

Review of: "On the Meaning of Psychological Concepts: Is There Still a Need for Psychological Concepts in the Empirical Sciences?"

Alejandro Tomasini Bassols

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The article *On the Meaning of Psychological Concepts: Is There Still a Need for Psychological Concepts in the Empirical Sciences?* is a provocative paper which induces readers to reflect on their own about the interesting subjects it deals with. Accordingly, the author's main achievement seems to consist, in the first place, in making the extraordinary discovery that psychological concepts are problematic, not so much in their application or utility as in their intrinsic intelligibility; and, secondly, in bringing to light their real *modus operandi* so that we are now in a position to overcome the situation which empirical psychology, neurophysiologists and L. Wittgenstein have put psychology in. Why this is so is relatively easy to understand. On the one hand, brain scholars can't avoid being materialists and that makes their theories, however refined or sophisticated, incompatible with what psychologists have to say; and on the other hand, Wittgenstein (according to the author) holds that psychological concepts refer to the only thing that can be observed in others, that is, external behaviour, an obviously mistaken view. What then does he propose? It's very simple: everybody, psychologists included, ground their psychological assertions on their own introspective analyses. It's thanks to introspection that we can form, for our own benefit, psychological concepts which afterwards we transfer or apply to other people. That is feasible, because concepts like "mental image", "memories", "sensation" or "believing" function in exactly the same way as concepts like "rat" or "stone", *i.e.*, they share the same referential character. The clue notion to understand both our inner (psychological) life and other people's lives is, therefore, introspection.

I should perhaps point out that papers like this one are always welcome, for they certainly make our work much easier. It seems as if from time to time writers are inclined to adopt the following precept: "say what you wish, as you wish, when you wish". And that's precisely what the author of this paper does. Disdaining centuries of discussions and thousand of essays and books, he allows himself to pontify over issues whose complexity and subtlety he obviously fails to grasp. Before highlighting what I consider to be absurd opinions expressed by the author throughout his paper, I'd like to concentrate briefly both on introspection and on the subject of self-adscriptions of psychological states.

It is obvious at first sight that the author operates with a primitive conception of introspection, since he immediately associates it with perception. It is with this initial blunder that he starts off. But let us ask ourselves: what does happen in us, what do we do when we are immersed in an introspective examination? What we can say is, taking words at their face value, that we certainly "see" nothing. There's no such thing as a modality of internal vision. We don't have eyes to see within ourselves. What instead we do is to **talk** about our experiences, to **describe** them as carefully as we are able to and to **share** them linguistically with others. At any rate, there's one thing we can be sure of: nobody turn his or her eyes

to try to look into what's going on in him or herself. First conclusion: introspection is whatever you want except what the author imagines it is. Let us now consider the subject from a different angle.

Since it makes absolutely no sense for me to carry out an exercise in introspection in order to inform myself about what goes on in me, I infer that the main purpose of such kind of exercise is to communicate other people what happens to me, what I feel, like, think and so forth. To achieve that I can't help having recourse to psychological verbs, which I naturally use in the first-person. But when I do that: what is it really that I do? **I let other people know** what happens with me, **I transmit information** to them, **I give verbal expression** to my pains, beliefs, memories and so on. That is using first-person psychological language; that is its point. What matters, however, is the fact that when I communicate personal *data* to other people (*e.g.*, a belief, a thought, a desire), I'm not referring to particular things, to objects which could only be found inside me, objects for which we got criteria of identity as when we speak of physical objects. If I confess what I think I speak about what I hold, I advocate, I imagine, etc., but none of these are "objects". To look for "psychological objects" is to give signs of being severely confused.

The fact that one has a psychological life doesn't mean that one has a privileged access to a special kind of objects. One just indicates, expresses, communicates, inform other about what one feels, remembers, thinks and so on, but how is it with other people? Even the author understands that one cannot express what other persons feel, wish, etc., in exactly the same way in which he can express it when he or she speaks about himself or herself. All one can do is to ascribe psychological states to others on the basis of recorded or observed behaviour. The author seems to understand it. The problem is that, once again, he uses primitive concepts or, perhaps better, he makes a primitive use of concepts, in this case of the concept of behaviour. Human behaviour is not merely physical, corporeal movements. Contrary to what happens with physical movements, human behaviour is intelligible, understandable, evaluable. Now how do we pass from physical movements to human behaviour? By contextualizing what people do. Contextualizing behaviour includes knowing the subject's goals, being aware of the presuppositions of the situation he or she is in, what they say, expect, etc. Understood in this way, human behaviour turns out to be the only element which would allow us to make psychological ascriptions to other people for, as the author cleverly saw it, we just don't have direct access to other minds. In Russellian terminology, we are not acquainted with people's minds. Naturally, in order to make psychological ascriptions we need to have recourse to **criteria**, without which ascriptions would never be justified and they ultimately be utterly arbitrary and unintelligible. The other relevant point to keep in mind here is that first person use of psychological verbs can be learn only if third person use is also concomitantly learnt.

Surely, I could have spared myself the task of explaining what everybody knows, limiting myself to saying simply that psychological language is characterized by an essential asymmetry between the first and the third persons, a feature of psychological language that Wittgenstein was the first to detect and to give an account of, but given the level of misinformation shown by the author, I opted for saying a couple of words about it. Taking what was said as a platform, I can now pass to examine the content of his paper.

The main thesis of the article has already been stated, for it is the view that introspection is, in spite of its deficiencies, a good method to know, even if indirectly, other people's mental life. The point is: since I know what it is to be in pain, then I

do understand what other persons feel what they are in pain, for I know that they have what I have when something hurts me. But there is a gap here, for how can I understand a pain that I don't feel and how can I be sure that other people have the same thing I have when I have a pain? It's just impossible for me to know it. It follows that I just can't be using the concept of pain in my case in the same way as in others' cases and that means that the supposedly conceptual transferring we carry out to pass from our cases to others' cases is nothing but a chimera. Obviously, what happens with pain happens with any other psychological concept (or item). What is somewhat alarming is the fact that the author gives no signs of having grasped these fundamental results. Worse still: his paper is full of argumentative flaws that, in my opinion, make it just unpublishable. Among the most prominent defects in the article we can list the following ones:

- A. ***Making assertions without any sort of argumentative support.*** The author holds, for instance, that had we not the ability to self-examine ourselves there would be no psychological concepts at all. That is patently false. I can perfectly well imagine a human group which would use language just as we do, but who would lack the language-game of introspection. They would be able to communicate with us just as any other normal speakers except when someone would try to "look into himself" and speak about what he "found out" there. But it certainly doesn't follow that they would be lacking the whole of psychological language.
- B. ***Non sequiturs.*** The author affirms things like: "given that the concept of introspection doesn't allude to external behaviour, then he alludes to real phenomena" (p. 10). There's no connexion whatsoever. The author could have drawn any other conclusion he would have liked to, for why would the fact that introspection has nothing to with external behaviour imply that therefore it designs real phenomena? It just doesn't follow. There is plenty of this kind of "arguments" in the paper.
- C. ***Absurdities.*** The so-called "inner realm" refers not only to the mind, but to anything that happens inside the body as well (p. 12). Now if we admit that psychology is first and foremost introspective in character, then psychology also should occupy itself with the functions of the liver. This ridiculous outcome is partially due to an extremely careless way of expressing himself, which incidentally shows the lack of contact with genuine philosophical debate.
- D. ***Fallacies.*** The author holds (p. 21) that, taking for granted that psychological states are brain states, we would anyway be aware of them. Now let's imagine that I have a pain and that I'm fully aware of it. Now I want to ask: if my state of introspection is a brain state too, how then can I be conscious of another brain state, no matter which one? How a brain state can be aware of another brain state? How does consciousness emerges from inert matter? Either introspection is not a psychological state or process or psychological states just can't be identified with brain states. Any of these options is lethal for the author's stand.
- E. ***Conceptual chaos.*** According to the author (p. 21), psychologists rely on introspection, even if they acknowledge that in general introspection is useless with respect to other people's *data*. However, since it is undeniable that introspection "exists", then we have to admit that it is reliable after all. The author gives the impression of thinking that at least in our own case, introspection is infallible. This is simply false. Moreover, statements like 'I know what I feel', 'I know what I think' may have applications, but they are useless if what we try to do is to describe our internal states, for what's the difference between 'I have a pain' and 'I know I have a pain'? It would have been quite useful to dig out some the rules (rules of use) which govern the applications of the verb 'to know'. The author doesn't hesitate in saying

things like 'I know what goes on in my mind' and it's clear that he would accept as legitimate statements like 'Only I can know what I feel'. What he doesn't seem to be aware of is that if expressions like those have a sense, then their negations too have a sense, since we cannot pass from a meaningful expression to a meaningless one just by adding or eliminating the negation sign. Therefore, 'I don't know what goes on in me (in my mind)' (taking it literally) would be meaningful as well, but what on Earth could that possibly mean? What would we think of someone who affirms that he doesn't know whether what he has is a memory or a desire? Thus expressions of this kind are meaningless and, therefore, statements like 'I know what goes on inside me' taken literally (psychologically, not physically) are just senseless. In the end, I'm afraid, the author should have to abandon his cherished belief to the effect that introspection is infallible. After all, it is a platitude to say that anyone can have wrong beliefs about oneself.

F. **Irresponsible statements.** On page 24, the author solemnly asserts that "Cats do not use psychological concepts in context, which implies that Wittgenstein's assumption is not plausible" (*sic*). That doesn't sound very serious indeed. I confess that if I had to point to something which could be labelled a 'Wittgensteinian assumption', I would be in big trouble. With respect to what the author says, first of all, I would suggest that both the assertion that cats use psychological concepts and its opposite ('cats don't use psychological concepts') are neither true nor false, but simply absurd (instead of 'cats' we could put 'fishes' or 'worms'. The size of the animal is not what is at stake here, though). It just makes no sense to ascribe concepts to cats. For surely cats do react in front of situations, distinguish dogs from rabbits or birds, remember places they have been in and so on, just as many other living beings, but the possession and use of concepts can be ascribed strictly speaking only to linguistic beings. Lions go hunting, but they don't have the concept of gazelle or of zebra. I won't go into the details of this view, first because I think it is solidly established and, secondly, because it would take us too far from our present themes. At all events, it's clear the the philosophy of language is not the author's area of expertise.

I have to say that in my opinion the present article is rather like an outburst of euphoria on the author's side for having the opportunity to pronounce himself freely on interesting and venerable subjects. The author, however, gives the impression of having grasped neither their complexity nor of perceiving the scope and implications of what he so confidently asserts. He instead does give the impression of thinking that he is discovering a new continent, when strictly speaking he stands on a small spot which belongs to a certain region which in turn is located in a big country which belongs to a huge continent. So the author neither apprehends nor worries about the ramifications of the subject which interests him. Now ignorance is never an argument, and so he should have taken the trouble to investigate a bit more carefully about how much has been said about the subject he writes on, but there's something in his article which, in my view, goes beyond that and is much more irritating, namely, his total lack of respect for the most decisive thinker of the XX th century, that is, Ludwig Wittgenstein. One thing we can be sure of is that the latter **never** said the collections of nonsenses the author ascribes to him. This attitude spoils his whole paper.

To sum up: it's difficult not to think that the paper is something like a piece of homework in which the author is allowed to express himself freely. The author took advantage of the way nowadays people in philosophy are forced to quote, which is the way scientists do. In philosophy that way doesn't help too much, to say the least. One just has to put, *e.g.*, "Wittgenstein: 1953" and that's all. The reader has to look in the entire book what the author affirms that other people said.

I challenge the author to show me where Wittgenstein says that a psychological state is external behaviour. Nevertheless, I think that if the author takes the name 'Wittgenstein' out of his paper and he re-thinks the whole issue, concentrating on, say, the nature of introspection or on the old fashioned identity thesis, then a good short paper could grow out of this one. Then perhaps it could be seriously considered for publication.

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