



The behavioral, experiential and conceptual dimensions of psychological phenomena: Body, soul and spirit[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Psychological phenomena can be described on different levels of analysis: on an experiential level (e.g., what is it like to be attentive); and on a behavioral level (e.g., how does it become evident that someone is attentive). In the following, we outline how the widely prevalent focus on exclusively behavioral characteristics is insufficient and how our understanding of psychological phenomena can be enriched by taking the qualitative dimension of experience into consideration. We then scrutinize components of this experiential realm and report how it provides the stage for a third level: conceptual insight (e.g., what types or phases of attention can be distinguished). We subsequently look at the history of science and relate the behavioral aspect to the material realm (the realm of the body); the experiential aspect to what has been historically referred to as the soul realm; and the conceptual aspect to what has been historically referred to as the spirit realm. Finally, we add a first-person trial to delineate these concepts further and scrutinize them in light of contemporary theory-building.

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Early on in their education students of psychology are still prepared to ask unorthodox questions such as that about the human soul and spirit. Occasionally, this also happens in our own classes – and as the psychologist in the team I (U.W.) typically experience a mild anxiety in these moments because of a dilemma that I am now confronted with: on the one hand, this topic is anathema in the discipline and many academics consider it not to belong into the psychological curriculum to begin with. To illustrate: Last year – in 2014 – only 387 publications with the word “soul” in the article-title were listed on ISI Web of Knowledge, in comparison to 37,422 listings with the word “brain” in the title. When the search was limited to listings in *psychological journals*,¹ only 2 outputs with the word “soul” in the article title were listed for 2014. Within the academic community there is thus a certain disinterest, perhaps an active disregard as to this theme and I

likewise notice a certain reluctance within me to take a position that may face the trouble of this opposition (especially when it comes to submitting journal articles for peer-review). On the other hand, I have struggled with this theme for too long to be able to simply brush such questions aside and pretend that there is nothing to say about this topic. The current research emerged as an effort to come to grips with this quandary.

To begin with, the question about soul and spirit comes with a certain justification in the psychological curriculum: the name of the profession is rather promising in this direction and psychology as a discipline grew out of philosophy and theology – two disciplines that have these issues at their heart. As a matter of fact, a range of phenomena that traditional schools of philosophy have described as involving soul and spirit dimensions are no longer named and understood as such because the assumption is that they can be explained from an exclusively material point of view. Examples are intentionality, executive control or voluntary memory recall, among many others – phenomena that without doubt have a material component (relying on the brain and actually the whole body) but that also reveal an inherent current of inner activity of which a possible source of origin has not yet been observed in the material realm.

In parallel to this one-sidedness in our theoretical understanding, the methods of inward enquiry that have traditionally been used by psychologists – see, for instance, the Würzburg school of

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¹ This was achieved by requesting articles that appeared in journals with a journal name that included the word psychol* – e.g., *Psychological Science* or *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*. The search was conducted on 9.6.2015.

introspection – have likewise been abandoned. But by now, many findings illustrate that psychological phenomena cannot be explained from an exclusively material point of view (for reviews, see Majorek, 2012; Miller, 2010). As we see it, this omission leaves significant gaps in our understanding of core psychological concepts. Our view is that when beginning to advance and re-integrate the methods of inner enquiry into the psychologist's research repertoire, it will also become possible to reconnect to – and to more systematically enquire into – our experiential awareness of psychological phenomena. The experiential, as we understand it, is the access point to the non-material side of psychological phenomena. It has historically been differentiated further into qualities of soul (experiential in an extended sense) and spirit (conceptual; e.g., Steiner, 1904/2003). According to this distinction, the soul is the individualizing element in our relationship to the world – the individual configuration of thoughts, feelings and will impulses in their experiential, non-material dimension; the spirit, on the other hand, is the bridge to universal principles (including the conceptual) that do not remain isolated entities but unfold into the other realms and can be accessed through thinking.² While the primary realm of appearance of material aspects is space, the primary realm of appearance of the soul is time (particularly evident in rhythmic processes such as the changes of breathing or heartbeat as a function of changes in experience); and finally, the primary realm of appearance of the spirit is the space- and time-less realm (e.g., the conceptual realm as one form of expression of the spiritual). We will come back to this distinction in more detail later on. Suffice it to say here that the distinction between the experiential and the conceptual does not mean that the conceptual has to reside outside of the experiential realm; on the contrary, the conceptual reveals itself to human consciousness only through the experiential and is accessible through our thinking. The conceptual depends on the experiential to the extent that it manifests as a conscious reality that becomes directly and immediately evident. As such, the conceptual (spiritual) can enrich and inspire our soul life (and that is: the experiential side of our feeling-, thinking-, and action/intention-life) but these experiences are part of the soul realm (the individualizing element), not the conceptual/spiritual realm (the universal element). The experiential and conceptual as umbrella domains are already part and parcel of our account of psychological phenomena anyway, e.g. in the way we typically understand the conscious experiential side of mental representations and operations (e.g., the experience of meaning in conceptual representations; processes of intentional memory recall; conscious decision making; logical reasoning; and the like); but they are typically considered to be emanations of material processes and are not understood as primary dimensions of their own.

Going further, the outcome of this material focus is that the other, non-material dimensions have receded out of sight: soul and spirit are largely abandoned from our *explicit* theory-building as well as from our *explicit* vocabulary – only to re-surface *implicitly* from the other end in speculative concepts such as the assumptions underlying the so-called emergence or supervenience accounts as well as models of autopoiesis, neuronal computational models or homunculus models (the latter of which are actually frequently criticized by neurophilosophers). We hypothesize that in recognizing and researching the importance of qualitative awareness as the gate to the experiential and conceptual facets of a psychological

phenomenon it will become possible to reconnect to the neglected but undeniable non-material facets of psychological phenomena; and to thereby begin to close the existing explanatory gaps between the material and the experiential/conceptual side of these psychological phenomena – gaps that only on the surface appear insurmountable. Note that we can easily appreciate the experiential and the conceptual dimension of psychological phenomena already in our normal state of waking consciousness – after all we are capable of conceptual thinking during normal wakefulness. On top of this, however, a methodologically developed (i.e. research-led) form of inner enquiry allows us to explore these experiential and conceptual dimensions more deeply, for instance by investigating the processes that allow the researcher to transition from one experiential/conceptual state to another (e.g., from cognitive dissonance to consistency). These more subtle cognitive events are not normally accessible to consciousness but can become conscious when inward research methods are systematically developed. Also note that by experience we do not mean a fuzzy or generalized feeling but an immediate immersion into a content of consciousness that can take the form of a passive (receiving) as well as an active (producing) mode of engagement; the former mode takes on an imprint from this content, the latter mode seeks to deliberately affect it.

In the next sections we will pursue the following steps: (1) We question purely cognitive-behavioral accounts of psychological phenomena, using an introductory example to illustrate our point. (2) We illuminate limitations and historic concerns about introspection. (3) We illustrate how these concerns can be addressed and how a more rigorous and systematic form of introspection allows for a deepened enquiry into the different dimensions of psychological phenomena. (4) We differentiate these experiential dimensions into ones of an individual activity (receptive/productive); and ones of a conceptual nature; and relate those to what has been historically referred to as soul (individual experience and mental activity) and spirit (universal concept and meaning) dimensions of psychological phenomena. (5) We pursue a systematic first-person enquiry and scrutinize our own understanding of mental activity (soul) and conceptual (spirit) dimensions. (6) Finally, we will close our discussion with a concluding section and discuss the implications of our work.

1. Limitations of a purely cognitive-behavioral account

To begin with, we wish to illustrate the shortcomings of a purely behavioral account of psychological phenomena that disregards their experiential and conceptual dimensions, using a recent example that received prominent attention in the academic community. We use this example to highlight the need for a more balanced account of the different facets of psychological phenomena, not only their outwardly measurable/behavioral side. Following this we will illustrate the potential of considering inward/qualitative dimensions of experience.

In a recent article entitled *Cognitive systems for revenge and forgiveness*, McCullough, Kurzban, and Tabak (2013) provide a cognitive account of two core and under-researched psychological phenomena. Early on the authors indicate that they take a cognitive point of view by using cognitive terminology in line with a behavioral account of the phenomena (underlining added here to highlight what we see as abstractions that are in need of explanation of their own because they postulate abstract mechanisms or homunculus processes): “We posit that mechanisms for revenge are designed to deter harm, and that forgiveness mechanisms are designed to solve problems related to the preservations of valuable relationships...” (McCullough et al., p. 2). The authors then cite a number of definitions to shed light on what is meant by revenge. We argue that it would have been beneficial at this point to explore

² As an example take, for instance, Aristotle's distinction between form and content/material: form (morphē) is not the same as matter (hylē) – but form appears upon matter (Aristotle, 1994, 1042 b). Form is a non-material, conceptual dimension (the spirit realm) that is grasped and understood in this genuine conceptual nature only in our thinking.

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