A Cognitive Reinterpretation of Classical Introspectionism

The Relation between Introspection and Altered States of Consciousness and Their Mutual Relevance for a Cognitive Psychology of Metaphor and Felt Meaning

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Abstract. This paper is a step toward relinking the scattered subjectivist-pheno­menological traditions in psychology to offer some balance for our current “extraverted” obsession with the experimental management of information and computation. Felt meaning, physiognomy, and metaphor are crucial to such a Fechnerian endeavor, because these most subjective aspects of symbolic cognition are also most strikingly attuned to the qua­lia afforded by the environment.

Specifically, the striking overlap between the techniques and phenomena of altered states of consciousness and classical introspectionism, understood through a holistic cognitive perspective, exteriorizes normally masked aspects of metaphor—the syn­aesthetically mediated reorganization of microgenetic-iconic stages of perception. Titchener’s sensory-affective core has the place in a psychology of metaphor that it so lacked in functional perception (Gibson), and the disparity between Würzburg “im­palpables” of thought and Cornell imagery protocols can be resolved if we assume that all representational processes have a presentational aspect based on complex or geometric synesthesias. Support for this approach is drawn from Wittgenstein’s later notebooks.

For many individuals external reality remains to some extent a subjective phenomenon. In the extreme case the individual halluci­nates either at certain specific moments, or perhaps in a general­ized way. There exist all sorts of expressions for this state (“fey,” “not all there,” “feet off the ground,” “unreal”) and psychiatrically we refer to such individuals as schizoid... To balance this one

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would have to state that there are others who are so firmly an-
chored in objectively perceived reality that they are ill in the oppo-
site direction of being out of touch with the subjective world and
with the creative approach to fact.

Schizoid people are not satisfied with themselves any more
than are extroverts who cannot get in touch with dream. These two
groups of people come to us for psychotherapy because in the one
case they do not want to spend their lives irrevocably out of touch
with the facts of life, and in the other case because they feel
estranged from dream. They have a sense that something is wrong
and that there is a dissociation in their personalities, and they
would like to be helped to achieve ... a state of time-space integra-
tion in which there is one self containing everything instead of
dissociated elements that exist in compartments, or are scattered
around and left lying about.

This gives us our indication for therapeutic procedure—to
afford opportunity for formless experience, and for creative im-
ulses, motor and sensory, which are the stuff of playing. And on
the basis of playing is built the whole of man's experiential exis-
tence .... This if reflected back, but only if reflected back, be-
comes part of the organized individual personality, and eventually
this in summation makes the individual to be, to be found .... No
longer are we either introvert or extrovert. We experience life in the
area of transitional phenomena, in the exciting interweave of sub-
jectivity and objective observation, and in an area that is inter-
mediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared
reality of the world that is external to individuals.

D. W. Winnicott, 1971, pp. 64, 66–67

1. The Historical Fragmentation of a Psychology of Subjectivity
   and Its Potential Reintegration

It may seem somewhat quixotic to argue for a reintegration of the
various strands of the entire subjectivist-phenomenological tradition in
psychology by reinterpretting Titchenerian classical introspectionism as
a misplaced psychology of metaphor. Yet the actual fragmentation of
that tradition seems undeniable. First, we have the division between the
more formal descriptive types of phenomenology and introspection of
the 1920s and 1930s (with their extensions into research on mescaline,
Klüver, 1942), and the more applied psychologies of therapy and self-
actualization characteristic of the revival of interest in consciousness
beginning in the late 1950s. (The latter emerged from applied studies of
psychedelic drugs, meditation, hypnosis, and sensory deprivation.)