

**THE FOUNDATIONS OF NORMAL AND
ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY**

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CHAPTER XXVI

THE SUBCONSCIOUS AND AUTOMATISM

The theory of unconscious cerebration dies hard. Recently a few psychologists made an attempt to revive it. The arguments advanced are rather more philosophical than psychological. It may be well to test the validity of these arguments. If we clear the ground of all superfluous speculations, we find two main contentions. In the first place, it is assumed that many hypnotic and hysterical manifestations are solely the result of physiological activities. It is claimed by some, such as Münsterberg, that physiological processes without any psychic accompaniments, may reach such a high state of complexity as to account fully for all the observed manifestations in the different forms of mental dissociations. In the second place, it is claimed, from a purely philosophical standpoint, that even in the case of dissociation when consciousness may be granted to be present, there is no dissociation in consciousness itself, since consciousness is but a passive onlooker while the active changes go on in the content of consciousness; in other words, in states of dissociation it is not consciousness that is changed, but only the content of consciousness.

Let us examine these contentions and see whether they can stand the test of critical analysis. The view of regarding mental activity from a purely physiological standpoint is not new, it dates as far back as Descartes, who regards all the animals, with the exception of man, as mechanical automata. The philosopher, Maimon, in his *Autobiography* tells an anecdote on himself. In his youth Maimon was an ardent adherent of Cartesian automatism. During one of his strolls with a friend Maimon struck a goat. The animal bleated. The friend rebuked Maimon for his cruelty. Maimon laughed at the simplicity of his friend.—"The goat is like a drum which sounds when it is beaten."

Huxley carried this view further, regarding consciousness as an epiphenomenon. The physiological mechanism is the engine, consciousness is but the whistle accompanying it.

Of course, it goes without saying that psychologists and physiologists at present assume that all states of consciousness are accompanied by physiological processes. Every thought, every feeling, even the most complicated poetical inspiration, or the most abstruse mathematical, logical, and metaphysical speculations, have physiological processes as their accompaniments. We are, however, hardly justified in carrying this postulate to the absurdity of the total denial of consciousness, and regarding all adjustments and adaptations as so many chemical and mechanical reactions—"tropisms," as some modern biologists, such as Loeb and others, are apt to put it in the case of many animals, a reversion to the Cartesian hypothesis of mechanical automatism. Motor reactions can be regarded solely from the physiological standpoint, but consciousness cannot be entirely ruled out. What probability is there that a play of atoms

and electrons would produce the *Iliad*, *Hamlet*, the *Principia* of Newton, the *Celestial Mechanics* of Laplace, or Darwin's *Origin of Species*?

Even if we descend to such motor reactions as are expressed in the compositions of a schoolboy, we still unhesitatingly assume a conscious activity. We cannot refute the philosopher who would regard all such manifestations as so many physiological processes without any conscious accompaniment. For though everyone is directly conscious of his own mental life, no one can experience directly the mental life of another. We cannot inspect directly the psychic processes that go on in other living beings, or in our fellow men. Mind is inferred from action, from behavior. Reactions, adjustments to environment, accompanied by consciousness, by intelligence in us, are rightly judged to have the same accompaniment in other beings, in our neighbours. To deny consciousness to our neighbour, and to regard him as a physiological automaton, is to put oneself in the absurd position of denying the existence of states which are observed in ourselves under similar conditions. In fact, the burden of proof falls on those who make such a denial.

Now, in the case of hypnosis or various states of dissociation, we meet with intelligent adjustments often expressed in gestures, writing, and speech. We can, by means of various methods, enter into active relationship with those dissociated activities, unknown to the individual himself. We can obtain intelligent replies to our questions either by writing, or by speaking, or by other arranged means of communication. What right I have we to deny consciousness in one case while we affirm it in another case under similar circumstances? When I receive a letter from my friend I

regard the letter as having been written by a being who possesses consciousness, but when a similar letter is written by a friend in a hypnotic or post-hypnotic state, we regard it as the result of physiological automatism, with no conscious accompaniment. It is clear that the denial of consciousness to the hypnotic individuality is purely arbitrary. It is certainly arbitrary in the case of double or multiple personality to regard one personality as conscious and the other personalities as purely automatic, with no consciousness in them. It would have been more consistent, if the psychologist were to take the solipsistic point of view and deny consciousness to all else except himself.

The arbitrary standpoint of the psychologist who denies secondary and multiple consciousness can be still further made clear in the case of coexistent, dissociated mental activity. Thus one hand of the subject or of the patient may write a letter, while the other hand may be engaged in drawing or writing a composition, of which the individual is not cognizant. Both hands enter independently of each other into communication with the external observer. The communications are independent and equally intelligent. In each case we get intelligent replies and reactions to our questions and stimulations. Which of the two is supposed to be conscious? To take a concrete experiment. Mr. M. presents phenomena of dissociation. When in one of those states of dissociation Mr. M. is made to write a letter with one hand, while the other hand, being anaesthetic, is put under a screen and made to carry out a calculation. One hand replies to questions, while the other solves problems. Both hands give intelligent replies. To which of them is consciousness to be ascribed? If we deny it in one case, we should also deny it in the other. But, then, why not be consistent, and deny it in every case of intelligent

adjustment? We realize how arbitrary and illogical is the position of those psychologists who coquet with physiology under the delusion that they are more scientific. They are led to take arbitrary positions which lead into the pitfalls of solipsism, with all its contradictions and absurdities.

Besides, physiological processes are, after all, but hypothetical concepts physiological currents are conceived after the model of electrical currents, and are by no means theoretically proven. While they should be used for the sake of a better elucidation of the facts, it is not good scientific sense to sacrifice to them the very material of the science of psychology. Sensations, ideas, feelings, emotions, are after all the direct data of the psychologist, while physiological processes and currents are purely hypothetical. When, therefore, these hypothetical entities lead not to a better understanding of the facts of mental life, but to their denial, the very purpose of the hypothetical creations is completely defeated. Physiological processes are framed to explain states of consciousness with their motor reactions. When, therefore, these hypothetical creations threaten to sweep away the actual living facts, it is time to halt and examine closely the sterile character of the hypothesis. The central fallacy lies in the tacit assumption that unknown and possibly unknowable, highly problematical brain currents, with their "opening and closing valves, with "well worn or blocked paths," all of a purely conjectural character, have, by their ingenious complexity become, like marionettes, so marvellously endowed with sense-like activities as to dispense completely with the mental states which these conceptual entities were called in to explain.

Clinical cases and experimental facts go further to invalidate the theory of the purely physical interpretation of the subconscious, or what may be described as automatism-psychology. If anything is of the utmost importance in mental life, it is surely memory. Memory forms a unity of our life, brings, so to speak, to a focus our life-experiences, which would have otherwise been disconnected, confused, and chaotic. I remember just now what I did an hour ago, a day ago, what I lived through many years ago. I remember the experiences of my childhood, boyhood, and youth. I remember my struggles and disappointments, my loves, my friendships, my enmities, my feelings, sentiments, emotions, ideas, and sensations. All these inter-connected, interlocked links of memories form the solid chain of my conscious personality.

In my memory of the past experiences there is the present consciousness that all that I had gone through at the time of the experience—any change, any modification, that had taken place—occurred in *my* mind, in *my* consciousness. Unless under delusion or illusion of memory we cannot remember what did not occur in consciousness. *We cannot remember what we were not conscious of.* The past mental state which the present memory refers to is a state of consciousness; otherwise memory is impossible and meaningless. Memory, recollection, reminiscence, can only refer to *a previous state of consciousness.* Surely no one else can have a better and more direct knowledge than I myself have of the ideas, emotions, and moods that I remember, as experienced by me.

The memory factor is all the more important in psychology, since we have to take account of the subject's inner experiences.

In each case of memory the burden of proof falls on those who deny the validity of that memory, as referring to a past state of consciousness. Suppose I have a memory in a full state of consciousness that I lighted a lamp an hour ago, the burden of proof would fall on those who deny the existence of such a state. It would be an arbitrary, if not a preposterous position for an outside observer to claim that the lighting of the lamp was carried out mechanically, by a physiological automatism, and that the subsequent memory was but an illusion. The onus of proof that the original act had no conscious accompaniment is entirely on those who take such a position in opposition to the direct introspective account. Where such a proof is not forthcoming, the position taken is arbitrary. Were we to take such a position, the very science of psychology would become an impossibility, since all memory would have to be declared a snare and a delusion. All psychological studies based on introspection, and memory would have to be abandoned, and we should have to follow Comte, and declare psychology an impossibility. A psychologist maintaining such a point of view is, from the very nature of his attitude, disqualified to give his opinion he must fall back on physiology, and rule out all psychology.

If, however, memory and introspection are not rejected, then the recollection of a conscious state should I not be arbitrarily dismissed, unless there are good reasons for such a dismissal. Now, the hypnotic subject, or the patient, in the case of functional psychosis, undergoes an experience of which he is apparently unconscious. In a subsequent state, in a hypnotic or trance state, he actually recollects that the experience was a conscious one; we cannot possibly reject this recollection as an illusion of memory. The burden of proof that the former state was not a conscious one

falls on him who denies the person's mental experience. Such a proof is all the more requisite, since it can be demonstrated that in subconscious states there is really present a subconscious consciousness.

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