Modes of Normal Conscious Flow

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When we speak of consciousness we are referring to the sum total of events in awareness. The term by no means exhausts the realm of things psychological, but it does encompass all of an individual's direct experience. When we speak of the flow of consciousness we are referring to the changes that take place in consciousness over time. The events of consciousness are, of course, extremely complex and varied. They embrace images in every sensory modality and in every degree of vividness, realism, and believability, including inner dialogue, hallucinations, reveries, and dreamlike sequences; and they also embrace qualities that are at the same time less figured and more pervasive than these—the affects. This chapter focuses on a broad class of these conscious contents. They do not contain the imagery of current perceptual activity but they contain imaginal qualities that one can describe in terms of forms, colors, sounds, words, smells, tastes, temperatures, and the like. I shall refer to this class as "thought." This chapter brings together ideas and data regarding ways to observe thought, the dimensions and forms of thought, and the factors that determine the content of thought as it changes from one moment to the next.

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1. Methods for Observing Thought

1.1. General Considerations

Empirical science proceeds on the basis of observation. Scientists must do a good deal more than observe, but the current accepted truths of a science rest on a body of observations, and these must be the products of commonly accepted observational methods. Observational methods have been subject to more controversy in the study of consciousness than in most areas of scientific investigation, to the point that for some decades the conventional wisdom in psychology itself ruled out the possibility that appropriate methods could ever be devised. However, as behaviorist dogma has loosened its grip, psychologists interested in inner experience have in fact devised a number of methods for producing quantitative or quantifiable data. Since the strengths and limitations of these methods condition the body of results we shall unfold in this chapter, this section presents an overview of how observations of thought are currently being performed.

1.1.1. The Nature of Observation in the Science of Inner Experience. Observations of inner experience have long been regarded as in some important respects different from other kinds of scientific observation, but views of how they differ have changed. At one time, psychologists took pride in the belief that their science was the only one in direct contact with its subject matter, unlike other sciences whose experience of their subject matter was filtered through the distorting lenses of physical sensation. Following a long period in which introspective methods were denied the status of scientific observation altogether, the increasing acceptance of experiential reports is accompanied by recognition that reporting one's own inner experiences is a form of observation subject to the limitations that are necessarily imposed by the usual human processes of attention, selection, categorization, memory, and communication (e.g., Natsoulas, 1970). There is also another limitation: Whatever event one introspective observer can experience can never be experienced by any other observer. Therefore, no observation as such can ever be verified by a second observer. All that can be recorded and communicated is a greatly abbreviated, more or less distorted account, one not subject to psychometric assessments of reliability or validity.

How severely does this special limitation handicap observation of inner experience? Not very severely, I believe. The relevant question is not of handicap but of what special burdens this feature of