New Directions in Philosophy and Cognitive Science

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This series brings together work that takes cognitive science in new directions. Hitherto, philosophical reflection on cognitive science – or perhaps better, philosophical contribution to the interdisciplinary field that is cognitive science – has for the most part come from philosophers with a commitment to a representationalist model of the mind.

However, as cognitive science continues to make advances, especially in its neuroscience and robotics aspects, there is growing discontent with the representationalism of traditional philosophical interpretations of cognition. Cognitive scientists and philosophers have turned to a variety of sources – phenomenology and dynamic systems theory foremost among them to date – to rethink cognition as the direction of the action of an embodied and affectively attuned organism embedded in its social world, a stance that sees representation as only one tool of cognition, and a derived one at that.

To foster this growing interest in rethinking traditional philosophical notions of cognition – using phenomenology, dynamic systems theory, and perhaps other approaches yet to be identified – we dedicate this series to ‘New Directions in Philosophy and Cognitive Science’.

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Rethinking Introspection
A Pluralist Approach to the First-Person Perspective

Jesse Butler
University of Central Arkansas, USA
For Blue
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Series Editors’ Foreword

One of the oldest and yet most difficult of the ancient Greek philosophical imperatives is ‘Know thyself’. A perhaps equally ancient association couples vision – theory – and truth. Combining the two leads us to introspection: the route to knowing yourself is to look within yourself.

As venerable as the introspective tradition is, it came under severe attack when philosophy and scientific psychology became allies. Cast aside for its impressionism and relativism, introspection spent the twentieth century banished from scientifically oriented philosophy, lost in the wilderness of poets, novelists, and phenomenologists.

If introspection is to be readmitted to polite company then, Jesse Butler argues, it will have to be rethought. And that rethinking shows it not to be a literal inward vision – despite a long series of philosophers who have used language suggesting that it is – but a metaphor grouping together multiple and heterogeneous processes.

The most basic of those processes, Butler shows, is revealed by the phenomenological method, which is not, pace its enemies, navel-gazing yielding subjective impressions, but rather the careful demonstration that our basic cognitive self-relation is non-reflective subjective awareness. As Butler puts it, ‘We know ourselves by being ourselves, not as objects but rather through the qualitative character of our experiences as living subjects’. This is a unique sort of knowledge, Butler claims, irreducible to the types of knowledge currently discussed in analytic philosophy of mind. Butler calls it the ‘existential constitution’ model and discusses it in relation to the classical phenomenologists and to contemporary thinkers.

Butler does not stop there, however. He goes on to show how non-reflective self-awareness is only one of our ‘introspective’ capacities; we can and do objectify ourselves for genuine and valid cognitive purposes. Such higher-level, reflective introspection occurs through the use of normal outwardly directed cognitive processes such as representation, conceptualization, and attention that we turn back on ourselves. To complete the picture, Butler also discusses the self-application of Theory of Mind, inner speech, and sociality and self-knowledge.
All in all, then, Butler’s *Rethinking Introspection* shows how the ancient theme of introspection, when brought back from exile and appropriately rethought, offers widespread and important current application.

*John Protevi, Louisiana State University*

*Michael Wheeler, University of Stirling*
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Although much has changed since, this book began as my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Oklahoma, where I benefited from the fine guidance of Jim Hawthorne, Chris Swoyer, Ray Elugardo, Wayne Riggs, Lynn Devenport, and many others while carving out the basic framework that has become this book. Many more people have contributed to the discussion and refinement of the content since, especially my friends and colleagues at the University of Central Arkansas and all the folks who offered their thoughts on my work at conferences. I thank you all for your helpful feedback and kind support.

Some of the work presented in Chapter 4 appeared previously in my article ‘Introspective Knowledge of Experience and Its Role in Consciousness Studies’ in the Journal of Consciousness Studies, which I thank for permission to republish portions of that article here. The content of Chapter 8 (and aspects of Chapter 7) was initially mapped out in 2009 through a summer research stipend from the University Research Council at the University of Central Arkansas. I am grateful for the support.
Introduction

When considering our first-person knowledge of our own minds, whether with regard to immediate awareness of a sensory experience, reflection upon one's own beliefs or desires, deliberation concerning one's character, or metaphysical soul-searching about one's ultimate nature, we commonly appeal to the concept of introspection. But what exactly are we talking about when we speak of introspection? Do we literally perceive our own mental states, as the term seems to suggest, or are there other processes at work in our ability to know our own minds? Can introspection be trusted as a viable or even privileged source of knowledge, as many have claimed and many others have simply assumed, or are there significant barriers, problems, and limits regarding what we can know about our own minds from our own first-person perspective? This book offers a pluralistic framework for understanding these issues regarding the nature and epistemic properties of introspection. At the core of this framework is the idea that introspection is a multi-faceted phenomenon that cannot be limited to a single cognitive mechanism or epistemic characterization. There are many different ways in which we engage in introspection and, correspondingly, a variety of different epistemic dimensions involved in our first-person understanding of our own minds. Through presentation and analysis of these various aspects of introspection, I illustrate how we know, and sometimes fail to know, our own minds.

The first step in this reevaluation of introspection is to recognize that the standard and somewhat intuitive understanding of introspection as an inner perceptual faculty is mistaken. People often think of introspection literally, as inner perception, but we do not really perceive the contents of our own minds, inside a so-called mind’s eye. As I will argue, this perceptual account of introspection is a result of pervasive
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and unintentional use of perceptual metaphors in our general understanding of knowledge. This is not to say that we should stop using the concept of introspection to refer to our first-person knowledge of our own minds, however. Just as we continue to talk of the sun rising and setting while knowing that the rotation of the earth is the actual cause of what we are observing, we can continue to employ the term ‘introspection’ to refer to our first-person knowledge of our own minds while recognizing that what we are referring to is actually a heterogeneous collection of different ways of knowing our own minds.

With this clarification regarding the concept of introspection established, we can ‘see’ the diverse phenomena at work behind our ability to know our own minds from our own first-person perspective. First, there is the experiential knowledge that we have of our own conscious mental states simply in virtue of being ourselves, as conscious beings embodied in the world. This very basic component of self-knowledge, which I characterize as a kind of phenomenal knowledge that is intrinsic to one’s own conscious experience, is the topic of Chapter 4. Through the development of what I call the existential constitution model of phenomenal knowledge, I argue that this phenomenal knowledge is a unique kind of knowledge that plays a constitutive role in our knowledge of our own minds. Next is the higher-level introspective knowledge we acquire through our mind’s representational, conceptual, and attention-facilitated abilities, which we routinely use in our engagement with the external world but can also recursively apply to our own mental states. I introduce these cognitive processes as aspects of our introspective capacities in Chapter 5, defending a somewhat reductionist account of the cognitive processes involved in higher-order introspection. It is a reductionist account in the sense that it explains our introspective abilities through faculties that are already present in human cognitive systems, irrespective of any particular introspective functions they may perform, thereby explaining our high-level capacities to reflect upon our own minds through the more general cognitive capacities of the human mind. In Chapter 6, I develop this account further by analyzing a somewhat more specific element of this domain: the use of folk psychology, the common-sense understanding of mental states that enables us to conceptualize others as intentional beings with their own beliefs and desires, to understand prominent aspects of ourselves. Drawing upon some important and revealing empirical discoveries, I argue that we often understand ourselves through the application of folk psychological concepts to our own mental states, thereby understanding ourselves through the same interpretive structures that we use
to understand the minds of other people. In Chapter 7, I present and discuss several different ways in which language, through the prominent phenomenon of inner speech, contributes to our ability to know our own minds, but also simultaneously allows for epistemic error and even self-deception. In the final chapter, I take a look at the social side of introspection, considering how our introspective knowledge extends into the social processes that surround our lives. Taken together, these various faculties and processes provide a viable framework for understanding introspection.

Throughout my discussion of these rather diverse aspects of introspection, one key goal is to map out the epistemic dimensions of our capacity to know, and fail to know, our own minds from our first-person perspective. Corresponding to the fundamentally different kinds of introspective processes outlined above, there are distinctly different epistemic characterizations of the nature and extent of our knowledge of our own minds. As I will argue, some introspective faculties provide unique ways of knowing our own minds that do not fit standard models of knowledge and are not subject to typical epistemic error, such as the experiential self-knowledge intrinsic to being in a conscious state and the self-determining truth values of some types of inner speech utterances (such as thinking the thought ‘I am thinking’ to oneself). However, many other kinds of introspection are subject to the possibility of epistemic error, such as the capacity to misrepresent anything that is mediated through representational concepts and the capacity to deceive ourselves through the narratives we construct with inner speech commentary upon ourselves and our experiences. The consideration of these various traits illustrates how introspection includes a rather broad range of epistemic properties that cannot be neatly contained within a one-dimensional characterization of the epistemology of introspection.

By drawing attention to this broad epistemic range of introspection, I hope to clarify the needless and misguided debate concerning whether introspection is special and privileged or fallible and untrustworthy. Can we trust introspection? This question simply cannot be answered with a singular yes or no. Instead, introspection, as a diverse phenomenon, is spread out across numerous characteristics, some of which are trustworthy and some of which are not. Realization of this fact is long overdue in the various disciplines investigating the human mind, where perspectives on introspection have been polarized by one-dimensional characterizations, from the categorically dismissive attitude that has been prominent in mainstream psychology since the decline and
rejection of the early ‘introspectionists’ to those in philosophy who regard introspection as a privileged, authoritative, and/or foundational source of knowledge. Introspection cannot be accurately squeezed into either of these characterizations, and is best regarded as a multi-faceted phenomenon with both privileged and fallible epistemic elements.

In addition to offering a pluralist account of introspection, this book is methodologically pluralistic. I will follow a naturalistic but methodologically diverse explanatory approach, drawing upon a variety of fields of study for both conceptual development and supporting evidence. This book is first and foremost a work in philosophy, but it also integrates ideas and observations from relevant sciences, including cognitive, social, and evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, and sociology. Even within the domain of philosophy, it will be methodologically diverse and integrative. Much of what I will address stems from, and critically engages with, work in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, but I will also utilize and engage in varying degrees with phenomenology, existentialism, pragmatism, and ordinary language philosophy, insofar as they present relevant considerations for understanding the phenomena involved in introspection. I do not draw any principled exclusionary lines in the sand between theoretical orientations, contrary to the common tendency to divide philosophy into warring camps pitted against one another. Instead, I prefer to draw upon multiple theoretical backgrounds, pragmatically determined by whatever considerations are needed to pursue truth, understanding, and clarification regarding the topic at hand.

It is worth noting that this work is not unique in following a pluralist methodology. For example, some philosophers concerned with understanding the mind have advocated a triangulated approach, such that experiential phenomenology, explanatory theory, and empirical observation are all each given their due in approaching a sufficient understanding of the mind (e.g., Flanagan, 1992; Gallagher, 2008). I agree that all three of these factors must be taken together if we are to progress in our understanding of the mind, and likewise follow a similar pluralist approach in this book.

Not all accounts and perspectives are equally plausible, however. It is important to note that pluralism does not entail that all methods, accounts, and/or explanations are to be accepted. Indeed, as we will see in the first two chapters of this book, some accounts do not hold up to sustained pluralistic inquiry, even though they may pass muster from one particular perspective or other. In approaching truth and avoiding falsity, our claims about the mind ought to be held accountable to all