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Are some mental states public events?

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The target article relies on a distinction between private and public mental events (sect. 5, para. 1), a distinction that is intuitively appealing but does not withstand critical examination. Lubinski & Thompson's (L&T's) definition of a private event uses a first-person criterion and an internality criterion.

Their first-person criterion defines private mental events as those about which only the subject speaks with unchallengeable authority. But L&T also believe that private events are part of the causal stream – that is, that they are caused by observable external events and may in turn cause observable external events. The notion of mental causality does not sit well with the notion of mental privacy because any event that is in the causal stream is providing constant public notice of itself.

L&T seem to be aware of this problem and so include within their definition of the first-person criterion the requirement that private knowledge be gathered by direct rather than indirect means. They seem to mean a distinction between a direct neural connection with the action and an indirect connection via behavioral observation. This distinction has an ephemeral appeal. Some neurons are relatively directly connected to activity in some other neurons. For instance, there are neurons in my spinal chord that clearly have direct access to information coming in from the "pain" sensors in my big toe. But this is a long way from saying that "I" have direct access to pain in my toe. First, activity in afferent pain fibers is not identical to pain. Second, "I" am not my spinal nuclei. So the part of my nervous system that decides whether my big toe hurts is not directly connected to the toe in this sense and is thus making a fallible inference on the basis of information from a variety of sources.

Still, a direct connection might be one that was inherently more reliable than an indirect one. In this case, to demonstrate that I have direct access to my mental states I need only show that I am better able to predict the causal consequences of these mental states than others. But this is not always the case. Sometimes, others predict my own reactions better than I. So, if L&T hope to validate the privacy of some mental states by the superior ability of the subject to predict that state's causal consequences, then they must concede that some mental states are public rather than private. Such an approach would suggest, among other things, an experiment in which their observer pigeons were given the opportunity to assess the drug state of their comrades without any communicative help from the drugged animal itself. I would be amazed if observer pigeons took as long as six months to learn to distinguish between a pigeon on cocaine and one on opium. Does this mean that drug states are public mental events?

The criterion of internal origin is as problematic as the first-person criterion. All the discriminated events in this study, whether they were injections or lights, began outside the body, were mediated within the body, and were realized in discriminated operants. The decision to focus on some events as internal and others as external thus requires some additional justification.

One obvious suggestion is that internal stimuli are those that *appear* internal to the subject and external stimuli are those that *appear* external. But this suggestion also fails. Consider, for instance, the irritating manner in which other people often behave when I have had too much coffee to drink. Is this a private mental event? In deciding whether an event is internal or external on the basis of the subject's experience, we must remember the Gelb disk. A Gelb disk may appear luminous because we assume that the light coming from it arises "internally" rather than "externally." But in fact, the disk is cleverly illuminated from a concealed light source. When this fact is demonstrated by placing a piece of paper in the path of the hidden light that illuminates the disk, the disk is seen as illuminated rather than as glowing. Thus, luminosity is not a characteristic internal to the disk but a characteristic of its relationship to other things in the visual field. Similarly, irritability is not a characteristic internal to individual persons but a characteristic of individuals' relationship to persons and objects in their surroundings. If the irritating aspects of my surroundings are cleverly "illuminated" with caffeine, I will perceive myself as good-humored and my environment as irritating. Only when my excessive coffee drinking is pointed out to

me do I perceive that the world is normal and I myself am drugged.

The experimenters present no evidence that the pigeons are experiencing their drug states as internal. Opium and cocaine may alter the pigeon's perception of its world in any of a variety of ways that may serve as a cue. Opium may make the cage feel warm. Cocaine may make it feel small and confining. And so on. For every hypothesized "internal event" there is a hypothesized "external" event that will produce effects that are indiscriminable to the pigeon.

The distinction between private and public events is a conceptual rather than a physical one. I have written elsewhere that psychology is the field that deals with the contrast between first- and third-person accounts (Thompson 1987). This rational reconstruction of the field of psychology fits nicely with the majority of its concepts, most of which seem to be concerned with explaining discrepancies between first- and third-person accounts. One of the most widespread of such explanatory psychological constructs – in fact, so widespread that we are hard pressed to think of it as such – is the distinction between private and public events. But like all such constructs, it is a cognitive achievement, not a fact of nature. As such, it is something to be explained by our cognitive theories, not a foundation on which these theories may be built.

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