

Characterizing the Conscious Mind: Brentano and James



Franz Brentano

- As a philosophy student, had special interest in Aristotle and scholastic philosophy
- In 1874 he published the first volume of *Psychology from an empirical standpoint*
- By *empirical* he emphasized the role of experience in knowledge (inspired by the British empiricists as well as Aristotle)
- But emphasized the first person perspective on experience: introspection
 - Genetic psychology: third person experimental psychology
 - Descriptive psychology: first person introspective psychology

Mental Phenomena

- Exclusive object of inner perception
- Appear as a unity—unified collective of experience
- Intentionality
- Introspection not a second mental act examining a first but a part of the first mental act, making the first act conscious
 - Mental phenomena “only perceived in inner consciousness, while in the case of physical phenomena only external perception is possible” (*Psychology*, 91)

Intentionality

- “Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself . . .” (Brentano, *Psychology*, 88)
- In thinking “The mountain is golden” I am thinking *about* a mountain
 - The mountain is the object of my thought

Intentional Object

- What is the object of an intentional state?
- We can think about things that do not exist:
 - I can think that Santa Claus has a beard and my thinking is about Santa Claus, not about the Easter Bunny
- Where is Santa Claus, the intentional object of my thought?
 - Could the intentional object be a part of (immanent in) my thought—a representation?
 - But then I can never think about real things!
 - Could the intentional object be external?
 - Then Santa Claus must exist (or subsist a la Meinong)
 - Or is intentionality only a *quasi-relation*?

Three Types of Mental States

- Presentations: directedness towards an object: the presentation of a dog
- Judgments: go beyond presenting a phenomenon to accept or deny it
 - Judging that there are no dogs present
- Phenomena of love and hate: attitudes toward the presented
 - I do not like this shirt



William James (1842-1910)

- Trained as an MD, taught physiology and later philosophy at Harvard
- In 1875 establish a *teaching* laboratory (not a research laboratory)
 - James was not an experimentalist
 - Method was to reflect on mental life, drawing upon the experimental findings of others
- *Principles of Psychology*, finally published in 1890 after 12 years, was a large, two volume synthesis:
 - “the empirical correlation of the various sorts of thought or feeling [as known in consciousness] with definite conditions of the brain



Two major influences: Peirce and Darwin

- Charles Sanders Peirce: pragmatism
 - Truth often characterized as correspondence, but we can never establish correspondence
 - “The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite and assignable reasons.”
- Charles Darwin: evolution
 - Not the first evolutionist, but convinced many of the occurrence of evolution (transmutation)
 - Offered an account of transmutation—natural selection—to explain the adaptedness of traits
 - Far less successful in establishing natural selection
- Pragmatism and evolution combined in James to yield functionalism



James' Functionalism

- Approached the mind in much the way that Darwin approached biological organisms
 - Darwin collected biological organisms (or their fossils) and tried to account for them in terms of natural selection
 - James collected mental phenomena and then tried to account for them in terms of how they served us
 - Less interested in giving a structural description of mental life and tying it to the brain
 - Assumption: mental life is something we can access directly—it is conscious

Characterizing Mental Life

- 1. Is purposeful and willful.** *"The pursuance of future ends and the choice of means of their attainment are thus the mark and criterion of the presence of mentality in a phenomenon."*
- 2. Exhibits intentionality.** *"The psychologist's attitude towards cognition . . . is a thoroughgoing dualism. It supposes two elements, mind knowing and thing known, and treats them as irreducible."*
- 3. Is something of which we are aware.** Not something hidden

Characterizing Mental Life - 2

- 4. Is private, personal, and uniquely one's own.** "In this room--this lecture room, say--there are a multitude of thoughts, yours and mine, some of which cohere mutually, and some not. . . . My thought belongs with *my* other thoughts, and your thought with *your* other thoughts. Whether anywhere in this room there be a *mere* thought, which is nobody's thought, we have no means of ascertaining, for we have no experience of its like. The only states of consciousness that we naturally deal with are found in particular consciousnesses, minds, selves, concrete particular I's and you's."
- 5. Is always changing, in flux.** There is no single constant feature of our mental states.

Characterizing Mental Life - 3

- 6. Is sensibly continuous, if flows like a stream.** Perception of continuity without anything being constant.
- 7. Is selective, attentive, and interested; it is excited by some features of the world, not by others.** The ability to select is learned. As a result of being a selective, conscious mental life is active, not passive.

Functionalism Applied to Consciousness

- Rejects the view that consciousness is a thing—a separate mind, a parallel entity, or a brain state
- Rather, it is a *function*: conscious activities are the result of a brain working in an environment. "I mean . . . to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it stands for a function."
- Focus on functions consciousness plays for us, not on what it is
 - How does being conscious help us?
 - Could we do the same things without consciousness?



Huxley's Conscious-Automaton Theory

- Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin's *bulldog*
 - Debate with Bishop Wilberforce
- Emphasis on the material basis of living organisms: protoplasm
- Humans are machines
 - All behavior is due to the operation of the machine
- Consciousness is a by-product—epiphenomenon
 - Caused by the operations in the machine but having no effects

James' Defense of Consciousness

- "Consciousness . . . has been slowly evolved in the animal series, and resembles in this all organs that have a use. Since the mere supernumerary depicted by the Conscious-Automaton-theory would be useless, it follows that if we can discover the utility of consciousness we shall overthrow that theory."
 - Assumption—consciousness "is most needed where the nervous system is highly evolved"
 - "What are the defects characteristic of highly evolved nervous centres?"
 - Complex brains have so many possibilities that they are very unstable
 - Need to stabilize and give direction to the brain

Selective Function of Consciousness

- Pure machines have no evaluative role and cannot perform comparisons
 - Consciousness provides a forum for evaluative deliberation
 - “The words Use, Advantage, Interest, Good, find no application in a world in which no consciousness exists.”
 - The importance of selection, especially of the locus of attention (selective attention)
 - Applies idea to Helmholtz’s account of perception to yield a non-Kantian view
 - Applies the same idea to aesthetic and moral judgment: selection among possibilities

Selective Power of Consciousness

“I beg the reader to notice here the limitations of the power of Feeling, if power there be. All the possibilities of representation, all the images are furnished by the brain. Consciousness produces nothing, it only alters the proportions. Even the miraculous action of free will can only consist in the quantitative reinforcement of representations already given qualitatively. A sonorous plate has no proper note of its own. It is most impossible by scraping it to reproduce twice an identical tone. The number of Chladni’s sand-figures it will furnish is as inexhaustible as the whimsies which may turn up in a brain. But as the physicist’s finger pressing the plate here or there determines nodal points that throw the sand into shapes of relative fixity, so may the accentuating finger of consciousness deal with the fluctuating eddies in the cerebral cortex.”

Habits

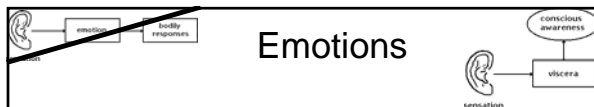
- “Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein. It keeps the fisherman and the deck-hand at sea through the winter; it holds the miner in his darkness, and nails the countryman to his log-cabin and his lonely farm through all the months of snow; it protects us from invasion by the natives of the desert and the frozen zone. It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted, and it is too late to begin again. It keeps different social strata from mixing.”



"That is not one of the seven habits of highly effective people."

Habit (continued)

- "Already at the age of twenty-five you see the professional mannerism settling down on the young commercial traveler, on the young doctor, on the young minister, on the young counsellor-at-law. You see the little lines of cleavage running through the character, the tricks of thought, the prejudices, the ways of the 'shop,' in a word, from which the man can by-and-by no more escape than his coat-sleeve can suddenly fall into a new set of folds. On the whole, it is best he should not escape. It is well for the world that in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again."



Emotions

- "Our natural way of thinking about these standard emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My thesis on the contrary is that the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion. Common sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that the one mental state is not immediately induced by the other, that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between, and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be. Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth. We might then see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult and deem it right to strike, but we could not actually feel afraid or angry."

Practical advice on emotions



- "Whistling to keep up courage is no mere figure of speech. On the other hand, sit all day in a moping posture, sigh, and reply to everything with a dismal voice, and your melancholy lingers. There is no more valuable precept in moral education than this, as all who have experience know: if we wish to conquer undesirable emotional tendencies in ourselves, we must assiduously, and in the first instance cold-bloodedly, go through the outward motions of those contrary dispositions we prefer to cultivate. The reward of persistency will infallibly come, in the fading out of the sullenness or depression, and the advent of real cheerfulness and kindness in their stead. Smooth the brow, brighten the eye, contract the dorsal rather than the ventral aspect of the frame, and speak in a major key, pass the genial compliment, and your heart must be frigid indeed if it do not gradually thaw!"

Free Will

- "Let psychology frankly admit that *for her scientific purposes* determinism can be *claimed*, and no one can find fault. If, then, it turn out later that the claim has only a relative purpose, and may be crossed by counter-claims, the readjustment can be made. Now ethics makes a counter-claim; and the present writer, for one, has no hesitation in regarding her claim as the stronger, and in assuming that our wills are "free." For him, then, the deterministic assumption of psychology is merely provisional and methodological."

More on Free Will

- "the most that any argument can do for determinism is to make it a clear and seductive conception, which a man is foolish not to espouse, so long as he stands by the great scientific postulate that the world must be an unbroken fact, and that prediction of all things without exception must be ideally, even if not actually, possible. It is a *moral* postulate about the Universe, the postulate that *what ought to be can be*, and that *bad acts cannot be fated*, but that *good ones must be possible in their place*, which would lead to the contrary view."
