Brentano Reading Seminar
Organized by the research unit "Phénoménologies" (University of Liège, Philosophy Dpt.)
02/02/2016: Brentano's psychological method (I)
Quotations form *Psychology From An Empirical Standpoint* (Book One, Chapter II)

(1)

§1. Scientists have begun to pay very special attention to the method of psychology. In fact you could say that no other general theoretical sciences are as noteworthy and instructive in this regard as psychology, on the one hand, and mathematics, on the other.

These two sciences are related to one another as polar opposites. Mathematics considers the most simple and independent phenomena, psychology those that are most dependent and complex. Consequently, mathematics reveals in a clear and understandable way the fundamental nature of all true scientific investigation. There is no better field of study for gaining one's first clear view of laws, deduction, hypothesis, and many other important logical concepts. Pascal had a real stroke of genius when he turned to mathematics to get a better understanding of certain basic logical concepts, and to clear up the confusion which had arisen about them, by distinguishing the essential from the non-essential. Psychology alone, on the other hand, demonstrates all the richness to which scientific method lends itself, by seeking to adapt itself to successively more and more complex phenomena. The two together shed light on the methods of investigation which are employed by the intermediary sciences. The difference exhibited by each successive science in comparison with its predecessor, and the basis of its own distinctive character, the increase in difficulty in proportion to the greater complexity of the phenomena, and the simultaneous refinement of techniques which to a certain extent at least compensate for the increase in difficulty – naturally all this becomes clear when we compare the first and the last link in the unbroken chain of sciences (Franz Brentano, *Psychology From An Empirical Standpoint*, Engl. Transl. by Antos C. Rancurello, D. B.Terrell and Linda L. McAlister, London-New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 21).

(2)

§2. Psychology, like the natural sciences, has its basis in perception and experience. Above all, however, its source is to be found in the *inner perception* of our own mental phenomena. We would never know what a thought is, or a judgement, pleasure or pain, desires or aversions, hopes or fears, courage or despair, decisions and voluntary intentions if we did not learn what they are through inner perception of our own phenomena. Note, however, that we said that inner *perception [Wahrnehmung]* and not introspection, i.e. inner *observation [Beobachtung]*, constitutes this primary and essential source of psychology. These two concepts must be distinguished from one another. One of the characteristics of inner perception is that it can never become inner observation. We can observe objects which, as they say, are perceived externally. In observation, we direct our full attention to a phenomenon in order to apprehend it accurately. But with objects of inner perception this is absolutely impossible. This is especially clear with regard to certain mental phenomena such as anger. If someone is in a state in which he wants to observe his own anger raging within him, the anger must already be somewhat diminished, and so his original object of observation would have disappeared. The same impossibility is also present in all other cases. It is a universally valid psychological law that we can never focus our *attention* upon the object of inner perception (*ibid.*, p. 22).

(3)

It is not without reason that we underline this difference between inner perception and introspection and emphasize the fact that the one but not the other can take place in connection with our mental phenomena. […] They had been told that inner observation is the main source of psychological knowledge, and they repeatedly made strenuous attempts at it. But all these efforts were in vain; all they got for their trouble was a swarm of confused ideas and a headache (*ibid*., p. 22-23).

(4)

Psychologists came to realize that such inner observation does not really exist. But because the distinction between inner observation and inner perception was once again ignored, they came to deny the possibility of inner perception as well. Comte has fallen victim to this error. He calls "illusory" that psychology which "pretends to accomplish the discovery of the laws of the human mind by contemplating it in itself.":

> Lately, through peculiar subtlety, one has come to distinguish two types of observations of equal importance, i.e., external and inner observation, of which the latter is exclusively devoted to the study of intellectual phenomena. At this point I must restrict myself to mentioning only one line of reasoning which proves beyond doubt that this supposedly direct contemplation of the mind by itself is a pure illusion. Not long ago it was believed that seeing had been explained by saying that the influence of luminous objects projects on the retina images of their external form and color. To this the physiologists with good reason have objected that, if light impressions acted like images, another eye would be needed to see them. Does not this apply even more in our case? In fact, it is clear that on account of an ineluctable necessity the human mind can observe directly all phenomena except its own, since there is no one here who can perform the observation (*Cours de Philosophie Positive*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1864), I. 30 ff.)

Thus Comte rejects not only inner observation, whose impossibility he has rightly recognized, even though the explanation which he offers in this connection is of dubious value, but, without making any distinction between them, he rejects at the same time the inner perception of one's own intellectual phenomena (*ibid*., p. 23-24).

(5)

Inner perception of our own mental phenomena, then, is the primary source of the experiences essential to psychological investigations. And this inner perception is not to be confused with inner observation of our mental states, since anything of that sort is impossible (*ibid*., p. 26).

(6)

§3. It is obvious that in this respect psychology appears to be at a great disadvantage compared with the other general sciences. Although many of these sciences are unable to perform experiments, astronomy in particular, none of them is incapable of making observations.

In truth, psychology would become impossible if there were no way to make up for this deficiency. We can make up for it, however, at least to a certain extent, through the observation of earlier mental states in *memory*. It has often been claimed that this is the best means of attaining knowledge of mental facts, and philosophers of entirely different orientations are in agreement on this point (*ibid*., p. 26).

(7)

We really can focus our attention on a past mental phenomenon just as we can upon a present physical phenomenon, and in this way we can, so to speak, observe it. Furthermore, we could say that it is even possible to undertake experimentation on our own mental phenomena in this manner. For we can, by various means, arouse certain mental phenomena in ourselves intentionally, in order to find out whether this or that other phenomenon occurs as a result. We can then contemplate the result of the experiment calmly and attentively in our memory.

So at least one of the disadvantages can apparently be remedied. In all the experimental sciences memory makes possible the accumulation of observed facts for the purpose of establishing general truths; in psychology, it makes possible at the same time the observation of the facts themselves.

[…] To be sure, this procedure, which we could call observation in memory, is obviously not fully equivalent to genuine observation of present events. As everyone knows, memory is, to a great extent, subject to illusion, while inner perception is infallible and does not admit of doubt. When the phenomena which are retained by the memory are substituted for those of inner perception, they introduce uncertainty and the possibility of many sorts of self-deception into this area at the same time. And once the possibility of deception exists, its actual occurrence is not far off, for that unbiased frame of mind which the observer must have is hardest to achieve in connection with one's own mental acts

It is for this reason that while some authors extoll the infallibility of self-consciousness, others, for example Maudsley, consider it entirely untrustworthy. […] What opened the door to doubt was the fact that the observation could take place only in memory (*ibid*., p. 26-27).

(8)

§4. There remains another circumstance which threatens to place psychology at a disadvantage in comparison with the natural sciences. All that a person apprehends in inner perception and subsequently observes in memory are mental phenomena which appear within that person's own life. Every phenomenon which does not belong to the course of the life of this individual lies outside of his sphere of knowledge. However rich in remarkable phenomena even one life may be—and every life, even the poorest, exhibits a wonderful abundance—is it not obvious that it must be poor in comparison with what, contained in thousands upon thousands of other lives, is withheld from our inner perception? (*ibid*., p. 27)

(9)

In addition to the direct perception of our own mental phenomena we have an *indirect knowledge of the mental phenomena of others*. The phenomena of inner life usually express themselves, so to speak, i.e. they cause externally perceivable changes.

[…] It is obvious that our capacity for mutually intelligible communication encompasses all kinds of phenomena and that we ourselves are able to form ideas of mental states experienced by another person during a fever or under other abnormal conditions on the basis of his description. […] This makes it possible for us to integrate our own inner experiences with the phenomena which others have observed within themselves, and, whenever the observations bear upon similar phenomena, to check one's own observations by means of someone else's, just as an experiment with light and

heat made by an American scientist is confirmed or rejected by an experiment which another scientist performs in Europe on specifically similar phenomena. The language itself, which two people who speak with one another about their inner lives both have inherited from their people or from earlier science, can also further their knowledge of mental phenomena, just as it facilitates knowledge of external phenomena elsewhere, by displaying a sort of preliminary classification of the different main classes of phenomena clearly organized from the standpoint of their specific relationships.

Finally, the preceding statements show the value which the study of autobiographies has for the psychologist, provided that he takes due account of the fact that in this case the observer and reporter is more or less biased (*ibid*., p. 28-29).

(10)

Less perfectly, perhaps, but often in a sufficiently clear way, mental states can be manifested even without verbal communication. […] In this category belong, above all, human behavior and voluntary action (*ibid*., p. 29).

(11)

§5. It will be of especially great value if, by means of one or another of the above-mentioned methods, we can gain some insight into the states of *a conscious life simpler than our own*, whether it is simpler because it is less developed or because it is completely lacking in certain types of phenomena. The first is true of children in particular and the more so the younger they are. For this reason numerous observations and experiments have been made on the new-born. In addition, the study of adults in primitive societies is valuable in this respect.

An example of the second type of simpler mental life is that of the congenitally blind person in whom the idea of color is missing as well as all other ideas which can be acquired only by means of the sense of sight. Such cases are of two-fold interest: first, in determining to what extent a life of ideas can develop without the assistance of the sense of sight, particularly whether the congenitally blind have the same knowledge of spatial relations as we do; secondly, if a successful operation later on makes it possible for them to see, in investigating the nature of the first impressions they receive.

To this category also belong observations which are made on animals for psychological purposes. Not only the mental life of lower animals which are deprived of one or another sense, but also that of higher animals appears extremely simple and limited when compared with man's mental life (*ibid*., p. 30).

(12)

§6. The attentive study of *diseased mental states* is important in another respect. Frequently theoretical interests, and even more often practical interests, have led scientists to observe idiots and insane people, and this has provided psychology with valuable data. […] Quite apart from the causes of this phenomenon, we find in it valuable illustrations of the laws of the association of complex ideas. […] The phenomena of imbecility and insanity and other diseased phenomena give us extremely valuable information concerning the connections between mental phenomena and our corporeal being when, as is almost always the case, such deteriorated mental phenomena are associated with observable organic abnormalities (*ibid*., p. 31).

(13)

§7. Therefore, since our first and foremost task is to learn about normal phenomena, it will be, on the whole, more instructive for us to observe first of all the extraordinary phenomena which are found in physically healthy persons. Valuable clues for psychological research can be found in biographies of men who have distinguished themselves as artists, scientists, or for outstanding character, as well as those of notorious criminals, and in studying an eminent work of art, a remarkable discovery or a great deed or crime, at least to the extent that it is possible to gain insight into motives and antecedent circumstances (*ibid*., p. 31).

(14)

In addition, the course of world history considered in and for itself, the succession of phenomena which are exhibited in the masses, progress and retrogression, the rise and fall of nations, can often render great service to those who want to investigate the general laws of man's mental nature. The most prominent characteristics of mental life can often be seen more clearly when you are dealing with large groups of people, while the secondary peculiarities cancel each other out and disappear (*ibid*., p. 32).

(15)

What we have said is sufficient to show from which areas the psychologist gains the experiences upon which he bases his investigation of mental laws. We found *inner perception* to be his primary source, but it has the disadvantage that it can never become observation. To inner perception we added the contemplation of our previous mental experiences in *memory*, and in this case it is possible to focus attention on them and, so to speak, observe them. The field of experience which up to this point is limited to our own mental phenomena was then extended, in that *expressions* of the mental life of other persons allow us to gain some knowledge of mental phenomena which we do not experience directly. […] Consequently, and on this point traditional psychology is correct as against Comte, inner perception constitutes the very foundation upon which the science of psychology is erected (*ibid*., p. 32).