conscious experience” and “the outside world?” Is what he says that phenomenal experience is less certain than the outside world, as in, the piled papers? How does he compare them, and what the difference is? What does his saying: “[t]he teetering stacks of paper around me, I'm quite sure of” mean? In other words, sure of what? Is that different from “visual experience as I look at those papers,” or the sounds/smell/touch of them? What is the author sure of in the paper story?

(p 268) “Our judgments about the world to a large extent drive our judgments about our experience” =>How does he judge the outside world? Aren't inferences minds' activities as well? Also, it seems that introspection is treated as if it is something only inside of “heads.” But encountering others also makes people reflect/introspect if there is a boundary between others and us; it is also the matter of boundaries. —Chateldon

I think Schwitzgebel's point here is pretty straightforward. When I look at a nearby physical object (such as a stack of paper), I normally get very reliable information about it and what it is like. Right now I am sitting in front of a window, and I can know a lot about it just by looking at it. By contrast, he thinks that when we attend to our experiences, we get far less clarity about what they are like. His essay is a series of examples of this. Of course, you can use techniques like those of Descartes to cast doubt on our knowledge of the external world. But Schwitzgebel's point is that, in fact, we tend to be much more confident in our judgments about at least some external-world things than we are in our introspective judgments about the contents of our own minds. And plausibly, this is how it should be. This really flips Descartes' way of doing things on its head.

Another good example from Eric Schwitzgebel was when asking the rural people of China what color is their dream and they would say black and white meanwhile the rich people that live in the city dream in color, and the reason behind the differences is because the people that live in the rural part of China only has a black and white tv meanwhile the people in the city has colored tv. This makes me wonder if there is something that everyone can relate to, what question would it be for everyone to reply with the same answer? Or is that impossible because everyone is different and have their own views? —Taiji

I think there is a lot of debate about what to make of this study of people's descriptions of whether they dream in color. One option is to take what they say at face value: watching TV in color really does make people start dreaming in color. But there are reasons to be skeptical of this interpretation, and to think instead that people were just misremembering their own dreams. Schwitzgebel argues for this conclusion in [this other paper](#).

An aspect of this week's reading I find interesting is when Eric Schwitzgebel brings up emotional experiences in *The Unreliability of Naive Introspection*. Of course introspection does not reveal to us our emotional experiences as clearly as visual observation reveals our physical surroundings to us, but that is because emotions are not material objects with tangible properties. I don't think that because of that, our emotions or our introspection about emotional experiences are not trustworthy. Emotions can vary from person to person and doesn't have a specific place in the body where it manifests for everybody or a universal color association for a particular emotion, but that doesn't mean how we view our emotions is fundamentally flawed. I also disagree with Schwitzgebel's statement that most people have a pretty poor sense of what brings them pleasure and suffering. He backs this up with studies about how unhappy people are, but what about the possibility that people cannot always do what gives them the most pleasure? And what if pleasure is not one's highest good in life? —Casey

I don't think Schwitzgebel's point is to argue that the way that we experience emotions is fundamentally flawed. I think his point is that we, and especially historically many philosophers,

have been overconfident in our ability to know what is going on inside our own minds. Compare Schwitzgebel to Descartes, for example!

I think your criticism of Schwitzgebel's use of happiness studies is well taken. For example, although there is good evidence that having children makes people less happy on average (and in this case people do tend to accept that this shows that we don't know what makes us happy), at least part of the explanation is that people's goal when having children is not primarily to increase their own happiness. For example, they may be seeking to give their lives a larger significance that comes with caring for others, even if this won't make them happier.

As I was reading, "The Unreliability of Naive Introspection" by Eric Schwitzgebel I thought of his idea of introspection vs visual experiences and decided to put a blind and deaf person in the hypothetical scenario. Would it be a valid question to ask, does a blind and deaf person have equally reliable introspective capabilities as they do of a perceptual experience? I may have put it confusing, but I am asking a question based on page 9 of "The Unreliability of Naive Introspection" where it states, "Introspection may admit obvious cases, but that in no way proves that it's more secure than external perception—or even as secure." Before this statement Eric mentioned that some visual experiences are hard to argue against and then that the touch of something is hard to argue against. Most of the human population rely on both hearing and seeing as ways to think that they know what they are experiencing and introspection is not easy to come by when humans don't think of what they experienced internally, but they usually think about what they saw and go from there. Do people with these conditions, blind and deafness, find it easier to be introspective or does it not matter? Also what does it say about a person who cannot be introspective? I say cannot, but I do not know for sure whether they have a hard time trying to be introspective or is it that they do not want to do so whether it be for one reason or another. —Miguel

I think it's probably not useful (or respectful!) to speculate about what it is like for visually or hearing impaired people when they introspect. It would probably be better to just ask them (or perhaps to study their experiences in other ways). [Here](#) is a dissertation written on the nature of experience by a blind philosopher, for example, which argues that philosophers have typically relied far too much on visual metaphors when describing their mental lives.

Emotion and Conscious Experience

I'd like to consider more fully the question Schwitzgebel raises about emotion: Is emotion a conscious experience?

"I don't know what emotion is, exactly...Is surprise an emotion? Comfort? Irritability? Is it more of a gut thing, or a cognitive thing? ...Does cognition relate to emotion merely as cause and effect, or is it somehow, partly, constitutive?"

He goes on to say that "whatever emotion is, some emotions...can involve or accompany conscious experience."

I may be conflating terms, but aren't our experiences be both conscious (voluntary/immaterial) and/or involuntary (brain wiring/ material)? How are we able to regulate emotions?

Where does smiling or laughing fall within the introspection/consciousness discussion? Some aspects are involuntary: stimuli come from the brain. There are also external physical stimuli that can produce emotional experiences. But a person can consciously decide/choose to smile or laugh, or intentionally present another form of emotion through facial/bodily expressions (shame, anger, coyness, flirtation, etc.). I find the undefined, complex relationship between cognition and emotion (voluntary vs. involuntary and the 'structure' of emotion, if there is one) very interesting and perplexing. —Donna

There are several different questions mixed together here, I think. One is the question of whether (or to what extent) emotions are conscious. Another is the extent to which they are voluntary. I think these are orthogonal issues: something could be conscious but involuntary, or it might be voluntary but unconscious. So it would be best to separate the questions.

There are a lot of complicated issues about which mental phenomena are voluntary, and this would get us into debates about free will that I don't want to take up too much space on here. However, there is a lot of evidence that at least some expressions of emotion can only be produced involuntarily. A famous example is the Duchenne smile, which is a kind of smile that tends to be produced by genuine happiness and pleasure, and that involves muscle contractions in the muscles around the eyes that we generally can't produce at will.

As far as consciousness goes, I would have to say that although our emotions are often conscious, they sometimes aren't. Some of the examples given by students in the slack make this point. For example, someone who is used to suppressing their emotions might develop affection or even love for another person and not become conscious of this for a long time.

Questions about Kukla and Walmsley

Pg 29 - says behaviorism became the orthodox view among English speaking academic psychologists but psychologists from France and Germany went in other direction. I am curious why? why did they choose different direction - is there any political / historical significance behind their choices? —Syeda

This is a good question, and I don't really know the answer. However, it is often the case that when a field is not yet mature enough to generate genuine scientific consensus, different groups adopt different approaches, and it is common (though not universal) for these groups to be geographically clustered. This is extremely common in philosophy, most famously in the divide between continental and analytic philosophy during the 20th century. But there are smaller versions of it happening all the time. It's not uncommon to distinguish between trends in the philosophy of language in England versus America, for example. I think it can be fruitful for different groups of researchers to explore different approaches, and then even to compete with one another about which one reveals the most useful findings.

Psychology vs Other Fields

I thought this week's reading shined a light on just how complicated psychology is compared to other scientific fields. I previously never thought about how psychology does not have completely agreed upon facts as other scientific fields do. For instance, nobody disputes Newton's laws of motion or the equation for gravity because all of that is measurable and quantifiable – but when studying the mind, it's difficult to find a metric to measure. —Arthur

I think you're making some unwarranted assumptions about other fields here. Your own example is not a great one, for example: physicists all basically now agree that Newtonian physics is false, having been replaced by relativity theory and quantum mechanics. And many physicists agree that even those replacement theories can't be entirely right, although there is no consensus about what to replace them with.

That being said, you're certainly right that psychology is a "less mature" science than, for example, physics, and that one symptom of this is that there is far less consensus about what the best assumptions and approaches are. Still, as we'll see, psychology has made a good amount of progress since the time of the introspectionists, and contemporary work in cognitive science is (I think) on a much more solid footing.

A preview of next week's topic: Psychoanalysis

Of the several different schools of thought for studying/treating/observing the mind – I'm more inclined to agree with Freud. I agree that there is definitely a very very large part of the mind that is unconscious and not "readily accessible" that plays a big role on things like conscious observations/experiences and general behaviors. It is mainly his theory addressing the unconscious aspect of the mind that makes me much more inclined to his theory of the mind than the others. —Arthur

This is a good segue into next week's topic. Ultimately the reading will be quite critical of psychoanalysis, and will explain why that theory has ultimately been abandoned as a serious scientific proposal. So I would like to know what you think about that once you've read it!