

Høffding on the Two Perspectives: Inner and Outer as Irreconcilable

Notes for vtfys Week 5

Background

Harald Høffding's *Outlines of Psychology* (1882; English translation 1891) develops a sustained account of the relationship between psychological description and physiological description. Høffding holds a version of psychophysical parallelism—mind and body are not two substances in interaction, but one and the same reality seen from two different sides. The parallel between conscious processes and brain processes is real and deep. Yet the two perspectives are not reducible to each other: they cannot be translated into a common language, and no amount of external observation yields the inner perspective. The following passages document this claim with precision.

The Two Sides

Høffding introduces the parallelism in Chapter II (*Mind and Body*) using Fechner's simile:

Physiology and psychology deal with the same matter seen from two different sides, and there can no more be dispute between them than between the observer of the convex and the observer of the concave side of a curve.¹

The same chapter establishes that the two perspectives cannot be collapsed into one. Writing in the tradition of Spinoza and Leibniz—both of whom insisted that thoughts must be explained by thoughts and movements by movements—Høffding notes that the two orders of description “cannot be reduced to a common measure.”² This is not merely an epistemic limitation; it is a structural feature of the two descriptions.

Two Languages with No Common Original

The most striking formulation of the irreducibility appears a few pages earlier in the same chapter. Høffding has been arguing that for every conscious phenomenon there is a corresponding material process (and vice versa), and that the two are not causally related but constitute two manifestations of the same underlying reality. He then writes:

¹Høffding, *Outlines of Psychology*, trans. M. E. Lowndes (London: Macmillan, 1891), p. 70.

²*Ibid.*, p. 69.

It is as though the same thing were said in two languages.³

The metaphor is immediately qualified in a way that sharpens its force:

The two languages, in which the same thought is here expressed, we are not able to trace back to a common original language.⁴

This is the crux. Høffding does not deny the unity of the underlying reality. But he holds that the two descriptive perspectives share no common original vocabulary into which both could be translated. The inner and the outer are irreconcilable not because they describe different things, but because there is no third language in which the description could be given.

The Inner as the Only Starting Point

Høffding draws out the epistemological consequence in Chapter I (*Subject and Method*). Conscious life is accessible only from the inside:

If we wish to gain a knowledge of conscious life, we must study it, above all, where it is directly accessible to us—namely, in our own consciousness. This immediate experience is also the only source whence the physiologist can determine the significance for mental life of the various organs of the brain.⁵

The external description—the physiologist’s description of the brain—cannot itself yield the inner content it is correlated with. Only first-person access provides that. Høffding puts the point even more sharply in the context of ruling out both spiritualism and materialism as starting points for psychology:

Psychological experience gives only the internal mental phenomena themselves—not the manner in which they are connected with other phenomena.⁶

The Leibniz Connection

Høffding’s position is structurally identical to the conclusion of Leibniz’s mill argument (*Monadologie*, §17), though he arrives at it by a different route. Leibniz imagined the brain enlarged to the size of a mill, so that one could walk around inside and observe all its physical workings—and argued that one would never, in this way, encounter *perception* or *thought*. Høffding, working from psychophysical parallelism rather than from Leibniz’s metaphysics, reaches the same conclusion: the outer perspective, however refined, cannot generate the

³Ibid., p. 65.

⁴Ibid., p. 66.

⁵Ibid., p. 11.

⁶Ibid., p. 14.

inner one. He explicitly cites the *Monadologie* elsewhere in the *Outlines*,⁷ and his *History of Modern Philosophy* contains a detailed treatment of Leibniz.

The significance for Bohr is direct. When Bohr insists that the experimental arrangement must be described in classical terms—that the classical description is a condition of unambiguous communication, not a contingent choice—he is applying the Høffding-style principle to quantum mechanics: there is a perspective from which unambiguous statements can be made, and it cannot be replaced by the quantum description of the apparatus itself, any more than the inner perspective can be replaced by the outer one. Complementarity, on this reading, is the quantum-mechanical instantiation of the principle that the two languages share no common original.

⁷Ibid., p. 46 n. 1, citing *Monadologie* §24.