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The Philosophical Background and Scientific Legacy of E. B. Titchener's Psychology

Understanding Introspectionism

 Springer

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Introduction

Psychology, like every other science and, indeed, like every other field of human enquiry, did not spring fully grown and fully armed from Zeus' forehead. As an experimental science, the field's past stretches back beyond the so-called cognitive revolution of the 1950s and 1960s and, earlier still, beyond the so-called behavioral revolution of the 1910s and 1920s.¹ Beyond this, of course, reflections upon the nature of the human psyche predates antiquity. Recognizing that the lessons of psychology's past provide perspective, reflexivity (Smith 2010), and perhaps even the impetus for a reevaluation of some aspects of current practice, we evidently need to *get those lessons right*.

With this in mind, consider the well-trodden story about the coming-to-be of modern psychology. Repeated in introductory psychology textbooks, this narrative is a core disciplinary legend. It usually goes something like this:

- (1) Psychology, as instituted in the universities, began as the study of mind, *based, almost exclusively, on the method of introspection*.
- (2) In reaction to the *blatant unreliability of the introspective method*, behaviourism then redefined psychology as the study of behaviour, based, primarily, on the objective method of experimentation.
- (3) In reaction to the limited research agenda and theoretical bankruptcy of behaviourism, the 'cognitive revolution,' in turn, restored the mind as the proper subject of psychology (but now with the benefit of the rigorous experimental and statistical methods developed within behaviourism) (Costall 2006, p. 635).²

The above quote is Alan Costall's summary of the standard story. The story, as Costall sees it, is mere mythology—and it forms part of the widespread “fictional history” of psychology (Costall 2006, p. 635). Mythical or not, the story has been a long-standing fixture of psychology's scientific identity. Already in the early 1990s, for example, Thomas Leahey published a trenchant criticism of this myth in *American Psychologist*. Leahey's target was a

¹ See Mandler 2002 for a nuanced discussion of the extent and influence of behaviorism as well. Mandler also argues for the gradual, not revolutionary, transition from behaviorism to cognitive psychology.

² Italics added to this quote. Parenthesis in original. British spelling retained.

story of the development of American psychology widely told and widely repeated. In the beginning—1879—psychology was born as *the science of mental life, studying consciousness with introspection*. Then, in 1913, the dominance of mentalism was challenged and shattered by the rude and simplistic behaviorists ... However, in 1956, a new revolution began, its makers waving the banner of cognition, aided by outside forces from linguistics and artificial intelligence (Leahey 1992, p. 308, italics added).

The aim of this book is to reopen and to rewrite, in part at least, the first chapter of this history of psychology. Contrary to the contention that prebehavioristic introspective psychology—or, *introspectionism*, as we will refer to it here—was undone by its overreliance on introspection in the study of mental life, it will here be argued that the major philosophical flaw of introspectionism was its utter reliance on key *theoretical* assumptions inherited from the intellectual tradition of British associationism, assumptions that were upheld in *defiance* of introspection.

This thesis sounds paradoxical to be sure. How could a historical movement known as *introspectionism* not have been profoundly committed to the use of introspection? That's a good question—and, in fact, this entire book can be seen as an endeavor to address precisely this query in a comprehensive and scholarly manner.

For now, the following introductory clarification must suffice. The term “introspectionism,” although widely used by philosophers, psychologists, and historians for almost a century, is not as unproblematic as it might appear. Typically, the term is used to refer to a family of influential nineteenth and early twentieth century systems of experimental psychology, most notably the psychology of Edward Bradford Titchener. Yet, it is important to realize that the term was attached to these systems in general, and to Titchener's system in particular—*by their critics*.

As Kurt Danziger has argued, “no proponent of introspection as a basic method of psychology ever called himself an introspectionist” (Danziger 1980, p. 241). Indeed, the “very notion of an ‘introspectionist psychology’ is a product of behaviorism” (Danziger 1980, p. 241). The great historian of psychology, Edwin G. Boring, made largely the same point almost 20 years earlier, observing that

[i]ntrospection got its name because [the] protesting new schools needed a clear and stable background against which to exhibit their novel features. No proponent of introspection as the basic method of psychology ever called himself an introspectionist. Usually he called himself a psychologist (Boring 1963, p. 172).

Titchener, along with a number of other thinkers at the time, were thus labeled and, to borrow a term from political life, “negatively campaigned,” as inveterate practitioners of old-fashioned “introspectionism”—making the parvenu school of *behaviorism* look more appealing by comparison. The name “introspectionism” has stuck. This, in itself, is not too troubling. After all, “what's in a name?”—as Juliet put it so poetically about sweet Romeo. The real problem lies in the supposition, widely held today, that introspectionism is the preeminent example in the history of science of a psychological system built on a fundamental commitment to introspection. This estimation, as we shall see, is confused and inaccurate.

Danziger has noted that, for “a topic of rather central importance in the emergence of modern psychology, introspection has not been accorded the *historical* attention it deserves” (Danziger 1980, p. 241, italics added). Perilous

consequences follow from this inattention. This book traces the intellectual background of introspectionism in early modern philosophical thought (Part I). On this basis, we will proceed to examine the nature of Titchener's distinctive system of psychology and to argue that it is really a form of associationism (Part II). Building on this two-stage analysis, the argument will be made that, contrary to widespread and popular opinion, introspectionism had very little to do with what we today would recognize as introspection (Part III).

In sum, the aim of this book is to offer a fundamental reconceptualization of Titchenerian introspectionism with respect to its basic philosophical and scientific stance, its investigative methodology, and the actual cause of its demise.

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