**COULD INTROSPECTION BE UNRELIABLE – EVEN IN PRINCIPLE?[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Reflections on the Primacy of the Private**

Many philosophers and psychologists give little credence to claims based on introspection. On the one hand, we hear the charge that such claims, since based on the supposed “hidden” contents of individual streams of consciousness, are not scientifically testable, hence not scientifically verifiable and thus cannot count as evidence for psychologists. On the other, we are assured by psychologists that our introspective reports are frequently false or inaccurate, so that psychology can in fact prove that the putative evidence of such reports is no such thing, but simply an act of “confabulation” on the part of experimental subjects.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Now I must admit that I find these claims incredible and preposterous; I cannot conceive of them as being true. My attitude toward these claims is at one with Hume’s attitude toward claims concerning miracles: they are so absurd that they do not even deserve to be investigated and can be quite reasonably rejected out of hand. This I have done, and not even bothered to acquaint myself with the supposed empirical evidence for the unreliability of introspection. As such, I surely owe an apology to those who have endeavored to prove this claim by means of empirical evidence or accepted it on that basis. My apology shall take the form of an explanation of my reasons for denying these claims so cavalierly and contending that *no* empirical evidence, *even in principle*, could show them to be true, so that empirical evidence is not even relevant to their evaluation. However, I shall approach my target obliquely, by briefly considering two other, related issues: the reliability of sense perception and of eyewitness testimony, both of which have also been the target of skeptical scientific research. Having established the general pattern of argument I will use in these two cases, I will then be in a position to present the parallel argument against the in principle possibility of anyone proving that introspection is unreliable.[[3]](#footnote-3) I shall then briefly consider the notion of introspection itself and attempt to remove some of the misconceptions surrounding that notion.

**Could Science prove that Sense Perception is Unreliable?** Descartes famously begins his critique of the senses in *Meditation* I by adumbrating the hoary *argument from perceptual error*, the skeptic’s stock in trade from the time of Protagoras.[[4]](#footnote-4) When I was a young man, the argument was always interpreted as a stand-alone proof that the senses were unreliable, and reconstructed as the thesis that since the senses are sometimes deceptive they might always be so, or at any rate, might be so at any moment that I might raise that question.[[5]](#footnote-5) Contemporary Descartes scholars, however, have revised that contention. A more subtle reading of the text suggests that Descartes does not after all believe this argument sufficient to show that the senses are unreliable. In fact, the conclusion that he actually draws, that we should never altogether trust a faculty that has once misled us, is remarkably modest. More than this, Descartes immediately softens the blow by noting certain further facts about perception. We are, he admits, only very infrequently subject to perceptual error, and what errors we are subject to are generally corrected in short order by subsequent sense-experience, so that our faculty of sense perception, like our capacity to do arithmetic, is fallible but self-correcting.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Descartes thus tacitly (and I think knowingly) admits something that is often urged as a criticism of the argument from perceptual error. The claim that we are subject to occasional perceptual errors is itself a contingent, empirical claim and can known only on the basis of experience, and indeed, sense-experience. Thus, our confident claim to know that there are perceptual errors actually *presupposes* that the senses are not systematically misleading or unreliable about the nature of the external world. If they were, we would be in no position to assert this fact based on sense-experience, since sense-experience would not be capable of providing evidence for any claim, no matter what its content, and we could trust it no further than sensible people trust the claims of fortunetellers. Thus, either sense perception is not reliable as a source of knowledge about the world, in which case we cannot justify this claim using the argument from perceptual error, or sense perception does in fact provide us with adequate evidence for the factual premises of that argument, in which case we must suppose it to be reliable. We can thus have no reason to doubt the in principle reliability of the senses based on the argument from perceptual error. The most that follows is that sense perception is *fallible*, which we already knew and from which no obvious dire consequences follow – or are drawn by Descartes.

Now, suppose that a scientist were to argue, by reference to well-known optical illusions such as the Muller-Lyer diagram and similar devices developed by psychologists, that sense perception (specifically in this case, *visual* perception) was not a reliable source of knowledge about the external world. In the first place, we should note that psychologists developed these devices on the basis of prior knowledge of the physics and geometry of vision, and more specifically that they were deliberately designed in order to evoke erroneous judgments in response to questions about what we see. These illusions exploit well-known features of visual perception (such as perspective) that ordinarily provide accurate perceptual information but which in the artificial, experimental circumstances evoke false spontaneous judgments precisely because they are operating in their usual, and generally reliable, way. As such, these experiments are from the very first a set-up job. Such experiments are possible only due to what we already knew pre-scientifically based on ordinary sense perception. Therefore, *they actually confirm*, rather than refute, the reliability of sense perception by providing, by means of sense perception, supplementary evidence for what we already believed on perfectly adequate grounds.

If one were to balk at this, however, one could further enforce this result by noting that the experimenter, in reporting his or her results needs to depend on sense perception in order to report accurately what his subjects say and do in response to his or her questions. More than this, the experimenter needs to use visual perception in order to confirm that the judgments made by the subjects in question really are erroneous. However, if the point of the experiment is to establish that visual perception is not a reliable source of knowledge about the external world, then there is no way for the psychologist to establish this on the basis of his or her visual experience without indulging in a cognitive version of the fallacy of special pleading. In this case, the truth of the thesis makes the evidence used to establish it worthless as proof. To adopt such a research program, then, is surely self-defeating. For the same reason, any book intended to establish such a thesis based on such evidence could not possibly succeed, and one could safely neglect it even though it might contain much useful information. To adopt such a research program, then, is surely self-defeating.

**Could Science prove that Eyewitness Testimony is Unreliable?** It is often confidently reported that both science and the empirical evidence acquired from court cases proves that people are generally poor observers of the world around them and that, for this reason, eyewitness testimony is unreliable and not to be trusted.[[7]](#footnote-7) No one, of course, questions the fact that eyewitness testimony is fallible, and that claims based on eyewitness testimony can be and sometimes are defeated by other evidence. However, admitting this claim is perfectly consistent with maintaining that eyewitness testimony is generally reliable, just as the fact of perceptual error is perfectly consistent with the possibility of perceptual error. Oftentimes, the claim that eyewitness testimony is unreliable simply intends to suggest that we should never accept eyewitness testimony at face value, but always demand some other sort of additional evidence before accepting any such claim. However, even so modest a claim as this seems impossible to sustain. Ultimately, *all* empirical evidence of *any* sort is derived from and epistemically dependent upon, eyewitness testimony. If eyewitness testimony *as such* is unreliable, even in principle, then no empirical claim can ultimately be sustained and that will include any claim to the effect that eyewitness testimony is beneath rational credence.

It is often pointed out that nearly everything that we believe is derived from the testimony of others, so that if we were restricted in our beliefs only to those things that we could confirm for ourselves, there would be very little that we could claim to know. Newman, for example, famously used the proposition “Great Britain is an island” as an example of such a fact, accepted by us not on direct evidence, but rather on the consent of all men and the weight of authority.[[8]](#footnote-8) Newman also supposes that to do this is eminently rational – a procedure that we rightly follow in countless other cases. Very few, I think, would want to interpret Clifford’s dictum that to believe on insufficient evidence is always morally wrong in so strict a way as to exclude such empirical claims as the belief that Great Britain is an island from the class of rational beliefs. As such, no sensible epistemology can afford to dispense with testimony as a source of rational belief. Even casual reflection reveals many manifest “inconveniences” of such a consequence, an exercise I am here content to leave to the reader.

In this case, however, the rub is that *all* testimony ultimately relies for its *provenance* on eyewitness testimony, the substantive empirical content of which was originally derived, not from the testimony of others, but from someone who simply witnessed the relevant events. Any claim based on testimony, no matter how second-hand, must terminate in an original witness or witnesses who actually experienced the relevant events or states of affairs that ultimately anchor the entire chain of testifiers. Indeed, any testamentary claim that does not so terminate is, no matter how ancient and how distinguished may be its transmitters, rightly seen to have no basis at all. It follows straightaway that unless eyewitness testimony is reliable, no testamentary claim, no matter how apparently well grounded, could be rationally credible.

Nor would it do at all to turn away from testimony and insist on confirming all substantive claims on one’s own. Even if this were possible (as it obviously is not) even here, we would not be able to escape from the tyranny of eyewitness testimony: for one to insist on one’s own observations, trained or otherwise, is precisely to insist on the reliability of eyewitness testimony – namely, *one’s own*. To see this point is to realize, at the same time, that *all substantive, empirical claims of whatever sort ultimately rest on eyewitness testimony*, and to call eyewitness testimony into question is ultimately to call into question all of our empirical beliefs, of whatever sort. This, of course, would include the results of any supposed scientific experiments intended to demonstrate its unreliability. We need never fear, then, that science will be able to establish any such contention, since for it to do so would completely undermine the very possibility of empirical evidence for any claim, including scientific ones, and especially the claims currently under discussion.

If any scientist writes a book claiming that eyewitness testimony is unreliable, he expects us to accept that claim based on his cognitive authority. That authority, in turn, is grounded in the empirical evidence, such as a set of experimental results that provide the justification for his or her claim that eyewitness testimony is unreliable. The scientist in question claims to have performed these experiments and observed the results or to be reliably reporting the work of other scientists who have done so. In any event, we are being offered an argument from testimony, and one that terminates in the eyewitness reports of scientists, whether his (or her) own or those of others. At the same time, all of this evidence is supposed to support the claim that eyewitness testimony is unreliable. If that is so, then this raises serious questions about the very possibility of there being scientific evidence for such a claim, given that all such evidence ultimately rests on the very sort of evidence, (i.e. eyewitness testimony) that is being called into question. Once again, we face a dilemma. If the thesis of the book is in fact true in the unqualified, unrestricted sense in which it is stated, then we could have no reason to believe that thesis based on the proffered evidence. On the other hand, if we accept the proffered evidence, we thus are prevented from accepting that thesis, because to accept that evidence as evidence *for any thesis at all* presupposes the falsity of the very thesis the evidence was put forward to justify. There may be good reasons for reading such a book, but no one ought seriously to entertain the idea that its thesis might turn out to be correct.

I am really rather doubtful that anyone supposes that eyewitness testimony *as such* is unreliable. Instead, I suppose that what was really intended was to assert that eyewitness testimony is typically unreliable in certain circumstances or in certain situations, or liable to certain distortions due to the influence of memory, suggestion, or the demand for detailed observation that goes beyond what most of us ordinarily muster, thus inviting “confabulation” and the evocation of false memories. Indeed, most of the psychological experiments that I have heard about intended to establish this thesis, like the ones used to construct optical illusions, have the character of a set-up job, exploiting the limitations on human observation that are already well known to common sense and ordinary experience in order to scientifically “prove” a foregone conclusion. We can add to this the further point that, since all information derived from the senses ultimately depends on the reliability of eyewitness testimony, the question concerning the general reliability of eyewitness testimony cannot be altogether be separated from that of sense experience. Indeed, it is precisely by reliance on sense-experience, which itself presupposes the reliability of eyewitness testimony for every claim at which it arrives, that we have discovered these weaknesses and limitations. On the other hand, to the extent that we believe based on sense-experience (hence on the basis of eyewitness testimony) that perceptual errors (such as those to which eyewitness testimony is prone) are few and capable of correction from within sense-experience, we must likewise hold the same about eyewitness testimony, since these two claims ultimately rise or fall together. Thus, the strategy of using information derived from sense perception to discredit eyewitness testimony, then, is a mug’s game, since to undermine the reliability of eyewitness testimony in this way equally undermines the reliability of sense experience, and with it, empirical science as well. At the same time, the common dismissive attitude toward eyewitness testimony evinced by many “intellectuals,” especially when used to discount any claim that one does not want to take seriously, teeters dangerously on the brink of unreasonable (because self-refuting) skepticism.

**Private Experience and Private Language** Before turning to introspection proper, I want to consider one last preliminary. As I already mentioned, one of the constant objections offered to the legitimacy of introspective evidence is that introspective evidence is “private” or “subjective” and thus “unverifiable.” It is therefore regarded either as not evidence at all or as at best second-rate evidence to be relied on only in the extremity. Psychology nowadays scorns the older, “introspective” approach to the study of the mind as “unscientific” and generally holds that any reference to the supposed “inner workings” of the mind is irrelevant to the explanation of “behavior.” Instead, we are told that science has to be about the “publically observable,” the “quantifiable,” the “testable,” or the “verifiable.” Since introspective reports are none of these, they are taken to be scientifically irrelevant, and many look forward to the day when all such appeals will have been superseded and bypassed by a truly scientific psychology that regards the mind wholly from the objective, “third person point of view” that is thought to be the characteristically scientific perspective on reality.

Among philosophers, appeal to introspection meets a different sort of challenge, one grounded in the philosophy of language and which questions the very meaningfulness of terms referring to “private” mental contents. According to an influential argument descending from Wittgenstein, linguistic reference to private objects constitutes a “private language” that must somehow establish reference on the basis of purely “internal” criteria rather than the external, “public” criteria that establish the meaning of all other terms. Given this, how can anyone *really* know that he or she is using these terms correctly, even in his or her own case? The very idea of such a language, they tell us, is somehow incoherent.

Both of these critiques seem to suppose that there is a fundamental difference between our experience of our supposed “inner states,” such as a sensation of pain, and “outer experience” of material things, like a tree. This view, however, seems to me not only to be wrong, but rather obviously wrong. *All* experience, including “outer experience,” is private and subjective in *the same sense* that “inner experience” is. All *experience* (considered *as such* whether we call it “inner” or “outer”) is constituted phenomenologically by the unique stream of inner states and their contents existing in each individual conscious subject. It is thus *subjective*, in the intended sense, i.e., occurring in an individual conscious subject from a unique point of view. In every instance, each person’s apprehension of an “external” object or state-of-affairs is perspectivally unique, and while its content may qualitatively overlap with other, similar experiences had by others at the same time, it remains uniquely that person’s and, no matter how exhaustively described, *incommunicable* as lived by the subject – thus, in the intended sense, *private*. This holds for all subjects, so that while there may be *shared* experiences, but there are no *public* experiences.[[9]](#footnote-9) As such, if the privacy and subjectivity of the immediate contents of conscious awareness is sufficient to constitute any discourse about them a private language, then *all language is private* and there can be no other kind.[[10]](#footnote-10)

For the same reasons, it is clear that there no objective “third person” perspective or point of view *on* *experience*. In this context, the use of the terms “perspective” and “point of view” when they are attached to “third person” are systematically misleading, suggesting that “third person” refers to some sort of alternate phenomenological stance (distinct from the “first person” one) that we can adopt *within* experience, perhaps even switching back and forth between them at will. However, it seems clear enough that all experience is lived *ineluctably* from the first person point of view and there is no other even imaginable. (Just ask yourself, “What would it be like to live your life from the third person perspective?”) The third person stance is neither a perspective nor a point of view on experience, but rather a theoretical construct that we imaginatively adopt in order to get some purchase on the nature of things or reality as it exists independently of experience. It therefore can neither compete with the first person perspective from within experience nor exclude that perspective in principle as a source of hard data that needs to be recognized *as such* and to which our psychological theories must accommodate themselves, regardless of one’s naturalistic “druthers.” Indeed, without the data provided for us by experience from the first person point of view on lived experience, the third person point of view would not even be conceivable, let alone constructible, by anyone – not even a scientist.

**Could Introspection be Unreliable, even in Principle?** As we have seen, all substantive empirical claims, including scientific ones, are based on evidence apprehended from the first person point of view or perspective on lived experience. If there even is to be empirical knowledge of any sort, scientific or otherwise, then it must be possible for us to rely on lived experience for the materials from which theoretical constructs such as those employed in philosophy and natural science can successfully arise. At the same time, as we have seen there is no difference *in kind* between “inner” and “outer” experience – *all* of our lived experience is constituted by a stream of subjective, private mental contents apprehended from the first person point of view by individual conscious subjects, describable to others but nevertheless incommunicable in lived experience. As such, these materials will not be available to us unless it is possible for us directly and immediately to apprehend, clearly and distinctly, our own mental contents.[[11]](#footnote-11) Even so, given that those mental contents are subjective, private, and (considered *in themselves* or *as such*) are nothing but pure appearances there seems no reason, in principle, why this should not only be possible, but actually be the case. Ideally, then, we ought to be able to grasp these contents with incorrigible certainty *when we apprehend them clearly and distinctly*. Nothing more than this is necessary to make introspection possible, nothing more needed to make introspection actual than that we should engage in it, and no reason why it cannot be (as it surely is) an important source of substantive knowledge about the human mind. More to the point, since the necessary conditions for lived experience are the same conditions for the reliability of introspection, to call introspection into question is to call lived experience into question as well, and with it the very possibility of empirical knowledge.

Further, just as the reliability of sense perception ineluctably rests on the reliability of eyewitness testimony, so too does the reliability of eyewitness testimony rely on our being able to directly and immediately apprehend the subjective, private contents of my individual stream of consciousness. Eyewitness testimony, after all, is *mediated* by such contents, and unless I can reliably apprehend them, I cannot after all have any reason to suppose that I am in fact capable of reliably witnessing and reporting anything about the external world. Due to this fact, any scientific experiment that casts doubt on our ability to apprehend the subjective, private contents of our own minds (which is essentially to introspect them, as we shall see, though introspection proper is deliberate and involves concentration of attention on those contents as such) will also undermine the reliability of eyewitness testimony and thus, in turn, sense perception as well. As such, it will also undermine itself as a reliable source of knowledge about the external world.

To illustrate this point further, suppose someone were to write a book calling introspection into question on scientific grounds. The writer’s claims will be based on empirical evidence derived from psychological experiments that he (or she) has performed or reliably reported to have been done by others. That writer will have apprehended this experimental evidence by means of his (or her) private, subjective stream of consciousness in which those results are represented by mental contents of which that person is directly and immediately aware. Those results, then, will only constitute evidence for that person if he or she can rely on that private, subjective stream of consciousness for information about the results of scientific experiments. If that person can rely on his or her private, subjective stream of consciousness in that way, then as I have argued all of the conditions for the possibility of the accurate introspection of our mental contents are in place. On the other hand, if what these results are intended to show is that introspection is not reliable, these grounds will likewise undermine the claim that one’s private, subjective stream of consciousness is apprehended reliably in such a way as to be a source of information about the external world, such as the results of scientific experiments. In that case, I cannot be sure of any experimental results, or of anything else. One cannot even reasonably believe that one can reliably apprehend one’s own thoughts, hence that what one is writing expresses those thoughts, especially when one believes that one is composing the book that denies that introspection is reliable. (And for that matter, how could such a person even know *that*?) In that case, it is difficult to see how one could think, or write at all. The very existence of the book, then, is the very best evidence that we could have that its intended thesis is false. Now, if the author of such a book thinks that he or she has been ill used, feels resentment of my apparently flippant criticisms, certain that they are merely sophisms, etc. he or she can know this only through being directly and immediately aware of his or her mental contents. For it is only by means of these that he or she apprehends what I have written as well as his or her reactions to it. To the extent that he or she is so and is quite certain about this then, to paraphrase Hume, he or she can read in this the downfall of his or her principles.

Having made this point, the main argument of this paper is completed, and a negative answer given to the question that serves as its title. I wish I could leave it at that. However, there are currently a number of false ideas about what introspection is, how we do it, how we ought to do it, and under which circumstances it is trustworthy. Although I cannot discuss all of this here, I feel the need to provide the outline of a general account of the nature of introspection in order to dispel some of the common objections that have been raised to the use of this cognitive faculty. I shall begin by considering the vexed issues concerning privileged access and incorrigibility.

**Privileged Access and Incorrigibility** A major set of misconceptions about introspection arise from the doctrines of privileged access and incorrigibility. Given the foregoing, both of these doctrines have strong credentials to be true. If introspection is possible, then it is also possible for me to apprehend my mental contents as such. Since my steam of lived experience is private, only I have direct and immediate access to its contents and thus only I have the authority definitively to pronounce on what those contents are. Further, since mental contents are pure appearances, and thus are nothing more than what they appear to be, there is no appearance reality/distinction that can be applied within lived, conscious experience considered just as such. While I may be in doubt as to whether this is a dagger I see before me, I cannot doubt that I am “appeared-to daggerly.” Surely, then, my mental contents are capable of being incorrigibly apprehended by me, so that what I say about my mental life always trumps what anyone else, including a neuroscientist, may want to claim about my thoughts or experiences based on “external” observation of my brain, at least when they are clearly and distinctly perceived.

However, it is also important to note that the nonnegotiable basic reliability of introspection, like that of sense perception, memory, discursive reasoning, the inductive habit, and so on, does not confer infallibility on my judgments with regard to my own mental states any more than it does in the parallel cases involving other cognitive powers. We have no reason to believe, in the first place, that all (arguably) mental processes of interest to psychologists and philosophers are accompanied by conscious mental contents and are thus introspectable. Second, there is foreground and background, center and periphery in my intentional field of consciousness. I am not aware of all of my mental contents to the same degree or even in the same way. Attention will tend to concentrate on certain salient features of consciousness and thus some contents rather than others, with the result that those other contents will receive a reduced share of my attention or drop out of consciousness altogether. It is also the case that some mental contents are difficult to apprehend in a sustained manner and may thus resist being perceived clearly and distinctly. More than this, some of my mental states are so confused, complex, or affectively overwhelming that it is impossible for me to constitute the psychic distance necessary to get an analytic perspective – as we say, “I was too close to the situation, too involved to be of any help, even to myself.” Such mental contents may resist any sort of direct apprehension or analysis, and thus be better explored through other means, such as literary expressions of those states which “externalize” them in affective language.[[12]](#footnote-12)

We should not therefore suppose that the use of introspection, despite its promise of incorrigible certainty with regard to some of its objects under ideal conditions, as well as having the last word with regard to states of that sort, is incapable of falling into error. Like our other reliable-in-principle cognitive faculties, introspection is both finite and fallible. At the same time, by analogy to these other cases, we have the same good reason to believe that introspection is capable of being corrected from within experience as we do for thinking that sense-perception and eyewitness testimony are. At least, we had better hope so. Empirical science is not possible unless sense perception is a generally reliable cognitive faculty. In turn, sense perception cannot be a reliable cognitive faculty unless eyewitness testimony is, since all information derived from sense experience ultimately depends for its provenance on eyewitness testimony. At the same time, eyewitness testimony will only be trustworthy if it is the case that I have reliable, direct and immediate awareness of the contents of my subjective, private stream of consciousness, which as we have seen, is all that is required in order for introspection to be possible. If introspection is not reliable then neither are these other cognitive faculties.

We add to this that, since there is no third person perspective on lived experience, there is no way for any psychologist to empirically “investigate” the claims on behalf of introspection from the external, objective, third person point of view on experience and thereby verify or falsify introspective reports. Since the subject’s inner states are subjective, private, and incommunicable as lived, there is no way for any scientist to compare the claims made by the subject to the facts, since the only facts relevant to assessing those judgments are subjective facts about the subject’s mental contents, facts in principle beyond observation from the external, objective (thus “scientific”) point of view. There is only one way to discover the pitfalls and limits of introspection, and that is by the use of introspection, which presupposes that introspection is a reliable, self-correcting cognitive faculty. As such, if I have good reasons to believe that introspection is sometimes wrong, that is only because I have discovered that this is so introspectively, and this positive result will not be possible unless I am taking introspection to be a generally reliable, hence self-correcting, cognitive faculty. For the same reason, to the extent that I believe that such errors undermine the validity of introspective claims, at the same time I am disqualifying introspection as a source of evidence for any claim, including claims concerning its own reliability.

Psychologists who construct experiments intended to show that introspection is unreliable, like those who construct optical illusions or simulations intended to test the limits of eyewitness testimony, are really relying on tacit knowledge of the pitfalls and limitations of introspection acquired by means of that very faculty. That they can do this at all thereby presupposes, and in turn experimentally confirms, the reliability of introspection as a source of knowledge about the mind rather than undermining it, since it confirms that this faculty is self-correcting. As such, it will not be surprising if psychologists, exploiting the already well-known limitations and weaknesses of this cognitive faculty discovered from within consciousness by means of introspection itself, are able to produce experimental “set-ups jobs” intended to confirm a foregone conclusion. However, these experiments prove no more than the similar “set up jobs” that might be used to discredit sense perception or eyewitness testimony as reliable sources of knowledge about the external world and which we have already seen we have sufficient reason to dismiss. Further, given the interdependence of sense perception, eyewitness testimony, and direct and immediate apprehension of one’s own private, subjective mental states, any such experiments would be self-undermining, since nothing can count as empirical evidence or prove anything unless these faculties are reliable and so no scientific experiment could ever confirm such a result, even if it were true. All that would follow is that empirical science is incompetent to establish any conclusions at all, including this one. Given this, the only response to claims concerning introspective errors, controversies, and disagreements (to the extent that they admit of resolution at all) is that what is needed is simply more, or more careful, introspection.

**How do we Introspect?** Ordinarily, of course, we “think past” our immediate mental contents toward their putative originals in the world and discourse. We do not think about our own subjective states and contents, but instead about their intentional objects – the independently existing external things that our mental states putatively represent by means of their intentionality. We only rarely advert to our mental contents and their features *as such*, and only philosophers and some old-fashioned psychologists ever do so in a sustained fashion. This fact naturally leads to the notion that introspection is some strange “reflexive,” self-transcending act that converts subjective mental *contents* into a realm of subjective mental *objects*, such as ideas or sense-data. This notion often is thought to lead to some sort of reductionist phenomenalism, such as we encounter in a consistent empiricism, like that of Berkeley or Carnap. A proponent of this sort of view infers from the (true) thesis that all lived experience is apprehended from the first person point of view by means of private, subjective mental contents to the (false) thesis that we are never aware of anything at all in any fashion but our own ideas. Having made this initial error, such a person is further led to believe that ideas or complexes of ideas are the only objects that are conceivable for us, and that nothing can be meaningful for us unless it can be expressed in phenomenally reductive terms or verified by “sense-data,” as phenomenalists would interpret this notion.

To the contrary, if there is to be any such thing as consciousness at all, there has to be what I have been calling lived experience. Lived experience, in turn, is always from the first person point of view – even the third person perspective on reality, as it enters into the lived experience of any person, including a neuroscientist, is apprehended from the first person point of view, the only perspective on lived experience there is or can be. It can never be outflanked by any science, can never be naturalized, and it can never superseded by any scientific discovery, since for us to apprehend any such discovery as a part of lived experience requires that we be conscious of it *in* and *through* lived experience; otherwise, we do not apprehend it *at all*. The first person perspective is ineluctable and inescapable and in every case trumps the claims of all theoretical constructs such as scientific theories, which we can call “perspectives” only in a metaphorical sense that does not constitute them as alternatives or competitors to the literal, first person perspective of lived experience.[[13]](#footnote-13) In turn, lived experience itself, so far as the direct and immediate apprehension without which conscious experience is not possible is concerned, consists of private, subjective mental contents immediately present *in* and *to* conscious awareness as it modes. If I am aware of anything mediately or indirectly (such as the external world), I am so only through being directly and immediately aware of my own private, subjective mental contents. Indeed, even if some version of direct realism is true, and somehow the contents of my perceptual acts are material things themselves *via* their perceptible surface qualities, so that my perceptual act somehow terminates in an apprehension of the surfaces of individual material things, it remains that my apprehension of that thing is always partial, unique, and incommunicable *as lived*. More than this, my apprehension of external objects, even if they in some sense appear in and to consciousness, is nevertheless always a mediate apprehension, never a phenomenological fact that is given *in* consciousness, and thus must be inferentially justified by a philosophical argument. The inescapable primacy of the private thus remains.

From this perspective, the Platonic/Augustinian/Cartesian admonition to turn away from the senses and turn inward to seek the truth, at least as often interpreted, can be seen to rest on a false dichotomy. It is not as though there are two experiential realms, one of which consists of external, objective, public objects and another that consists of another, distinct set of subjective, private objects – ideas, sense-data, and so on: there is only one realm, that of lived experience and the subjective, private contents that constitute it. There is, then, no need to turn inward, or anywhere else, in order to introspect – the subject matter of introspection is already present to us in every moment of lived experience. It is not a matter of identifying some special class of entities or objects to which all consciousness can be reduced or out of which it is constituted, but simply in our appreciation of mental contents *as such* – as modes of awareness to which only the individual conscious subject in his own case has access in lived experience. To introspect is not to make these contents into a distinct class of theoretical objects by a special act of apprehension, but simply to resist and arrest, in a cool, safe hour for a specific purpose, the natural and no doubt evolutionarily useful habit of thinking past those contents to the intentional objects to which they naturally convey our attention. In that case, our attention can rest on those contents (of which we were already immediately and primarily aware in the first place) just as such, and permit our appreciation of their properties and relations considered independently of their role in subserving the “outer awareness” of material things. Nor does this require any sort of precisive abstraction, reduction to some special class of entities, or any phenomenological *epoche* that prescinds either from the intentionality of those contents or the existence of their intentional objects. It is simply a matter of shifting our attention from one aspect of lived experience (my apprehension of the external world and material things by means of mental contents) to another (the contents themselves by means of which that very apprehension is possible for me) *within* lived experience. This at most involves a shift in foreground and background, center and periphery in consciousness, not its falsification by being flattened into a “parti-colored plane” of externally related, Humean simple ideas from which lived experience becomes a theoretical construct.

While our ability to accomplish this in fact is limited both by our inherent finitude, individual talent, and by other extraneous factors, it can be improved with practice. One can become a trained observer of the “inner” world of consciousness just as one can become a trained observer of external nature or other human beings. What the actual limits of introspection consist in, and the degree to which they can be mitigated, is an open question, one that can be resolved solely to through the use of the very faculty we are investigating – an investigation that will not even be possible unless introspection is a reliable cognitive faculty. There is nothing for it but to try – let the chips fall where they may! Wherever they fall, however, the desired thesis that introspection is unreliable cannot be established by scientific experiments. Not all empirical questions, after all, are scientific ones.

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1. I would like to thank Richard Curtis for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of course, it cannot be the case that both of these claims are true, since if the first is true, the second cannot be and, for the same reason, if we can prove the second then the first must be false. Clearly, something is wrong here. I shall argue that the first, while true as far as it goes, has no dire consequences, while the second, being inconsistent with the first, must rejected as false. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Unreliable” means “not dependable, liable to mislead or deceive, and thus beneath rational credence.” One should not claim that, e.g. introspection is unreliable unless one intends to assert that it is not dependable, liable to mislead or deceive us, and is thus beneath rational credence. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. CSM, Vol. II, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a classic presentation of this interpretation, see Rosenberg (1978), 17-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I develop the analogy between the senses and arithmetic calculation in my paper “Being Mistaken and Being Deceived,” read to the Northwest Conference on Philosophy held in Moscow, Idaho in 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. People really do say this; see Coady (1995), p. 264-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Newman (1979), 234-5; originally published in 1870. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See next footnote. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. While the notion of private language is constantly excoriated, we never hear anyone talking about “public language.” Indeed, what could a *public* language even be or be about, in the intended sense of “public” that somehow contrasts with the intended sense of “private” used here?” It would seem that it could only be a language that somehow was learned and used without being processed through the subjective, private streams of consciousness of individual language speakers aware of what they were saying and what they are saying means. What would that be like? Unless and until this is somehow specified, the oft-used notion of a “public criterion for the use of words” is and remains just as empty and mysterious – one is tempted to say that it is meaningless as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Again, as I have argued elsewhere, not everything can be apprehended mediately or indirectly by means of having first apprehended something else; if experience is to be possible at all, there must be something that is apprehended *simpliciter* – a *de facto* foundation for human thought, experience, and knowledge. That there be mental contents that are directly apprehended is unavoidable, on pain of irrationality. See my “Can I know what I am Thinking?” on PhilPapers. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I have heard people say this sort of thing about “psychological” novelists like Henry James, Tolstoy, and Proust, though I am in no position to verify these claims myself. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Of course, there are as many individual perspectives on lived experience as there are individual conscious subjects. This raises important philosophical questions that, unfortunately, I have no space to explore here. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)