In Defense of Introspection

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INDEFENSE OF INTROSPECTION

by

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1. The traditional conception of inner sense.

“All ideas”, says Locke, “come from sensation and reflection”. He defines reflection as “the perception of the operations of our own minds within us” and goes on “though it be not sense, as having nothing to do with external objects, yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be called internal sense”. As examples of the operations of which reflection “takes notice” he mentions perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing and willing, but comments shortly afterward: ‘The term operations here I use in a large sense, as comprehending not barely the actions of the mind about its ideas, but some sort of passions arising sometimes from them, such as is the satisfaction or uneasiness arising from my thought’. (Essay Concerning Human Understanding, book II, chapter 1.)

This view of one’s awareness of one’s own states of mind is taken over without comment by Berkeley. At the outset of the main text of The Principles of Human Knowledge, he says that as well as “ideas actually imprinted on the senses”, there are ideas “such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind”. Hume, likewise, divides impressions, and the ideas derived from them, into “those of sensation, and those of reflection”, giving as instances of the latter ‘passions, desires and emotions’. (Treatise of Human Nature, book 1, part 1, section 2.)

The faculty of reflection, renamed ‘inner sense’ in accordance with Locke’s comparison, appears again in the philosophy of Kant. It first emerges in the Aesthetic of the first Critique, where time, as ‘the form of the internal sense, that is, of the institutions of self and of our internal state’, is distinguished from space, which is ‘the form of all phenomena of the external sense’.

This Lockean notion that there are two ultimate and distinct sources of empirical knowledge was a standard assumption of theorists of knowledge in the earlier part of the present century. In the epistemological writings of Russell, Moore, Broad and Price the distinction is expressed as that between sensation and introspection. But since the doubts, inspired by Wittgenstein, about the power of the argument from analogy to solve the problem of other minds first became widespread among theorists of knowledge, the notion of introspection has fallen into disfavour.

In certain quarters, however, the conviction persists that we do have direct knowledge or awareness of our own states of mind, that we do not have to observe our own speech and behavior in order to find out whether we are angry or elated or what we believe or hope or fear, and that, furthermore, we do often come to know, or at least reasonably to believe, such things about ourselves. It is my purpose here to defend this conviction.

2. Some verbal preliminaries.

There are good reasons for the dropping of the word ‘reflection’ as the standard term for referring to the capacity in question. The principal one is that in current speech the word is almost exclusively appropriated to thinking, as against any form of observation. One who reflects does, like one who turns his attention to his own
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present state of consciousness, withdraw his attention from the perceptible circumstances that surround him. ‘Let me reflect’ is a request to be spared from conversational intrusion for a while so that attention may be better directed elsewhere. Now often what one is reflecting about is rather whether one wants to follow some proposed course of action, which might seem to be a matter of careful observation of the state of one’s own desires, than whether one can follow it. But, in such a case, what is happening is that one is reasoning out what the costs and consequences of the proposal will be and not simply looking to see whether it is, as it stands, an attractive one or not.

Our current understanding of reflection as ratiocination rather than self-observation is not, perhaps, all that new. Leibniz, after all, took Locke to have acknowledged innate ideas by admitting that it is a source of knowledge coordinate with sensation.

Another, lesser, objection to the term for the purpose in hand is the suggestions it carries, although it does not entail them, of passivity and infallibility. Although much of our knowledge of, or belief about, our own mental states just comes to us unsought, even intrudes itself upon us, we can deliberately seek out such knowledge or belief. In this domain of interest we can be searchlights as well as mirrors. As for infallibility, although mirrors can be flawed or otherwise defective, the concept of a mirror-image is something of a paradigm for accuracy of registration.

If ‘reflection’ is too passive a word, its twentieth-century successor ‘introspection’ suffers to some extent from the opposite defect. To introspect is to seek in an attentive and purposive way, in ordinary, non-philosophical speech. An introspective person is not one who has a mass of detailed knowledge about his own states of mind so much as one who spends a lot of time seeking to acquire such knowledge. Similarly, a hero of introspection like Henry James is not so much endowed with the inner-directed analogue of very powerful eyesight as a dedicated investigator of the minute and precise detail of the stream of thought and feeling.

There are other candidates for the post. One is ‘self-consciousness’, sometimes preferred to ‘introspection’ just because of its freedom from any connection with the purposive direction of attention. But, as Ryle has noticed, it has another defect. A self-conscious person is one who is morbidly, or at least to an abnormally lavish extent, preoccupied with what he is doing or looks like and with the effect that his actions and appearances are likely to have. As for ‘self-knowledge’ and the closely related ‘self-awareness’, they, even more than ‘reflection’, carry an implication of infallibility. That, it might be argued, need not be a disadvantage. We are perfectly aware that our memories are unreliable and incomplete, even though it is impossible to remember what has not actually happened.

In the circumstances, since all the obvious candidates have their faults and no new coinage suggests itself, it seems best to stick to ‘introspection’. It is familiar in this employment, its defects are much less radical than those of ‘reflection’ and it has the stylistic merit of having a convenient adjectival form. To have noticed its possibly misleading implications should be sufficient protection against actually being misled.

3. The essentials of introspection.

What is involved in the claim that we have a power of introspection? The claim is that we have a capacity to acquire knowledge or form beliefs about our own states of mind which is analogous to ordinary sense-perception, but nevertheless distinct from it.
The crucial respect in which there is taken to be an analogy between outer and inner perception is that both are direct sources of knowledge or belief, in the sense that they are non-inferential. What that must mean here is not simply that as a matter of fact beliefs about one's own current states of mind do not ordinarily arise as the outcome of a process of inference, although it is, no doubt, broadly true. The point is that some beliefs about the minds of others may in fact be non-inferential in that way, even if most are not, so that on such an interpretation non-inferentiality would be a matter of degree and, as varying from person to person, would not be a property of the contents of belief as such, but only of them relative to particular believers.

What must be understood by non-inferentiality in this connection is that it is possessed by a belief which does not depend wholly on inference from other beliefs for its justification. The more familiar notion of the basic proposition is usually taken to be defined by a certain kind of non-inferentiality, namely of not needing support from other beliefs or propositions in order to be known for certain to be true. Another way of putting this would be to say that a proposition is basic in this strong sense if it can be justified conclusively without reliance on other beliefs. There is clearly a difference between the two kinds of non-inferentiality, partial and complete, just mentioned. But usually those who have supposed, as there is good reason to do, that there must be some beliefs which do not depend on other beliefs for their justification, have assumed that they must all be of the completely non-inferential, or incorrigible, kind. But the circularity of a coherence theory of knowledge or justified belief can be avoided without assuming completely non-inferential foundations.

This respect of analogy is of a fairly abstract or formal nature. Another, so general and obvious as to seem barely worth stating, is that the beliefs provided by sense-perception and introspection are singular, empirical and current, in the sense of concerning what is the case at the time they are formed. That they are current distinguishes them from memory-beliefs, which presuppose, but are, of course, not inferred from, previous beliefs of perception or introspection. That they are singular and empirical distinguishes them from non-inferential truths of a conceptual or analytic nature.

It may be thought that the analogy does not stretch very far. For one thing there is no parallel in introspection to the sense-organs that are characteristic of perception. Certainly we rely on clearly identifiable and familiar sense-organs - eyes, ears, nose, tongue, fingers - for the bulk of our perceptual beliefs. Furthermore the manipulation of these organs is a skill we acquire which makes it possible to gain much more information about our physical surroundings that we should have if we were passively confined to what simply thrust itself on us. The manipulability of our sense-organs is crucial for exploratory perception.

But there is one field of perceptual knowledge where clearly identifiable sense-organs are not employed: our perceptions of the states and positions of our bodies and their parts. How do I know that there is a fish-bone in my throat before I look in the mirror or pull it out and examine it with my eye? How do I know, without looking, that my left leg is crossed over my right leg; that I have twisted my head round to look over my right shoulder when I am up to neck in some opaque medium; that there is a stone or something of that sort in my shoe? These cases of bodily perception, although inner to the extent that they are concerned with what is in, on, or directly in contact with the body, are still cases of perception, instances of those extended uses of the sense of touch called muscular or kinaesthetic perception.
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This variety of uninferrred knowledge that we have about our own bodies has sometimes been called 'knowledge without observation', a piece of needless mystification. It is, undoubtedly, knowledge without vision, of something which is usually in principle visible, but, although philosophers of perception often write as if it were, sight is not our only sense. There is no great obscurity about the machinery of bodily perception. To start with the whole surface of the body is tactually sensitive, even if to varying degrees and generally much less than the paragons of touch--the finger tips. This tactual sensitivity is not confined to the body's surface, as we all know from visits to the dentist, but substantial regions of the body are largely devoid of it.

D.M. Armstrong has made the very important observation that perception of our own bodies is above all crucial if we are to engage in purposive bodily behavior. If we are consciously and deliberately to control what we are doing, we must have a continuous flow of perceptual information about the bodily parts involved in our programme of action. The role of tactual, but non-digital, perception of our own bodies in this becomes clear when one tries to do something with a limb that has gone to sleep, guiding it simply by eye, such as undressing or opening a letter.

In bodily perception, then, there is no determinate sense-organ, but there is a diffused network of sensitive surfaces which is the causally necessary mediator of the perceptual information involved. Is there anything of this kind in the introspective case to enlarge the analogy under consideration? Armstrong advances the purely speculative hypothesis of a self-scanning device in the brain, by means of which one part of it responds to and takes account of what is going on in other parts of it. That seems a reasonable conjecture but it is an imaginative extension of the other analogies between perception and introspection and not the discovery of a further likeness. However, it draws attention to an interesting point. The objects and events of which ordinary perception takes note are more or less remote from the body, sometimes very far away from it indeed. Thus there is an obvious and inescapable gap between the perceiver, physically conceived, and the perceived. In bodily perception of the tactual but non-digital kind the organ proper, the sensitive extremity, is at or near the surface of the body, in much the same place as the limbs or movements it perceives. It is surely the most plausible view of introspection that it consists in some transaction with events in or states of the brain, whether these are conceived as literally identical with mental states, as in the identity theory or central-state materialism, or as their causal correlates. In that case, as is assumed in Armstrong's speculation, both the introspective perceiving and the introspectively perceived will be inside the brain and thus both practically inaccessible to all but the most indirect perceptual investigation and also very small. It is thus not surprising that whatever the organ-like machinery of introspection may be, we should not have any straightforward common knowledge of it, as we have in abundance about our sense-organs proper and, in a less definite form, about our tactually sensitive surfaces as crucial to bodily perception.

It has been maintained by Geach that there is a defect of analogy between perception and introspection which shows them not to be coordinate at all, namely that there are no such things as introspective images. That is a very curious contention. One does not have to identify recollection with the having of images, to admit that imagery is very often the vehicle or, at any rate, the accompaniment of recollection. But one can as vividly recollect one's embarrassment as one can the visible state of affairs that was its occasion. Armstrong mentions the emotions one feels at a play as a further example of introspective imagery. What goes on when one interestedly looks over an old diary could be added.
Introspection is, then, like perception in being a non-inferentially justified source of singular, empirical beliefs about what is currently the case. If it does not obviously rely on organs in the way perception of what is external to the body does, bodily perception relies on sense-organs only in an attenuated way and the most plausible general view of the machinery of introspection implies that, if there is something that serves it as an organ, we should not be straightforwardly aware of it. Images are associated with both types of awareness.

4. The distinction of introspection and perception.

Let us turn to the distinction between the two. From a commonsensical point of view the basis of a distinction is plain enough: it lies in the nature of their objects. Perception has as its objects physical states of affairs acting on the perceiver; introspection has as its objects mental states of affairs going on in the mind of the introspector.

For most philosophers until rather recent times, this way of distinguishing the two is not available. The reason is, of course, that for most philosophers physical things are not the true objects of perception, but are inferred or constructed entities, somehow derived from the private impressions or sense-data which are the true and direct objects of perception. On the sense-datum theory, indeed, perception, properly understood, is not coordinate with introspection. It is, rather, a species of introspection, namely the non-inferential awareness of a particular, sensory variety of one's own states of mind.

That would not, as it stands, be fatal to the view that there is a distinction between the two. A species is not the same as the genus of which it is a species; it is also distinct in the fullest possible way from the other species of the genus in which it is contained.

But how, on this traditional view, are perceptual experience and the non-perceptual experience, which is the object of introspection proper, to be distinguished? It will not do to say that an experience is perceptual if it serves as a basis for inference to a conclusion about the physical. Pain, after all, is offered as the paradigm of introspection, yet we commonly form beliefs about the nature of the causes of pain from the felt character of the pains they cause us. What is odd about putting pain on the introspective side of the distinction is that it is the most interesting kind of bodily sensation. Yet sensation is taken to be the empirical core of perception.

Another possible criterion to distinguish the perceptual would be its spatial character. But to this, again, it could be objected that pain is experienced as located. Locke, it should be recalled, classed pleasure and pain as ideas of both sensation and reflection; of sensation when they were physical and localised in some part of the body, of reflection when they were not. But even if spatiality is a sufficient condition of the perceptual, it does not appear to be a necessary condition. We surely perceive smells, sounds and tastes; but we do not perceive them as spatial, although we perceive features of them, in particular intensity, which enable us to locate them, by way of their causes or the organs we perceive them with, in the space of sight and touch.

Since I do not accept the sense-datum theory of perception I am not really concerned with the problem of how one who does is to distinguish perception from introspection. I take the direct objects of perception to be public, material things, capable of existing unperceived and, for the most part, accessible on the same terms to different perceivers. I say 'for the most part' since there is a certain asymmetry of access with regard to bodily perception. A person has a way of finding out what
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is going on in his body which others do not have, what might be called the inwardly tactual, muscular and kinaesthetic, perception that he has of its state, position and movement. This gives him additional evidence, over and above the visual perceptions, or externally tactual ones, that he shares with others. But it is evidence of the same sort as is supplied by vision and external touch and can be overridden by it and needs to be confirmed by it.

But if a central state materialist theory of the nature of mental entities is combined with a direct realist theory of perception the problem of distinction breaks out again at a new level. For the sense-datum theorist who holds a Cartesian theory of mind, perception gets absorbed into introspection. For the direct realist who accepts the identity theory of mind, introspection appears to be absorbed into perception, since the objects of introspection, states of the brain, turn out to be physical.

On either combination of views the correct conclusion to draw is that perhaps there is no hard-and-fast distinction between outer and inner perception. Those who hold the two mentalist theories can say that introspection is non-inferential empirical awareness at that end of the continuum of such awareness where the beliefs acquired are not used as premises of inferences to an external world. Those who hold the two physicalist theories will locate the introspective at that end of the continuum of non-inferential empirical awareness where the belief acquired is minimally informative about the spatial character of the state of affairs it reports, locating it neither in the external world, in the literal sense of the world beyond the perceIVER's body, nor at some particular place in his body, but, if anywhere, as roughly where his body is.

After all, what is really at issue is the likeness and not the distinctness of our access to common material objects and our own states of mind. The closer the likeness, the shallower the distinction. The shallower the distinction the more forcibly the directly empirical nature of our consciousness of our own mental life is affirmed.

Before leaving the subject, however, one further proposal for distinguishing the two kinds of perception should be considered. It could be held that the natural registration of a belief acquired by sense-perception does not mention oneself (thus, 'there is a dead cat here'), while that of an introspective belief does (thus, 'I feel depressed' or, of course, 'I see a dead cat', which reports the introspective perceiving of a sense-perception and only derivatively the sense-perception itself). Here again what seems at first sight an attractive proposal, and all the more so for presupposing no formed views about the nature of the objects of the two kinds of perception, runs into difficulties with bodily perception.

For the most part, no doubt, bodily perception is reported not by talking about oneself, as a whole, but with the mention of some part of the body: 'my left arm is behind my back', 'my head is turned to the right', 'my foot has something digging into it'. But the last of those beliefs could be reexpressed as 'I have something digging into my foot'. We also say such things as 'I have a fishbone stuck in my throat' and again 'I am stuck in this narrow gap'. It may be that introspection proper can be separated from bodily perception in accordance with this proposal if it is amended to require that the mention of oneself that is a criterion of introspectiveness should not be replaceable by a reference to one's body as a whole or to some part of it. The equivalence of the two self-mentioning reports of bodily perception to 'my throat has a fish-bone stuck in it' and 'my body is stuck in this narrow gap' (admittedly not a very natural remark) marks them off from 'I feel depressed' or 'I wish it was Saturday' from which the first personal pronoun is ineliminable. There is a
feeling of depression’, for example, is simply incomplete, inviting the question ‘whose is it?’

This proposal confirms the propriety of calling introspection self-consciousness or self-knowledge. That way of speaking is sometimes objected to as implying that introspection always is, or at least contains as an essential part, an awareness of the self as something distinct from its states. In fact it does nothing of the sort. What Hume’s fruitless introspective self-exploration showed was not that he had no impression of the self, but that he had no simple impression of the self. From that, on his principles, it follows that he can have no simple idea of himself, but that leaves his possession of a complex idea of himself entirely open.

The upshot of this discussion is that the traditional idea that the nature of the distinction between sense-perception and introspection is so obvious and straightforward as not to need examination is mistaken. His particularly open to objection when this is assumed by philosophers who hold that the true and direct objects of sense-perception are sense-data, conceived as Berkeleyan, mind-dependent existences. But the difficulty of drawing a clear and explicit distinction, emphasized by the problem of accommodating the perceptions we have of our own bodies to it, does not undermine the main claim of the defender of introspection. That is that we have a non-inferential empirical awareness of particular facts about the current states of our own minds, even if these states are also states of our brains, and that this awareness does not depend on our ordinary sense-organs or on the diffused sensibility which we conceive as an extension of our sense of touch.

5. Incorrigibility and self-intimation.

To accept introspection in the sense just defined is not to accept the idea that our awareness of our own states of mind is infallible, as the Cartesian tradition (one might even call it Augustinian tradition) supposes.

In the first place, our current states of mind are not universally self-intimating, are not, that is to say, such that they cannot occur unless we are aware of them. There is a familiar formal argument for that conclusion. If I see a tree an event of sense-perception occurs in my mind. If, as is no doubt usually the case in such circumstances, I am introspectively aware of my perceiving the true, another, introspective, event occurs. It is the possible object of a further introspective occurrence. If I must be aware of everything that occurs in my mind each such event must generate an infinite series of awareness.

There are three ways in which this argument can be circumvented. One is to deny the distinction between the mental occurrence and the awareness of it. This is, in effect, the position of Locke, who says that the soul ‘must necessarily be conscious of its own perceptions’ and that ‘to suppose the soul to think, and the man not to perceive it is...to make two persons in one man’. A second is to restrict self-intimation to those elementary mental states that do not have mental states as their objects, in other words to say that all mental states are self-intimating except states of introspecting. A third is simply to reject the assumption that any mental states are self-intimating.

To many it seems simply self-evident, as against the Lockean proposal, that an object or state of affairs and the awareness of it cannot be one and the same. It is more effective, however, to draw attention to the fact that we have very good reason to suppose that there are many mental states whose possessors are unconscious of them. Our behaviour can show, in a way that we can subsequently be induced reasonably to accept, that we have perceived something or been in some emotional
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state or held some belief without being aware of the fact at the time it obtained. In that case both the first two responses are ruled out.

The other aspect of the infallibility traditionally ascribed to introspection is incorrigibility, the theory being that it follows from my believing something introspectively that it is true. This is different from self-intimation. To reject self-intimation is to allow that one can fail to have a belief about some mental state of one's own. To reject incorrigibility is to allow that one can have a false belief about a current mental state. Having no belief is not the same as having a false belief but one can easily lead to the other. If I do not believe I am jealous of someone, when I actually am, I shall form and express the belief that I am not jealous of him when I am asked if I am.

The problem about the thesis that introspection is incorrigible is to understand how it ever came to be believed. It is quite obvious that we do very often have false beliefs about our own mental states. The Socratic injunction, know thyself, is not a superfluity; it calls one to a difficult task. As far as character-traits are concerned, for example, their possessor is commonly far less well-informed about them than his intimates are.

What perhaps initiated this curious conception of the incorrigibility of our introspective beliefs is the Cartesian error of supposing that the epistemic peculiarities of 'I think' are possessed by all first-person reports of states of consciousness. By 'I think' Descartes meant 'I am conscious', in other words 'I am conscious of something or in some way or other'. That indeterminate assertion is self-verifying, in the sense that it being true is a logically necessary condition of its being asserted. The property of being self-verifying does not carry over to its specific, determinate forms. It does not follow from the fact that I say, state or assert that I am elated or embarrassed that I am. In general, self-verifyingness is a property of trivial assertions, such as that I am here, it is now, I am saying something. It is impossible to deceive someone with such an assertion, but one can easily deceive someone into believing that one is elated or embarrassed. Descartes' mistake was the result of his vague and unilluminating account of the distinguishing property of 'cogito' as that of being clear and distinct.

Self-verifyingness, being true if asserted, is one kind of incorrigibility; but there is another, that of being true if believed. It is widely supposed that that this is characteristic, either of all first-person reports of mental states, or at least of some fundamental class of such reports, the paradigm of which is 'I am in pain'. There is a strong case for the incorrigibility of the paradigm, although I do not think it is conclusive. Much of its strength comes from the indeterminacy of the claim. In saying such a thing we say only part of what we believe, which will be something more like 'I have a dull pain in my left knee'. But that can be interpreted so as to be compatible with one's not having a left knee.

Are reports of one's beliefs, emotions, desires and attitudes incorrigible in this way? The fact that they are not very often challenged should not be confused with the fact, if it is a fact, that they are usually true. We do, surely, often accept correction from others as to what we believe and feel. Whether we do or not, those who do not believe what we say about our beliefs and feelings do not have to suppose that we are saying what we know or believe to be false. But if such beliefs are true if believed they would have to make that supposition.

On the other hand it should be acknowledged that the possibility of false beliefs about current mental states does not by itself prove the corrigibility of introspection. For it may well be that many states are not directly introspectible. H.H. Price suggests this when he says, 'the contents of our own minds, or at least those con-
tents which are in any sense directly introspectible, are brief events rather than persisting entities. (Belief, p. 61) Yet a few lines later he talks of a leaden feeling of depression lasting all through the day as introspectible. Returning to the topic later in the book, he asks what his evidence is for believing that he is a timid person. 'My evidence' he goes on, 'is not just some other proposition which I believe. It is something I have noticed about myself. I have noticed on a great many occasions that I am easily frightened by persons, objects and situations which do not seem to frighten others at all'. (Belief, p. 104-5) He concludes, 'My evidence for believing that I am a timid person is the evidence of self-consciousness, the frequent experiences of fear which I have noticed in myself on many different sorts of occasions.'

Price's entirely realistic account of how he has come to believe he is a timid person makes it quite clear that his timidity is not something directly introspected by him. His evidence for it is other propositions which he believes. Some of these may be direct reports of introspection, those, namely, in which his feeling fear on various occasions are reported. But others are not: those, namely, in which the public circumstances of his feelings of fear are described and those reporting the fear of others and describing the circumstances in which it was felt. To believe that one is timid is doubly complex, one could say. In the first place it is dispositional; it asserts a persisting tendency or liability to feel fear in circumstances of various kinds. Secondly, it is comparative; it asserts that one's own tendency to feel fear is above average. On this account of the matter, introspection comes in only to discover the occurrent feelings of fear of one's own which are a rather small, if essential, part of the evidence required.

Now Price is a defender of introspection and one of the most thorough, careful and penetrating theorists of knowledge of this century. It is, therefore, strange that he should write so loosely about introspection. That he should do so is a symptom of a widespread reluctance to examine it directly. Broad devotes a substantial chapter of The Mind and Its Place in Nature to the topic and concludes that introspection is neither infallible nor exhaustive. But his treatment of it is unsystematic and partial. Much of his attention is devoted to the question of whether we introspect a self distinct from mental states and when he considers the introspection of mental states he is principally concerned with mental states of a perceptual kind. In general, the philosophical defenders of introspection never give it the kind of attention they give to sense-perception. If they had they would no more have regarded timidity as directly introspectible than they would regard solubility or expensiveness as directly perceptible. More recently, of course, introspection has been denied altogether.

Before going on to examine that denial this stage of the discussion may be concluded with the remark that, although introspection is neither exhaustive nor infallible, its fallibility has to be established by the relevant kind of case, those involving occurrent mental states, and not by consideration of beliefs about our own mental states which are clearly inferential, both as a matter of fact and as regards their justification.

6. The attack on introspection.

What has incited hostility to the idea of introspection has been the belief that knowledge about minds and mental states other than one's own cannot be justified by analogical argument. The first response to this conclusion was to suppose that while one's knowledge of one's own mind was introspective, the only knowledge others could have of one's mind was of the dispositions to behave in certain ways in which the inner states one introspected were in fact associated. But this position
had the consequence that ‘I am angry’ said by me at a given moment and ‘you are not angry’ said to me at the same moment are logically independent and could both be true, a consequence properly regarded as absurd.

The next step, which may be called Rylean, although Ryle took it with puzzling reservations, amongst them the reasonable thesis that introspection is retrospection, was to hold that all statements about mental states, in the first person as well as others, are really statements about dispositions to behaviour. Ryle’s central claim, one which in effect denies introspection, is that we know about ourselves in the same sort of way and on the same sort of evidence as others do. What he says is wholly true about long-term traits of character and has some bearing on (though one can hardly say: is partly true of) such mental states as belief and desire. But it is plainly and simply false of such mental events as bodily sensations, though ts present in one’s consciousness, sudden onsets of emotion or desire. Ryle’s readiness to talk about introspection as a reality is not necessarily at odds with the comprehensive behaviourism of his central doctrine. He may, in his references to introspection, be using it in a sense tailored to his general theory, that is as meaning whatever produces or justifies beliefs about one’s own mental states and that, on his general theory, is perception of one’s circumstances and behaviour together with inference therefrom.

But he does also talk of avowals, first-person reports of mental states in which we disclose (to ourselves as well as others, it seems) that we are in the mental states in question. This is an idiosyncratic version of a doctrine about pain-statements put forward by Wittgenstein, which seems to have been intended, and has widely been taken, to be applicable to many first-person reports (although it is hard to find out which ones it is limited to). There are two features of Wittgenstein’s view that are particularly relevant to the theory that introspection is the ultimate source of knowledge of oneself, in that they make that theory out to be answer to an improper question. The first is that the utterance ‘I am in pain’ is not really a statement but a variant or extension of natural pain-behaviour, in other words a kind of cry, but of a conventionalised kind, like ‘ouch’. The second is that since there is no sense to the statement ‘I think I am in pain but I am not sure’ there is no sense to the statement ‘I know I am in pain’. The upshot is that since my pains are not objects of knowledge for me there is no need to hunt for a way of knowing them.

The first of these two contentions is not wholly gratuitous. If I say ‘I believe the next train is at 6:30’ I am not so much reporting the fact about my current mental life that such a belief is part of it, as expressing the belief in a slightly diluted or qualified way. Likewise if I say ‘I want that one, please’ I am rather making a request than reporting the current state of my desires. ‘I don’t think you do’ is an inappropriate, or at any rate jocular and oblique, response to it, as is ‘are you sure that’s what you believe’ is to the remark about the 6:30 train. In Urmson’s useful phrase the occurrence of ‘believe’ and ‘want’ in these utterances is parenthetical. But their parenthetical use is dependent on their having a direct, non-parenthetical use. It also requires something for them to parenthesise: a proposition in one case, an object of desire in the other. Neither condition is satisfied in the case of ‘I am in pain’.

The second is an instance of a recently common philosophical fallacy which infers the senselessness of a mode or form of speech from its inappropriateness. Thus one should not say ‘I believe it is the 25th’ when one knows it is because that form of words suggests that one does not know: but if one knows it is the 25th one does believe it all the same. ‘I know I am in pain’, particularly if there is an emphasis on the ‘know’, suggests that there is some doubt about it that has been expressed or implied. But even if it is wrong to say it, in the absence of such doubt, it is still true.

These slightly bizarre attempts to deny that we are aware of our own mental
states in a special, proprietary way have somewhat lost their appeal. But that has not led to the revival of the idea of introspection. Instead we hear about self-ascription, which is the linguistic or assertive outcome of introspection, but not of the cognitive occurrence which underlies it and justifies it. This theoretical taciturnity is sometimes defended on the ground that the knowledge embodied in self-ascription is a kind of knowledge 'without criteria'. That is true to the extent that introspection is non-inferential, but that does not mean it is without grounds, only that the grounds do not take the form of independently entertained and specifiable beliefs. The grounds of self-ascription can still be investigated and described.

7. Towards a phenomenology of introspection.

'Belief', Russell said, 'is the most mental thing that we do'. It is certainly much more pervasive in our mental life than at first appears. To start with, a good many emotions involve beliefs about their objects, and as essential elements not just as causes. Fear, for instance, is, in part, the belief that something will harm one. Anger seems less closely connected to the belief that its object has harmed one at first glance, yet it is not enough to define anger as the desire to harm someone or something for such a desire would be purely malicious if it were not inspired by the belief that the harm desired was a reciprocation.

At any rate, belief would seem to be a reasonable starting-point among introspectible states. How do we find out what we believe? If someone, including myself, puts the question of whether I believe something to me, I then ask myself what I would say. If the question is 'do you believe that p?', I imagine what I should say if someone asked me 'is it the case that p?'. There is a likeness here to, but also a difference from, Ryle's account of avowals as 'disclosures by unstudied talk'. It is not that I find out what I believe from hearing what I actually do say, as he suggests, but that I find out by considering what I should say.

Most accounts of introspection, even wholly sympathetic ones, are very uninformative about its workings. In the case of belief, they seem to suggest, one just looks inwards, finds a proposition floating through one's consciousness, attended with some slightly more convincing-looking substitute for Hume's vivacity, a 'belief-feeling'. That, of course, raises the question pertinently put by Wittgenstein: how do you know that the feeling is a belief-feeling?

Similar imaginative envisagements of possible or likely action take place when one looks into one's desires and emotions. Do I want a cup of coffee? Well, would I briskly cross the room and pick up a cup if one suddenly appeared there? Am I angry with Mr. Jones? Well, how would I speak to him if I were suddenly alone with him?

In the central-state materialism of Armstrong although mental states are not identified with the disposition to manifest them in overt behaviour, a close relation is asserted between state and disposition: the state of a person which is apt to cause the manifesting behaviour. If that is correct, it is not surprising that to discover whether one is in such a state one tries to find out whether one would, in ideal circumstances, do what, if in such a state, one is likely to do.

I do not suggest that such a pattern is present in the case of pain, that in order to find out whether one is in pain, one has to think whether one would, if nobody was present to despise one's feebleness, cry out. In general, one does not need to find out that one is in pain, it is thrust upon one. Nor does the pattern apply to imagery, which of all mental items is most loosely attached to manifesting behaviour. To report one's imagery is, surely, what it has always been thought to be by the old
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empiricists who regarded so much of our mental life as the having of images, namely a kind of surrogate report of perception.

It is important to mention here, since the account I have given of introspection as the imaginative envisagement of probable behavior might seem the prelude to an account of introspection as the contemplation and description of images. It is not intended to be such a prelude; but, it may be asked, if it is not then what does the kind of imaginative exercise I have mentioned actually amount to? I would suggest that what follows putting to oneself a question is not an auditory image of one's own voice answering it, as if one were listening to a recording of oneself, but the incipient stages of the process of actually giving the answer. One knows what it is to say 'it is raining' in the ordinary way where one means what one says. In so far as hearing oneself utter the words is a part of what one knows at all, it is at most a very small part. Now before one has actually uttered anything one knows what one is about to say in most cases, though a lot of what we say is, no doubt, habitual, automatic and so unconsidered. What shows this is the fact that, after an interruption at the outset of a remark, one can without difficulty say what it was one was going to have said if one had not been interrupted. To speak deliberately is to have a plan of speech. I suggest that we find out what we believe by imaginatively assembling the conditions for the formation of such a plan, from which, as in the case of interruption, we can tell what it is we would say and thus do believe. I suggest further that plans of non-verbal conduct serve us in an analogous fashion when we introspect mental states other than beliefs, many of which, however, involve beliefs with some degree of logical intimacy.

What I have produced in this section is the barest sketch, but it is something that any theory of introspection has to supply if it is not to hide uncommunicatively behind the concept of self-ascription, which talks cheerfully about an arrival but has nothing to say about the journey, or, on the other hand, to represent introspection in the style of the old imagist account with its helpless dependence on feelings whose specifically representative qualities, as feelings of belief or anger or elation, are left wholly unexplained and, indeed, unexplainable.