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ON INTROSPECTION AND INTROSPECTIONISM[1]

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For some time now, the topics of introspection, inner experience and so-called first-person approaches to the mental, have been the subject of attention in philosophy, psychology and consciousness studies. Indeed, some philosophers (such as David Chalmers) think that a central task of the latter field is to systematically relate and integrate data about subjective experience (first-person data) and data about behavior and brain processes (third-person data).

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In psychology, Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) is a good example of an ongoing research effort to investigate the nature of inner experience. In a typical DES study, a 'DES investigator gives a subject a random beeper to take into her natural environments. When the beep sounds, the subject jots down notes about her ongoing experience. The subject repeats this process, typically collecting about six moments of experience in a sampling day. Within 24 hours the investigator interviews the subject. During this expositional interview subject and investigator collaborate to develop high fidelity accounts of each sampled moment

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of experience. This process is repeated over a number of days until an idiographic description of the subject's inner experience has been developed'.[2]

In the debate surrounding DES and similar proposals, the pre-behaviorist school of thought in psychology known as *introspectionism* is routinely pointed to, by defenders and critics alike, as the *archetypal* first-person approach to the study of psychology. An archetype is an original pattern or model from which copies are made. So, we might ask whether introspectionism is, in fact, a good, basic research pattern or scientific paradigm for current introspective approaches to be modeled on or copied from? The aim of this short paper is argue that while introspection should again be accepted as a legitimate source of scientific data about the mental (subject to appropriate epistemological and experimental constraints), introspectionism should not be revived.

In *The Disappearance of Introspection* William Lyons characterizes the period from the seventeenth century through the first decade of the twentieth century as 'the golden age of introspection' – and, in many respects, there is something to be said for this designation. During this period, René Descartes developed a system of philosophy with the self-reflective notion that 'I think, therefore I am' ('cogito, ergo sum') as its structural keystone. In empiricist thought, John Locke held that the mind is a blank sheet, *tabula rasa*, until experience furnishes the simple ideas out of which more complex mental content is created. He argues further, that simple ideas come from two main sources: sensation and *reflection* – the latter understood as the 'Perception of the Operations of our own Minds within us'. During the late part of this so-called golden age of introspection, experimental psychology came into being. The birth year of modern psychology was, it is widely held, 1879, when Wilhelm Wundt founded the first world's first laboratory of psychology at the University of Leipzig in Germany. In America, some two decades later, Wundt's

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student Edward B. Titchener (1867–1927), achieved a nationwide leadership position in experimental psychology.

Despite his fame as the great introspectionist in Anglo-American psychology, Titchener would in the first place have recognized himself as advancing a *structural psychology*. To explain his approach, he draws a parallel between the work done in experimental psychology and the work done in morphology, the branch of biology dealing with the structure of organisms. Like a morphologist analyzing the structure of organs and organisms, so the 'primary aim of the experimental psychologist' is to 'analyze the structure of mind; to ravel out the elemental processes from the tangle of consciousness'.

This sounds odd, to be sure. To understand Titchener's conception of psychology we must consult his general philosophy of science. To put it briefly, Titchener held that the objective of essentially every science can be generalized as follows: Within its domain of investigation it (1) finds that what appears to be simple (such as a cube of ice for the chemist or the feeling of anger, say, for the psychologist) is really a complex compound, it (2) identifies and isolates the simplest constituents of that unit, and it (3) organizes these indivisible constituents systematically (just like the Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev did in his periodic classification of the chemical elements). The crowning achievement for modern scientific chemistry was the formulation of the periodic table of the elements. It is fair to say that, for Titchener, the creation of a comparable table or system of the psychic elements would be a crowning achievement for psychology.

Philosophically, Titchener's system of psychology was based on three important, foundational notions. We can call these elementism, reductionism and sensationism. Let us consider each in turn. Elementism is the idea that a given system (here, human psychology) is composed of a number of ultimate, indivisible, atomic constituents that combine to produce complex wholes. As Titchener puts it in the book *Outline of Psychology* (New York: Macmillan,

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1896), the 'first object of the psychologist' is to 'ascertain the nature and number of the mental elements' (13). Accordingly, the psychologist 'takes up mental experiences, bit by bit, dividing and subdividing, until the division can go no further. When that point is reached, he has found a *conscious element*' (13). As in chemistry, these elements can be properly quantified and classified. The main difference is that, quantitatively, the number of basic elements in psychology is much greater than it is in chemistry. For example, Titchener offers a list of the 'full resources of the normal mind' which he believes to have shown to amount to at least *42,415* conscious elements (67). This includes 30,850 eye sensations, 11,550 ear sensations, 4 tongue sensations, 3 skin sensations and a small list of other sensation. 'Each one of these forty thousand qualities is a conscious element, distinct from all the rest, and altogether simple and unanalyzable.' Being *constituents* of the mental, each one of those elements, in turn, can be 'blended or connected with others in various ways, to form perceptions and ideas' (67).

Reductionism, in Titchenerian psychology, is the idea that human mental life can be understood by reducing or decomposing it to simpler complexes and, ultimately, to its irreducible building-blocks or constitutive elements. As a parallel, consider that modern chemistry plainly is a reductive project in that it offers us a conception of the highly complex macroscopic world we inhabit – every solid, liquid and gas – as reducible to some 118 basic elements (at present count), plus the wide range of their respective potential permutations and combinations. Similarly, according to Titchenerian psychology, every idea is 'built up from impressions' (16) and – correspondingly – 'every idea can be resolved into elements' (26). An idea, then, is 'a compound' that 'consists of a number of elemental processes, travelling side by side in consciousness'. As such, it 'resembles the compound bodies analyzed in the chemical laboratory' (27–8). It should be clear that, in Titchenerian

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psychology, reductionism and elementism were closely intertwined notions.

Sensationism is the idea that the elements of mind are *sensations*. What are sensations? Well, they are discrete, atomic sense qualities – like 'cold', 'blue', 'salt' and so on (28). As Titchener put it, '[t]he idea is a compound; it consists of a number of elemental processes, travelling side by side in consciousness ... [but] *the sensation resists analysis, just as do the chemical elements oxygen and hydrogen*. It stands to the idea as oxygen and hydrogen stand to water. Whatever test we put it to ... however persistent our attempt at analysis and however refined out method of investigation ... we end where we began: the sensation remains precisely what it was before we attacked it' (27–8, emphasis added). Like atoms combining into molecules, so the atomic sensory qualities combine into complex mental processes, such the experience of having ideas, feelings, wishes and so on. These mental molecules, in turn, unite to form consciousnesses, and a series of consciousnesses, as Titchener thought, makes up the whole mind of the individual man.

The problem with all this is that these sensations, from which our entire mental life is built up and to which it supposedly can be introspectively decomposed, are not really open to straightforward observation or experiential acquaintance. We do, of course, all experience 'cold', 'blue', 'salt', and so on – but *what we actually experience* is a cold gust of wind, a blue patch of light or a salty peanut. We don't ever experience isolated, elemental sensations. Surprisingly, perhaps, Titchener concedes this. Trying to turn the table on his critics, however, he calls the erroneous inability to grasp, introspectively, the elemental constituents of mind the *stimulus error*. And the stimulus error, as he put it, can only be overcome by 'long training'.

Now, Titchener's scheme of human mental life was, in fact, a vast *theoretical construct*. His array of atomic experiences were also – in fact – theoretical stipulations. As William James put it, in his *Principles of Psychology*, the

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notion of psychic atoms is 'mythological' and among 'the obscurest assumptions'. The Titchenerian elements of experience were not observational data but were, in fact, posited by theory. Titchener's views, then, contrast rather dramatically with contemporary introspective approaches in psychology. These aim, after all, precisely at capturing things as they are given in the subject's experience. Consider, again, DES. To clarify the nature of this project, Russell Hurlburt has defined it as seeking to describe the *pristine* inner experience of the subject. In other words, it is the aim and ambition of DES to describe the character of inner experience as it is naturally occurring, in natural everyday environments unshaped, as far as possible, by theory, expectations, and investigator bias.

It seems clear, then, that Titchener's methodology was far removed from what we today would regard as introspection. But how could introspection not be fundamental to a movement known today as … *introspection*ism? Well, remember what Titchener's own name for his psychology was structuralism, not introspectionism. The latter term was attached to his system by it *critics* – primarily the behaviorists. Late in his career, indeed, Titchener was quite willing to put aside talk about introspection entirely. 'I have avoided the term "consciousness",' he wrote in 1920, '[e]xperimental psychology made a serious effort to give it a scientific meaning; but the attempt has failed; the word is too slippery, and so is better discarded. The term "introspection" is, I have no doubt, travelling the same road; and I could easily have avoided it too.' He also warned firmly against the attempt to furnish a 'phenomenological account of mind' by which he means 'an account which purports to take mental phenomena at their face value' recording 'them as they are 'given' in everyday experience' as furnished by a 'naïve, common-sense, non-scientific observer'.[3]

A quick word, finally, about the philosophical background of Titchenerian psychology. Briefly put, Titchener inherited his scientific project from the pre-experimental tradition of British associationism. This was a highly speculative

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approach to the study of the mental, developed in the context of early modern empiricist philosophy. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and David Hume were early precursors of this school, and David Hartley, James Mill and John Stuart Mill were the mature-stage advocates of British associationism. Perhaps the most important British associationist was James Mill, father of the famous John Stuart Mill. Mill's main work in psychology was the *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829), where he shows how all complex mental and moral states, can be analyzed reductively into sensations, ideas, and trains of ideas.

During his early training in philosophy at Oxford, Titchener had made a close study of British associationist thought in general and James Mill's writings in particular. As he put it, autobiographically, it was 'a paragraph in James Mill ... that set me on the introspective track'. For both Titchener and Mill, the fundamental explanatory strategy was to *posit* elemental constituents of consciousness and then to seek to show atomic constituents explain mental phenomena more generally.

In sum, Titchener's psychological system was built around the idea of conducting a quasi-chemical decomposition of mental life into elemental, sensory and affective components. A much better term for Titchener's methodology than 'introspection' – and one he often used himself – is *psychological analysis*. Introspectionism, thus, is not a very promising archetype or scientific paradigm for scientific approach to the study of 'inner experience', such as Descriptive Experience Sampling, to rely on or to appeal to. Titchener's system was suffused by the notions of elementism, reductionism and sensationism. It was *not* characterized by a fundamental investigative reliance on introspection (as we today understand the term). Contemporary philosophers and psychologists seeking to use introspection should take great care not claim Titchener's work as their model – *unless*, of course, they also harbor the quixotic intention of defending the British associationist theory of mind and the Titchenerian philosophy of science.

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Notes

[1] This article is an abridged and amended version the talk entitled 'E. B. Titchener's Scientific Psychology', given at the 2012 Annual Conference of The British Society for the Philosophy of Science, 5–6 July, University of Stirling.

[2] Heavey, C. L., Hurlburt, R. T. & Lefforge, N. L., 'Descriptive Experience Sampling: A Method for Exploring Momentary Inner Experience', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* vol. 7, 2010, 345–368.

[3] 'Prolegomena to a Study of Introspection', *The American Journal of Psychology* vol. 23, 1912, 427–48.

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