

Psychology as Science of Self
II. The Nature of the Self
Mary Whiton Calkins (1908b)

Classics in the History of Psychology

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ONCE more to take account of stock, the following conclusions have been reached: The basal fact of psychology, implied both by idea and by mental function, is the conscious self; [1] this self stands in close relation to a body; and its varying experiences may, in part, be "explained" and classified by reference to correlated non-physical phenomena in particular by reference to nerve excitations, to muscular contractions, and to organic accommodations and controls. This self, finally, is no philosopher's or epistemologist's self: it should not, for example, be characterized as free, responsible, or endless, and the question of its more or less ultimate reality is never raised. [2] The psychologist takes for granted, without meta- [p. 65] physical reflection and on the ground of everyday observation that there are conscious selves, just as the botanist starts from the observation that there are plants, and the neurologist from the observation of nerve structures.

But it may well be urged that, the self, as so far considered, is a very empty sort of phenomenon to which, as yet, no positive characters have been attributed. Why, it may be objected, protest that the basal fact of psychology is not idea and not function, but self, if all that one actually knows of the self could as well be stated in terms of idea and of function -- that is, if one knows nothing of the self save that, on the one hand, it is sensationally, affectively and relationally conscious, and, on the other hand, that it functions adaptively or selectively? This is a fair question, but not (I think) unanswerable. On the contrary, the self is found to have certain positive characters, which do not belong to idea or to function. The self is, in the first place, in some degree permanent or persistent. By "persistence" is not meant the ultimate self-identity, which may well be part of the self as conceived by the philosopher, but rather the kind of identity of which one is immediately conscious notably in anticipating and in recognizing. Not only mental imagery, but the consciousness of myself as "the same ego then as now," [3] is essential to recognition; and the direct consciousness of self-identity is as immediate a constituent of any anticipation as the sensational and affective consciousness involved in it. It is plain that this character of immediately experienced persistence differentiates the self from its ideas. Every one admits, since Hume so brilliantly expounded the truth, that identity can not lie attributed to ideas (mental structures or contents) because these are, by hypothesis evanescent and fleeting. It follows that identity is a character of the self, not of the idea; and the fact that we are directly conscious of identity as part of our unambiguously mental experience becomes the most persuasive argument for the existence of a self which is not a mere series of ideas. It is not, on the other hand, at first sight so evident that persistence belongs to self, not to mental function. For, it may be urged, "functions . . . persist as well in mental as in physical life. We may never have twice exactly the same idea . . . , but general functions like memory [are] persistent." [4] But, if one scrutinize the real meaning of the statement "memory -- or reason, or will -- is a persistent function," one finds it to be [p. 66] simply this, that one and the same self at any time may remember, or reason, or will. The special function of remembering or of reasoning has as little permanence as the particular idea: that which persists is the rememberer or the reasoner.

The self is, in the second place, not only persistent, but inclusive; it is, in other words, a complex of

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ideas, functions, experiences. This is the character of the self which gives to the idea and function conceptions of psychology their hold on psychological thought; for against ideas or functions regarded as parts, or aspects, of the self no crucial objection need be urged. There is little need of further comment, for the complexity of self is admitted on any view of it.

A third significant character of the self is its uniqueness. This uniqueness is, of course, experienced most clearly in our emotional and volitional consciousness: when we reflect upon it we may describe it as a consciousness of a this which-could-not-be-replaced-by-another.[5] Now we simply are not conscious of ideas and functions as, in this sense, unique. A given self, with a different idea, is still this self; whereas a given idea is this or that idea according as it belongs to this or that self. I am I whether I see or hear, whether I fear or hope, but another self's vision or fear, however similar, is not this experience, but another. The emphasized consciousness of uniqueness may be described as individualizing consciousness and is a distinguishing character of certain experiences, notably of emotion and of will.

The fourth of these fundamental characters of the self is its relatedness. I think of myself not only as unique, but as related, not only as a this-not-another, but as a this-in-relation-with-another.[6] In other words, whether perceiving or thinking, feeling or willing, I am always conscious of something-other-than-myself to which I stand in some relation, receptive or assertive; and according as I am more emphatically conscious of myself, or of this "other," the relation may be termed egoistic or altruistic. This immediate, or direct, awareness not only of "myself," but of an other-than-self, is, as Ward and Stout insist, a truth to be admitted and not argued by the psychologist.[7] For the metaphysician and the epistemologist, indeed, "duality of subject and object" presents a problem; for the psychologist it is an admitted character of experience. It is important to note also that the immediately experienced self-relatedness differs from the relations inferred to exist between ideas in that the relation of one idea to another is an addition to the "idea," not an inherent part of it.[8] The term "mental function," on the other hand, when function is not limited to the strictly biological, might be used as a synonym for self-relation.[9]

The psychologist has next to characterize the other-than-self, or environment. This may be of various types: it may be personal -- that is, the self may be conscious of itself as related to other selves, or the environment may be abstractly conceived as the ideas or functions of the self -- that is, the self may relate itself to its own past or future, as in recognition and in some phases of willing; or, finally, the environment, may be realized as "impersonal" or "external." The first of these forms of the other-than-myself is, however, to my thinking, most significant. I can not, indeed, describe or distinguish myself except in terms of my relatedness to other selves:[10] if I drop out of my conception of myself the consciousness of being child, brother, friend, and citizen, I simply lose myself. The awareness of impersonal object, and still more the consciousness of idea, or function as distinct from self, are certainly later and less essential than the primary consciousness of other self -- as is indicated by the child's early tendency to personify inanimate objects.[11]

These Condensed and abstract statements are, I realize, insufficient to make vivid or every plausible this doctrine of the self. But, before attempting, in the following section, the more detailed description of consciousness in these terms I wish to emphasize the truth that all these characters of the self are immediately experienced. Only as such, I hold, have we a right to rise them in describing consciousness.[12] For though psychology like every science, [p. 68] deals with concepts reflectively formed, not with immediate experiences,[13] yet the peculiarity of psychology is precisely this, that it has to do with the concept of immediate experience. That which can not be immediately experienced is, in other words, no object of psychology. Now, the commonest objection to the doctrine that psychology is science of the self is the belief that self-consciousness is a relatively late stage in conscious experience.[14] This objection is due, I think, to the neglect of the distinction between the ever-present inchoate self-consciousness of each experience and the reflective consciousness of self which I have tried, in this paper, to formulate. In the former sense only, all consciousness is self-consciousness, that is, one never is conscious at all without an awareness, however vague, confused, unanalyzed, and unexpressed, of oneself-being-conscious. (Of course, I make this assertion on the basis of my own introspection -- for there is no other way of making it -- and it is open to others to disavow this experience. Such a denial of self-consciousness must, however, itself be based on introspection; and I believe that those who deny, always by their own account betray, this same vague and intimate awareness of self.) And if this be granted, it is evident that we must form our concept of consciousness from this, "the only experience immediately accessible to us." [15] It follows that there is no middle course between the conclusion that an animal

or a baby is unconscious and the inference that it possesses self-consciousness of the thin and undifferentiated sort already described. Such consciousness, it must be repeated, lies at a far remove from the reflective self-consciousness of the psychologist.

Footnotes

[1] This expression is, of course, tautological, but is employed to distinguish the conception of self from the Lockian concept of "soul" or "spiritual substance" which, on his view, might conceivably not be conscious. The statement that the self is basal fact of psychology does not, it may be added, forbid the psychologist to occupy himself temporarily with "idea," "function" or "experience" of the self, supposing that he always keeps in mind its abstract nature.

[2] If I understand the criticism of my teaching; expressed by Mr. W. Boyce Gibson in a sympathetic review (*Mind* 1906, N. S., 57, pp. 106 ff.) of "Der doppelte Standpunkt in der Psychologie," I should meet his objection that I neglect "the point of view of the personal experiment," which is also "a teleological point of view," by urging that this neglected point of view is (as Mr. Gibson indeed implies) a philosophical standpoint and thus outside the domain of the psychologist as such.

[3] Note 33 to Vol. II., Chapter XIV., § 7, of James Mill's "Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind."

[4] Angell, "The Province of Functional Psychology," loc. cit., p. 662. (Angell, however, does not make this assertion as an objection to self-psychology.)

[5] This will be recognized as Royce's analysis of individuality

[6] Cf. Judd, op. cit., p. 311.

[7] Cf. Ward, "On the Definition of Psychology," loc. cit., pp. 19 and 24.

[8] Hume's admissions of this, "A Treatise of Human Nature." Bk. I., Part IV., § 6, paragr. 3; Appendix; et al. By "relations inferred to exist, between ideas," I mean the relations assumed by associationist theories as holding between ideas; the causal relation, for example, of one idea to another. I do not, of course, refer to the relational elements of consciousness, which, as I believe, are inherent constituents of most ideas. (Cf. the first paragraphs of the next paper of this series.)

[9] I am not claiming that the terms function is generally so used, but that it might be so used, since the usual conception of function, "reaction on environment," includes the conception of relation to environment. Cf. a paper on "A Reconciliation between Structural and Functional Psychology," *Psychological Review* Vol. XIII. pp. 72 ff.

[10] Cf. J. M. Baldwin, "Mental Development in the Child and the Race," Chapter XI. § 3; J. Royce, "Studies in Good and Evil," pp. 33 ff.; and my "An Introduction to Psychology," p. 152.

[11] "For further discussion of this subject, cf. the next section.

[12] Cf. the emphatic teaching of Stumpf that file "immediately given" is the subject matter of psychology. Herein, he holds, psychology has all epistemologically advantage over the other sciences ("Zur Einteilung der Wissenschaften," *Abhandlung der kgl. preuss. Akad.*, 1907, p. 21; cf. also the monograph earlier cited). Professor Pillsbury's criticism of self-psychology, already quoted, proceeds entirely on the false assumption that the self is "presupposed" not "found."

[13] Cf. K. F. Pearson, op. cit., Chapter II., § 6; and W. C. D. Whetham, "The Recent Development of Physical Science," Chapter 1.

[14] Cf. Titchener, *Philosophical Review*, Vol. XV., p. 94. For a similar misconception, cf. A. E. Taylor, "Elements of Metaphysics," *Ilk.* IV., Chapter III., §§ 4-5. For another statement of my own position, cf. *Psychological Review*, Vol. XI II pp. 67, 68, and note.

[15] Cf. my paper on "The Limits of Genetic and of Comparative Psychology," *The British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. I., p. 283. For argument that the nature of animal consciousness must be inferred

from that of our own, cf. Ward, op. cit., p. 25.

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