

Self-Awareness

In the ancient world seekers of wisdom were often urged to 'know yourself'. The aim seems to be greater clarity about what your own mind is like, and especially about its implicit beliefs and hidden motivations. An appropriate mix of humility and self-confidence should presumably be the result. We might even hope to understand humanity in general by achieving understanding of ourselves, as typical specimens. In epistemology the foundationalist approach needs awareness of the contents of our own minds, to grasp the basic ideas, either as atoms of experience, or as a priori truths. Modern thought on the topic has suggested that these aims are far from straightforward. The experience of 'introspection' is not like watching the weather, and what is available to be known may be quite limited.

Introspection is talked of as if it were another way of perceiving things, like looking or listening. This would imply the existence of another mode of sense experience (alongside the five familiar modes), and a different type of sensation, like touch or smell. In practice introspection does not seem at all like that, and this may be a misleading picture. We also say that persons are 'self-aware', which perhaps makes them different in kind from non-human animals, suggesting that introspection is a permanent accompaniment to daily living. This too is not an accurate picture. When people are gripped by strong emotions like anger or fear, they are largely incapable of introspection, but even in normal experience, such as trying to cook lunch or catch a train, our experience is wholly filled by the objectives we are pursuing. Many people seem to be fully absorbed in outward activity, with introspection playing little part in their lives, except while waiting to fall asleep. Even awareness of your own body, which is a sort of self-awareness, focuses entirely on your limbs and organs, and hardly counts as 'knowing yourself'. This is not to deny that we all have second-order thoughts (thoughts about our thoughts), but these may concern a bad choice of lunch menu, or a bad route to the station, rather than focusing on how our minds work.

Because we cannot directly read other people's thoughts, the mind has a special sort of privacy (though neuroscientists may dream of breaching that privacy by reading the brain). Because of this, it is said that we have '**privileged access**' to our own minds, and hence there is the possibility of not only knowing things about ourselves that others cannot know, but also of that knowledge being incorrigible by others, and hence it might be known with certainty. This is the feature of introspection which appeals to foundationalists. However, we may make mistakes about such things, such as thinking that we believe in something or want something, until putting it to the test proves otherwise. Being incorrigible by others does not actually ensure that it is correct, and recent psychological research offers a lot of evidence that the reports of introspection (e.g. about our moral convictions) are quite wrong.

The modern view draws attention to **external** sources of information, to supplement (or even replace) introspection. It is now a commonplace that thought and language (and even the whole mind) have a dimension outside the body, in a cultural or language community, and self-awareness comes from other sources than private thinking. We look in mirrors, read our old diaries, and hear other people's comments about us. We may even observe our own behaviour with a little surprise, such as doing something unexpectedly brave. The extreme view ('anti-individualism') says our self is so enmeshed in external reality that self-knowledge is impossible.

If we agree that introspection allows some privileged access into our own minds (even if it is fallible), and that this can be supplemented by external reflections of our inner nature, then **what do we learn** about ourselves? It is striking how little consensus there is among thinkers who have discussed this question. Those who believe in the existence of the Self (or '**Ego**'), and in a human nature shared by nearly all of us, will claim to see proof of that within the mind, but others see the mind and self as an undetermined and free-flowing process with no landmarks, and will offer introspective reports that support their view equally well. It is particularly notable that some see the presence of a Self, as perceiver, believer, thinker, willer, rememberer, and hero of a life-story, but others see nothing of the kind.

There is much more agreement that we can know the **activities** themselves, whether or not the Self controls them. We can thoughtlessly perceive an object, but also be aware of the integration of our perceptions, such as sound and touch when we tap something. We know our beliefs (because we dislike attribution to us of beliefs we do not hold), but we cannot count our beliefs, and may never even have thought of them until they are needed. A central feature of the mind which we all experience is the ability to focus on things, and we may even chide ourselves when our attention wanders (suggesting a division in the will). An important aspect of thought seen in introspection is the presence of 'maps', which not only cover a locality such as your home, but also spread across time, such as the chronology of your life so far. The recollection of memories is an intriguing and exasperating phenomenon, as when we look for triggers to recall the name of a familiar actor. Emotions seem to have a dual aspect: if I am afraid of a large dog, I may entirely focus on the dog, but be less interested in a small spider than in my fear of it, and I may even feel fear when the emotion has no content at all. Introspection is no longer a fashionable source of knowledge, when compared to the objectivity of scientific research, but philosophers know that it remains endlessly fascinating.

The **sceptics** about self-awareness and self-knowledge are more impressed by its failures than its successes. We now know that many aspects of perception are non-conscious, and hence hidden from introspection. In general it seems that the traditional view that the mind is the same as our consciousness is entirely wrong, since concepts, beliefs, emotions, motivation, and nearly all of our attitudes such as hopes and fears, all have non-conscious aspects which have a huge influence. There are obvious doubts about our ability to know our selves directly. For example, if you think you can directly perceive your Self, what does it appear to be doing? If it is busy looking at the landscape, who is perceiving the Self? In the light of that puzzle, it seems axiomatic that we could never experience the Self, which means it is entirely inferred from our other experiences. But empiricists say that if you have no direct experience of it, it might as well drop out of the picture, as it is just an illusion, or a social construct, or a convenient linguistic device. Maybe the idea that experience must have an owner is entirely false, but accepted because we can't see an obvious way to challenge it.