

Cultivating Attentional Intelligence

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Attentional Imbalances

- Laxity (deficit): loss of clarity and vividness of attention
- Excitation (hyperactivity): involuntary agitation and distraction driven by compulsive desires
- Attentional dysfunction: attending in afflictive ways

Attention and the World of Experience

William James (1842–1910):

- “The subjects adhered to become real subjects, attributes adhered to real attributes, the existence adhered to real existence; whilst the subjects disregarded become imaginary subjects, the attributes disregarded erroneous attributes, and the existence disregarded an existence in no man’s land, in the limbo ‘where footless fancies dwell.’... Habitually and practically we do not count these disregarded things as existents at all... they are not even treated as appearances; they are treated as if they were mere waste, equivalent to nothing at all.”
- “Each of us literally chooses, by his ways of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit.”

Attention & Education

William James:

- “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will...An education which should improve this faculty would be *the education par excellence*. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about.”
- In education, “the power of voluntarily attending is the point of the whole procedure. Just as a balance turns on its knife-edges, so upon it our moral destiny turns.”

Attention and Inner Strength

William James:

A person “who has daily inured himself to habits of concentrated attention, energetic volition, and self-denial in unnecessary things...will stand like a tower when everything rocks around him, and his softer fellow-mortals are winnowed like chaff in the blast.”

Is Attention Trainable?

William James:

- “There is no such thing as voluntary attention sustained for more than a few seconds at a time. What is called sustained voluntary attention is a repetition of successive efforts which bring back the topic to the mind.”
- “The possession of such a steady faculty of attention is unquestionably a great boon. Those who have it can work more rapidly, and with less nervous wear and tear. I am inclined to think that no one who is without it naturally can by any amount of drill or discipline attain it in a very high degree. Its amount is probably a fixed characteristic of the individual.”
- Geniuses are commonly thought to excel in their capacity for sustained voluntary attention; but he quickly adds, “*it is their genius making them attentive, not their attention making geniuses of them.*”

Three Goals of Attentional Training

- Relaxation: the sense of bodily and mental ease
- Stability: continuity and coherence of attention on an object
- Vividness: brightness, resolution, and focus of attention

Two Faculties for Refining Attention

- **Mindfulness:** the faculty of sustaining voluntary attention continuously upon a familiar object, without forgetfulness or distraction
- **Introspection:** the faculty of monitoring the mind, recognizing the occurrence of excitation and laxity

Mindfulness of Breathing

- Retrospective mindfulness (long-term memory) of instructions
- Present-centered mindfulness of the breath
- Prospective mindfulness of the occurrence of laxity and excitation

Observing the Mind

- Present-centered, “real time” mindfulness of the space of the mind and its “objective” contents, e.g., discursive thoughts, mental images, and dream events
- Retrospective mindfulness, in the form of working memory, of “subjective” mental processes, e.g., emotions and desires
- Prospective mindfulness of the occurrence of laxity and excitation

Challenges for Introspection

- Edward B. Titchener (1867–1927): the main difficulties of introspection are “maintaining constant attention,” “avoiding bias,” and “knowing what to look for.”
- Challenges for introspection:
 - Unstable and impossible to verify
 - Useful for understanding only meditative states, not ordinary or pathological mental states
 - Subject to contamination by theory
 - Subject to phenomenological illusion
 - Subject to concealment and misrepresentation by unconscious mental processes and motivations
 - Subject to distorting influence of observation on the observed mental processes

Benefits of Settling the Mind

Lerab Lingpa (1856-1926):

“Whatever kinds of experiences and visions arise—be they gentle or violent, subtle or gross, of long or short duration, strong or weak, good or bad—observe their nature and avoid any obsessive evaluation of them as being one thing and not another. Let the heart of your practice be consciousness, naturally at rest, lucid and clear. Acting as your own mentor, if you can bring the crucial points to perfection, as if you were threading a needle, the afflictions of your own mind-stream will be subdued, you will gain the autonomy of not succumbing to them, and your mind will constantly be calm and composed.”

The Psychological Value of Introspection

- Neuropsychiatrist David Galin: “it is more damaging to a person’s integration to be out of touch with the dimensions of ‘personal’ reality through loss of self-monitoring than to be out of touch with the externals through sensory loss or paralysis.” (“Theoretical Reflections on Awareness, Monitoring, and Self in Relation to Anosognosia,” *Consciousness and Cognition* I, 1992, pp. 152-162)
- Psychological integration of the personality: Personality is the synthetic unity of all personal traits. All the mental traits—intelligence, emotions and sentiments, impulses, volitions, native and acquired reactions, must be organized and integrated into a unity. The uniting of all mental traits into personality is called integration. Complete integration is the ideal of personality. A sound personality comprises reaction tendencies that are not loosely organized but closely related to integrated.

The Practical Value of Introspection

Inventor Nikola Tesla (1856-1943):

“From childhood I was compelled to concentrate attention upon myself. This caused me much suffering but, to my present view, it was a blessing in disguise for it taught me to appreciate the inestimable value of introspection in the preservation of life, as well as a means of achievement. The pressure of occupation and the incessant stream of impressions pouring into our consciousness through all the gateways of knowledge make modern existence hazardous in many ways. Most persons are so absorbed in the contemplation of the outside world that they are wholly oblivious to what is passing on within themselves.”

Introspective Knowledge

William James:

“Introspection is difficult and fallible; and ... the difficulty is simply that of all observation of whatever kind... The only safeguard is in the final consensus of our farther knowledge about the thing in question, later views correcting earlier ones, until at last the harmony of a consistent system is reached.”