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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.

these “psychological mechanisms that produce revenge” (p. 3) by using a first-person approach. It would allow a more thorough insight into the vengeful/forgiving mindset that goes beyond what the lay reader brings to reading this passage. Without this, their proposal, we argue, remains more unspecific than is necessary.

For example, the authors propose Welfare-Tradeoff-Ratios (WTRs), “internal regulatory variables, stored in memory and continually updated” (p. 3) that ultimately guide us towards more vengeful or forgiving attitudes. As humans we “have computational processes for generating baseline WTRs...” and we have “cognitive routines” (p. 4) that then allow us to interpret the actions of the people around us. In making these proposals, the authors outline a model of “revenge and forgiveness systems” that operates on constructed but non-verifiable cognitive structures. It introduces a theoretical construct (see also Fig. 1) that is in need of an explanation of its own; as such, it cannot be experienced or verified. We see it as no excuse that it is obviously necessary to start somewhere – because looking at the cognitive-behavioral side only, so we argue, provides a biased approach towards understanding revenge and forgiveness (for an insightful compilation of similar misconceptions and their misleading and costly impact on public opinion and politics, see Miller, 2010).

To become better aware of these experiential levels that are an undeniable reality of our everyday experience of revenge and forgiveness, we consider an inward, first-person form of enquiry into the qualitative dimensions of such phenomena as a useful and in fact indispensable guiding compass that should complement the more outer, behavioral description. As a most elementary starting point in the direction of first-person enquiry it would be insightful, for instance, to explore why it is so effortful to forgive when at the same time forgiveness almost instantaneously alleviates the desire for retaliation and yields a peace of mind that has a highly adaptive value and is opposed to the draining wariness of a vengeful mindset. The psychological processes underlying these different qualities can only be understood via an enquiry into the phenomenology of revenge and forgiveness, not their outer behavioral correlates and cognitive formalizations only. Note that we use the terms *inner* and *outer* here and in the following not as contrasting opposites but as reference points that guide attention to different facets of what in reality is an integrated whole: inner and outer inform and depend on each other; focusing on one implies accounting for the other in the same way in which the swing of a pendulum in one direction calls for an act of balancing by the other. Any alleged boundary between the inner and outer (e.g., the skin of the body) is arbitrary (cf. Mach, 1985) – it is already the result of a conceptual classification (cf. James, 1912) and in reality a place of constant circulation, a crossing point of reciprocal influence (cf. Schad, 2014).

The inner phenomenology alluded to is part and parcel of any psychological phenomenon – from perception, attention and memory over social psychological phenomena (e.g., conformity, aggression or the sense of self) all the way to applied domains like psychological health and well-being. There is no doubt that psychological phenomena such as revenge and forgiveness can also be understood in terms of cognitive routines and working memory representations; and even more, these are indeed suitably explored and documented with the help of cognitive-behavioral data (e.g., neuronal correlates of these processes). But revenge and forgiveness – like other psychological phenomena – cannot be suitably depicted by such behavioral measures *alone* when it comes to representing their qualitative nature. Here, behavioral measurements yield only indirect evidence of the qualitative experience of revenge and forgiveness – indirect because it comes in the form of symbolic abstractions and data. To really appreciate what such measurable data on revenge and forgiveness *actually mean*, one needs to recur to one's individual experience. Explaining the

observable neuronal activity or WTR's as already *constituting* the experience of forgiveness rather than *correlating* with it or *carrying/symbolizing* it is an illegal crossing of boundaries – a category mistake (Bennett & Hacker, 2003): It has never been observed how a mental content or experience would emerge out of neuronal activity; if anything, neuronal activity leads to fragmentation of wholeness (decomposition) instead of creating experienced wholeness. It is thus only on the mental end that out of the perceptual fragments a conceptual whole is re-generated (recomposition, see Wagemann, 2010, 2011). Note that we are not trying to dismiss the importance of the brain in any way – in fact it plays a critical role in any cognitive process. But it is a necessary role, not a sufficient one (cf. Straus, 1956: “Humans think, not brains”, pp. 112–194³; Majorek, 2012). The same holds for the other domains: thermoceptors, for instance, are necessary instruments but they are not sufficient for thermoception. They do not produce warmth, they only represent/symbolize it in a binary (all-or-none) manner. The phenomenon of warmth is different from its binary neuronal correlate in the same way in which a mental content is different from the accompanying neuronal process. Remember that this is not to be understood as implying an outer realm that is separated from an inner realm by means of an artificial boundary. The neuronal process may separate us from the primary phenomenon (fragmentation or decomposition) and create what is often seen as a gap between an inside and an outside. But the mental/conceptual process constitutes the bridge or unifying link that overcomes this gap, connecting us back to the primary phenomenon (recomposition) and transcending the categorical separation of an inside and an outside. Therefore, in addition to studying neuronal activity and behavior, the experiential (as the access road to the conceptual) should play an adequate role in our understanding and definition of a psychological phenomenon – not the only role, of course, but one that is representative of its share in the reality of the phenomenon.

2. Principle objections against introspection in light of the available evidence

Historically, psychology was indeed defined as the *science of behavior and experience*. It thus allowed for a distinction between these two directions of enquiry implied above: an outward – one could also say: a third-person direction of enquiry; and an inward, first-person direction of enquiry. Here we claim that the study of behavior is well-suited to study the material aspects of psychological phenomena; and that the realm of experience or qualitative awareness would be the point to start from when enquiring into the non-material (i.e. into the experience of mental states and actions and into the conceptual realm in the sense of experiencing coherence and lawfulness). More recently, however, definitions have abandoned the experiential component and have instead focused more on psychology as the *science of behavior and the mind* – an unfortunate change in direction because mental phenomena are often accounted for once again in terms of outwardly measurable behavioral coordinates. For example, Passer et al. (2009, p. 3) define “psychology as the scientific study of behavior and the mind. The term behavior refers to actions and responses that we can directly observe, whereas the term mind refers to internal states and processes – such as thoughts and feelings – that cannot be seen directly and that must be inferred from observable, measurable responses.” (Passer et al., 2009, p. 3). Note that an understanding of qualitative dimensions of experience in terms of behavioral coordinates comes with a certain justification: in a sense, experience is a form of behavior. When we take note of what it is like to experience an

³ German original: “Der Mensch denkt, nicht das Gehirn”.

attentive mindset, we also, in experiencing this mindset, engage in a particular form of activity or behavior – for instance by exercising attentional control; or by reflecting on what it is like to be attentive. Even more so, upon closer investigation, this inner behavior reveals itself in a twofold nature: it comes in both a receptive form of inner behavior (e.g., I notice how my attention is oriented by changing events) and a more productive form of inner behavior (e.g., I deliberately orient my attention towards certain events⁴). And yet, this behavior, immanent in our experience, is a form of behavior that is directed inward and is non-material or rather: mental in nature. It is a behavior that in its primary character is un-noticeable to the third-person observer and only resonates in the material as a secondary nature, if at all. It is for this reason that this inward-directed, immaterial behavior that we describe here is not what is typically understood by behavior (see the quote by Passer et al., 2009, above). It is typically seen as different from outer behavior and hence, in the view of many, falls into the category or domain of the subjective – which in turn is often disqualified from psychological enquiry because it is considered to be less standardized and not generalizable. In more general terms, the study of qualitative awareness (experience) has raised significant skepticism and is in fact considered anathema in many areas of psychology today.

Without doubt, there are reasons for this skepticism – first-person or introspective research has been seriously challenged by a number of findings that put its reliability into question. But these challenges have flaws and limitations of their own and cannot be seen as the only or authoritative guiding compass; we will briefly attend to both sides here to illustrate the nature of this debate – and to then illustrate necessary steps towards a more systematic approach to first-person research.

Historically, the devaluation of introspection originates in Kant's distinction between a "phenomenal self" and the "subject of pure apperception", the latter of which is allegedly inaccessible to conscious experience – even though this is precisely how we become aware of it, otherwise we would not be able to take note of or refute it (Danziger, 1980, p. 242; cf. Kant, 1998, p. 237). Because of this alleged inaccessibility, data collected by introspection are seen to contain arbitrary content in principle and therefore – according to this reasoning – cannot provide the researcher with reliable information. An early and influential instantiation of this position within the field of psychology comes from a classical study by Nisbett and Wilson (1977) who found that participants, when asked to introspect in a particular experimental scenario, regularly confabulate justifications for a choice *they were told* they made but they in fact did *not* make. The bottom line here is that introspections in general are likewise nothing more than confabulations of a similar nature. But recent follow-up work has shown that when participants are suitably guided to reflect on their justification process they are in fact very well able to detect this manipulation (Petitmengin, Remillieux, Cahour, & Carter-Thomas, 2013). In other words, what the participants now report is consistent with what was actually expressed in their behavioral response – first-person introspection and third-person behavioral observation converge. The conclusion then is that upon appropriate guidance and practice, introspections that may initially be fuzzy and callow can now be sharpened and advanced to a level where they withstand rigorous academic, behavior-focused scrutiny (Petitmengin et al., 2013).

⁴ Note that orienting attention can also take on a form of more outward behavior, for example when accompanied with overt head- or eye movements (so-called overt attention). Here we speak of a more covert form of attention that goes without such overt behavior. An example is the switching of attention between the two interpretations of an ambiguous figure – e.g., the Necker cube – that happens inwardly, without any noticeable change in the stimulus properties, cf. Ee, Dam, and Brouwer (2005).

Another common concern about introspection is the assumption that in seeking to conduct such introspective research, we need to split our attention into two: one that lives out the experience and another that observes it. But as Bitbol and Petitmengin (2013) point out, it is not about excarnating from our current reference point and then turning around and attending to an experience from that outside point of view. Rather, it is about getting in contact with this experience, unfolding into it via a receiving form of attention. And in the spirit of our earlier distinction between a receiving and a producing mode, we wish to point out that this receiving form of attention is complemented by an actively producing one that deliberately approaches and immerses into the experience. Instead of dividing one's attention into two, it is about keeping it as one but extending it towards an awareness of the different forms of action (receiving and producing) being performed out of itself. While the original experience may have come upon us without much preparation (i.e. here we are passive beings), when we now research it via an introspective approach we deliberately reinstate it or at least deliberately prepare the grounds for it to reappear (i.e. here we are active beings). We thereby exercise a high level of control and also keep the experience fresh in our mind, continuously reducing the gap between experience proper vs. reflecting on it to the level where it reaches that of third-person research. The point about having to split our attention into two hence does not invalidate introspective research – at least no more or less than is the case with third-person research. In third-person research the researcher also has to reflect on what he comprehends so as to be able to articulate it: Relating a conceptual representation to a perceptual input on the one hand is different from integrating this representation into a meaningful conceptual context on the other, as happens when we start to make sense of an experimental outcome and advance the theory in third-person research. To illustrate, comparing two psychological events and classifying them as similar or distinct requires thinking. Such a mental classification process is different from understanding what this similarity or distinctness actually means – a cognitive event which also requires thinking. In turn, both cognitive events (and note that both are required for conducting third-person research) require elaborate (!) thinking and thus cannot happen at the same time even if it may appear, in premature observation, to be so at first sight. Like first-person research, third-person research thus suffers from the constraint that we cannot divide our attention into two. The concern about splitting our attention into two is thus not only applicable to one type of research. First- and third-person research merge into a synthesis.

A third concern about the use of first-person methods is the fact that it implies looking back at an earlier event that may have changed or faded as a function of intervening experiences or the current state of retrospection; and that first-person enquiry, in turn, is inevitably biased and unreliable. But as just noted, classification and interpretation cannot happen at the same time in third-person research either, so the concern about having to look back at an earlier point applies to both first- and third-person research. More important, what appears to be a constraint at first sight in reality does not invalidate the research process, neither regarding third- nor first-person research. What matters is that the researcher is able to extract a conceptual description (or roadmap) of the process of how to arrive at a certain experience and then use this description as the scale of judgment for a given experience in the here and now. The elicitation interview approach in which the researcher guides the participant back to the point where a certain mental operation occurred (cf. Petitmengin et al., 2013) is useful in allowing the participant to step back into – and thereby more easily recall – the original experience. But note that it is even possible to emancipate the approach from an externally guiding researcher by scrutinizing one's own experience and then opening it to

subsequent scrutiny by others (and oneself) via explicating a roadmap. This roadmap can then be used to replicate the conditions that led to an experience. Such a process already involves a high degree of methodical permeation so that the conceptual description can be actually realized in deliberate mental action; and that mental action can be continuously updated in light of conceptual insight. As a matter of fact, this process is nothing other than the common approach as it is widely used in experimental (third-person) psychology today.

A whole series of additional concerns have been voiced – and have likewise been corrected, criticized and/or refuted (for extensive reviews, see [Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2013](#); [Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009](#)). Thirty years ago, [Danziger \(1980\)](#) had already argued that the complete rejection of any form of introspective research had not been a rational conclusion in light of the actual problems that had occurred at the time – this generalized rejection is more an expression of a one-sided “Denkstil” or thinking style ([Fleck, 1935](#)) that overgeneralized actual observations and corresponding interpretations. Psychologists’ uneasiness with first-person research thus needs to be viewed with caution of its own. Losing faith in and beginning to question the experiential domain inevitably implies that we would also have to lose faith in our capacity to think because thinking only becomes evident through experience/introspection. In turn we would be losing the basis of scientific reasoning in general: every empirical foundation that is based on mental reflection, every theoretical concept, including the assumption that introspection is unjustified (sic!) could no longer be trusted. In fact, this very skepticism must then become a target of skepticism in itself, a flawed logical reasoning that is spiraling into absurdity. Such an inconsistency is untenable and there is no need for it as long as we realize that when there may be current limits of method or insight regarding the research into our experience, these may reflect the current state of the art but there may sooner or later be ways to advance beyond them. In fact, significant steps have already been pursued in this direction as will become evident in the next sections.

3. The use of introspective research methods today – steps towards a systematic approach

In parallel to the increasing rejection of introspection and the application of the natural sciences approach to psychology over the past two centuries, alternative methods have been developed in an effort to do justice to the actual phenomenology of consciousness. Different types of such phenomenology have formed in the thinking tradition of J.W. Goethe/R. Steiner as well as of F. Brentano/E. Husserl, to name the most important. The former will be dealt with in more detail below; as regards the latter, Husserl’s way of scrutinizing mental events by phenomenological reduction has been taken up and modified by his followers, abandoning the more transcendental orientation of the method. Especially Husserl’s late progression from “the quest for essences” to the “clarification of meanings” ([Giorgi, 2009](#), p. 101) has been continued and intensified, for instance in the concepts of embodied cognition ([Merleau-Ponty, 1958](#); [Varela, Thomson & Rosch, 1991](#)) and phenomenological psychology ([A. Giorgi, 2009](#)).

More recently, a number of publications have emerged that use methods of introspective enquiry as an integral part of the research process – both by way of qualitative data-collection on the participants’ end (e.g., [Barrett, Mesquita, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007](#); [Marti, Sackur, Sigman, & Dehaene, 2010](#)) as well as by way of enquiring into one’s own experience on the researcher’s end (e.g., [Weger & Wagemann, 2015](#)). In the latter study, we proposed a multi-step process as a preliminary guiding compass for the researcher to safeguard the respective research project against confounds. We wish to briefly summarize these steps here but

before doing so, note that the confounds which imperil qualitative research are in our view actually not different from the confounds that also threaten quantitative research (see above); and that, in turn, the steps or measures needed to safeguard research into qualitative experience against these confounds are likewise not some form of unreasonable high-security protocol that constitute an undue burden and in this sense would ridicule any serious attention to qualitative research; instead they are measures that are in fact not all too different from those needed to safeguard quantitative research against confounds as well. We mention this here because we wish to highlight that proposing research into first-person experience is not the sort of unreasonable endeavor it is often understood to be. Note, however, that the confounds that can occur (e.g., expectation effects, overgeneralizations, confabulations, demand effects and others) appear on different fronts in the research process: In qualitative research, they surface particularly during the empirical phase – the phase of data collection or inner experience sampling. In quantitative research, these confounds also surface but do so on other fronts (even if a blinded design is used) – for instance in the way such data are interpreted and related to the overarching theory; in the search for mediating variables of an effect; in the way the null/alternative hypotheses are extracted from the theory-corpus; in the way the experimental design is set up. All of these stages are regularly influenced by expectations effects, overgeneralizations and subtle priorities of the researcher’s agenda.

4. Steps towards systematizing inward enquiry

A first step towards systematizing inward enquiry is an extensive *immersion* into the respective phenomenon (i.e. experiencing and practicing such immersion before entering the stage of formulating a hypothesis). It is about holding back premature interpretations for as long as possible while remaining receptive to the characteristics of the phenomenon. A sufficient immersion into the experiential side is imperative to a rigorous, open-minded approach in the research process, as it implies holding back premature accounts and interpretations before hardening into categorical/schema-driven hypotheses. A second important aspect is that when ultimately narrowing observations into interpretations and hypotheses, the research process becomes expectation-driven and the range of phenomena that are considered now inevitably begins to narrow. It is thus meaningful at this second level to consider *multiple possible* – and ideally even opposing – hypotheses to remain free of this expectation-driven state for as long as possible. There is also a third important element which regards the outcome of the research process: the very nature of this introspective approach requires the community of colleagues to re-enact these findings in their own first-person experience; when taken only at face value, the results remain symbolic (linguistic) abstractions. The desirable and ultimate outcome of the research process therefore is a *roadmap* that allows other people interested in this research to re-enact these findings more quickly and more reliably than if they were to start from scratch without such guidance. We argue that delineating a roadmap is not only a desirable end-product of first-person research but also serves as an important corrective and guiding compass during the research process – because attention to detail and accuracy will likely increase when the work is outlined in a roadmap that makes it subject to scrutiny by others.

The process is described in more detail in the original account ([Weger & Wagemann, 2015](#)), where suggestions for additional steps are also made. Following these suggestions, we next conducted an inner observation trial in the spirit of this methodological proposal, using mindfulness as an example (also reported in [Weger & Wagemann, 2015](#)). In the following we will discuss a subset of the results in light of the current account in somewhat more detail, as

we consider it useful in differentiating the experiential and conceptual aspects of psychological phenomena. It will provide the basis for a subsequent in-depth enquiry that is aimed at substantiating these facets more systematically.

In the [Weger & Wagemann \(2015\)](#) study we sought to supplement the third-person approach of an earlier project (which dealt with the more behavioral aspect of mindfulness: [Weger, Hooper, Meier, & Hopthrow, 2012](#)) with a first-person inward observation trial. In the [Weger & Wagemann \(2015\)](#) follow-up we pursued a two-week-long mindfulness task using a first-person approach as our method of enquiry. More specifically, we used both a physical object (a raisin) as well as a mentally generated object (a paper-clip/ a match) for the mindfulness task and focused our attention for several minutes each day on the different sensory qualities of the physical object and on the different conceptual aspects of the mentally generated object, respectively (for more details, see p. 46, f.). A variant of this original trial, focusing more on the mental after-images of the physical encounter with the object was also conducted and subsequently even studied with a group of students ([Wagemann & Weger, in preparation](#)). One finding was “that paying careful and systematic attention to a small, apparently insignificant and unspectacular object like a raisin can trigger qualitative experiences of surprise and wonder” (p. 46). We did not qualify these experiences further – and reported in this descriptive format they are certainly not much more than a side-note to begin with. And yet, observations such as these are illustrative in that they refer to an experience that goes beyond what the sensory input has to offer – something from within the observer is called up.

Building on this observation, one can take further steps to become familiar with the phenomenology of awe and wonder, also recurring to other instances that help sharpen the focus: Attention, as we became aware in such additional observations, reaches out towards the phenomenon. The apparent anchoring of the self in the body loosens, there is a strong centrifugal movement and it is as though the self unfolds into the object of awe and wonder. The usual process of mindwandering and inner speaking silences and an immersion into the language of the phenomenon comes about – but it is a language of inner gestures or meditative (mental) movements rather than of words.⁵

In looking back at such and similar experiences we noticed that they are closely linked to the individual observer, they cannot be emancipated from the person who experiences them, at least not initially (hence the name first-person observation). It is true, one can disqualify such observations as fantasy to begin with; but note that one can distinguish those observations from fantasy in the same way in which we can differentiate genuine visual experiences from dream-life: by deliberately experimenting with them – emphasizing or withholding them and then reflecting upon this process; and by finally waking up to normal waking consciousness and thereby comparing and differentiating between fantasy and reality, dream-life and conscious wakefulness. We can thus dismiss

such inner experiences only as long as we do not know them – or as long as we are also ready to dismiss the experiences stemming from visual/perceptual input.

The close linkage to the observer is different regarding a second level of observations we made during the earlier study. More specifically, the protocol also resulted in certain insights, for instance about the nature of the object: its form – for instance the subtle and manifold carvings on the surface of the raisin; its development – for instance how it took on the form it shows; the processes of growth and decay, and how these are altered and even deactivated by the treatment that makes a grape into a raisin; the variations in shape and size that are multifaceted – and yet show universal constants that we realize are never bypassed (a raisin never takes on the size of a nut or the color of a banana). The insights were not only directed at the object but also at the nature of the task – or more precisely: they were insights about the characteristics and stages of attention. Different directions or phases of attention (outward vs. inward going) could be identified as well as different degrees of penetration into the inner pattern of conceptual lawfulness of the object (the target of attention) and different forms of mental activity (receiving vs. producing). Note that the access road to these insights was likewise our experience; in other words: it is our experience that is the stage of appearance for these conceptual insights. And yet it is obvious that these observations belonged to us as researchers only to the extent that we observed them and became aware of them. In their inner reality, the content of these insights is anchored in the objects themselves, it is part of their existence. This is not so much their material appearance – but their existential counterpart: the concept. In the words of Aristotle's hylomorphism we can speak of the distinction between matter (hýlē) and form (morphē; [Aristotle, 1994, 1042 b](#)). We therefore have a second category of experience: an insight into the form of existence or pattern of lawfulness of the physical or mental object, i.e. the conceptual realm. The access road to becoming aware of this is also our experience to begin with – for instance, the awareness of the phases of attention and forms of mental action became noticeable in the experience of our thinking. But once realized in our experience, this insight can be explicated and communicated to other researchers, thus leading to a methodological emancipation from the individual researcher.

To summarize, neither of these categories of qualitative awareness (experience) or insight (concept) can be labeled as exclusively material. Moreover, it is evident that both dimensions also differ from each other. The first, related to the experience of awe/wonder, is dependent in its state of existence (as a conscious experience) on the experiencing individual. The second, related to the dimension of insight, is only dependent on the individual in as much as it becomes recognizable to individual consciousness; in its actual state of existence these patterns are not dependent on the individual who recognizes them – they are part of the inner nature and lawfulness of the respective phenomenon.

5. Other accounts in the psychological/philosophical domain

We are not the first to discover the distinction between these dimensions of experience and conceptual lawfulness. Scholars since the earliest traditions have emphasized such levels – they have referred to them as body (the realm of behavior), soul (the realm of experience) and spirit (the realm of conceptual lawfulness): In the early Indian philosophical system of Samkhya, for example, we find three aspects of “primal matter” (pakriti) described as Tamas (inertial, dark, obstructing, i.e. matter/body); Rajas (dynamic/active, excitable/suffering, i.e. soul); and Sattva (poised existence, light, purity, i.e. spirit) ([Burley, 2006](#)). Moving on to antique Greek philosophy, Plato's cave allegory can likewise be interpreted as the ascend of the soul, initially trapped in a body, to

⁵ This observation is partly confirmed by Merleau-Ponty who also alluded to the centrifugal tendency of perceptual immersion. On the other hand, however, he described such immersion to result in a “depersonalization” accompanied by a loss of awareness and individually accessible activity ([Merleau-Ponty, 1958, p. 250](#)). Apparently then, he avoided to cross the methodological border between sophisticated but still conventional observation of everyday consciousness on the one hand and the more subtle modes of meditative awareness on the other. It is therefore understandable that Merleau-Ponty focuses his phenomenology on the body and its senses as the origin of conscious existence: “Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system” (p. 235). While it is indisputable that the body serves as a *necessary* condition for perception, in light of the observations in the current article it is doubtful whether the ‘breath of life’ in our experience is *sufficiently* constituted by bodily processes.

the spiritual dimension of truth, good and beauty (Plato, 2004). Aristotle's attention to the close connection between material/bodily and non-material/spiritual aspects can likewise be placed in this tradition. Then again in the New Testament as well as in early Christian anthropology, an explicit distinction was made between body, soul and spirit as components of the human being (e.g. "May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" 1. Thessalonians, 5, 23"). In contrast to Plato's emphasis on the self-liberation of the soul, the role of divine salvation is now brought to the fore.

Despite this long tradition of differentiating between body, soul and spirit dimensions in both Eastern and Western philosophy and religious traditions, it is a distinction which, if not meeting outright rejection, at least raises eye-brows in much of contemporary thinking, both inside academia and beyond. The transition from the historic to the contemporary view was not one of a sudden paradigm shift – it developed in gradual steps and stages. But an early and significant such step was, remarkably enough, a decree of the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Constantinople in 869/870 – which outlawed the differentiation between a soul aspect (*psyche*, *anima*) and a spirit aspect (*pneuma*, *spiritus*) and only allowed for a one-dimensional soul quality to be acceptable as an account of the human being within the dogma of the church, effectively abolishing the spirit ("...unam animam rationabilem et intellectualem habere hominem..." Canon 11; for a review and criticism of the church's abandoning of the trichotomy of body, soul and spirit, see Willmann, 1896, §54, in particular p. 110–111). It was a step of significant impact on the thinking style of the subsequent era and it has been argued that it was a preamble to a historic development that was taken up and pursued further by the canonic dogma of the emergent natural sciences, including psychology, which grew out of these philosophical and religious traditions. The emerging natural sciences approach has in the meantime abandoned not only the spirit but also the soul – not because it has acquired positive evidence against it but because it could no longer find the soul or spirit through the common third-person observation approach that is by now the established code of practice within the scholarly community. This second step of losing the soul also developed in gradual stages and yet it becomes radically evident in an early letter of a leading German scholar of his time – Emile Du Bois-Reymond, president of the University of Berlin and influential member of the German (Prussian) Academy of Sciences – who wrote in a letter to a friend as early as 1842: "...Brücke [a colleague] and I have conspired to assert the truth that within the organism no other forces are at work than the ordinary physical-chemical ones..."⁶ (Du Bois-Reymond, 1842/1918, p. 108, according to Jost, 1995). The human being is now seen as a material organism that is to be explained entirely based on the laws of physics and chemistry. This understanding continues to be the prevalent view in psychology: by now, almost 200 years later, psychology is no longer seen as the science of behavior and experience but as the science of (bodily!) behavior and mental processes – where mental processes are generated by bodily activity (cf. Miller, 2010 for the problematic and costly consequences of this view). The reason for why we find comparatively little research activity in the direction of the soul or spirit realms (see the low number of listings with the word 'soul' in

the title) is not because of a principled problem that would be inherent in this subject. Rather, in the evolution of the discipline, soul and spirit became more and more unapproachable and unreal when looked upon from the emerging third-person behavioral approach. The assessments of the clerical and academic authorities of their time may stand out as radical examples but they are symptomatic in bearing testament to an increasingly one-sided account in our understanding of human nature.

Nonetheless, we have discovered a number of more recent scholars in both the philosophical and psychological sciences who distinguish in a similar way between a material, a soul and a spirit realm and we will briefly relate to them here to position our account in context. As a matter of fact, we did not spot them as a consequence of our research; rather this work has prompted us to enquire in the direction outlined here to begin with.

In one such account developed since the late 19th century, the German–Austrian scholar Rudolf Steiner pursued a methodology that was derived from Goethe's phenomenological approach to science but transformed into a strictly experiential form of consciousness research.

Steiner describes how the process of thinking allows us to enter the conceptual lawfulness of the content of our thinking. For example, in pondering the lawfulness of a mathematical axiom we enter into – and immerse ourselves within – this lawfulness. This lawfulness depends on the individual's own thinking activity only to the extent that it becomes conscious whereas in its reality as a pattern of lawfulness it is a universal content. The individual activity that is performed to gain insight into the lawfulness is what Steiner describes as the soul level; the lawfulness as a universal content proper is what he refers to as the spirit level. In our thinking we do not stand beside the content of thinking but enter right into it (Steiner, 1911). During thinking, the thinking self – or I – thus unfolds through a deliberately producing activity into the lawfulness (the conceptual nature) of the phenomenon. Steiner therefore points out that the I is best described as an entity that does not reside within the material boundaries of the physical body; but is immersed in – and as such becomes part of – the lawfulness of the phenomenon (e.g., a mathematical concept; the conceptual aspect of the material phenomena; etc.) in the outside; and in immersing into this lawfulness as a spiritual phenomenon and becoming one with it, the I must also be of a spiritual nature. "The I in the periphery" – so Steiner describes it; and this is not meant in a spatial sense but in a conceptual sense: the mathematical lawfulness is non-spatial in nature and thus likewise calls the I to reside in the non-spatial realm, between – or rather: beyond – the inside and the outside of the spatial coordinates of the material realm. The spatial/material body serves more as an entity that initially impedes or fragments (see the highly selective perceptual fields) and then mirrors the non-spatial nature of the conceptual into the spatial realm of ponderous matter and thereby allows it to enter the stage of human consciousness (see also Wagemann, 2011; Weger & Edelhaeuser, 2014, for more details). Steiner further highlights that an understanding of the I as residing in the periphery (i.e. residing in the conceptual lawfulness of the phenomena) allows for a bridge over the classical divide of the subject-object distinction that has emerged because the non-spatial form of the I has been misrepresented and misplaced within the spatial boundaries of the human body when in reality it is a non-spatial entity.

There is another account from the end of the 19th century which is in a way similar to Steiner's approach but originates from a different research tradition: the roots of academic psychology. Perhaps unexpectedly, William James' work contains a certain link to Steiner's work in so far as James assumed that there must be "something more" in human experience than only the overt phenomena of everyday consciousness (McDermott, 1991, p. 161). In his

⁶ German original: "Brücke und ich, wir haben uns verschworen, die Wahrheit geltend zu machen, daß im Organismus keine andern Kräfte wirksam sind, als die gemeinen physikalisch-chemischen; daß, wo diese bislang nicht zur Erklärung ausreichen, mittels der physikalisch-mathematischen Methode entweder nach ihrer Art und Weise der Wirksamkeit im konkreten Fall gesucht werden muß, oder daß neue Kräfte angenommen werden müssen, welche, von gleicher Dignität mit den physikalisch-chemischen, der Materie inhärent, stets nur auf abstoßende oder anziehende Componenten zurückzuführen sind." Du Bois-Reymond, 1842/1918, p. 108, according to Jost, 1995. Translation into English: U.W.

opus 'Varieties of Religious Experience' he explicates his hypothesis as follows: "[...] the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come [...]" (James, 2008, p. 373). And in his earlier considerations about 'Human Immortality', he comes to the conclusion that "Consciousness [...] does not have to be generated *de novo* in a vast number of places. It exists already, behind the scenes, coeval with the world" (James, 1898, p. 23). With reference to Fechner's "Psychophysics" he reflects upon a physiological 'threshold' which has to be surmounted by the action of a 'psycho-physical movement' in order to bring human consciousness to appearance (James, 1898, p. 23). This relation of a pre-existing consciousness ("wider self", spirit) to physiological processes (matter) initiated by mental action and resulting in individual consciousness ("psycho-physical movement", soul) can be understood as reflecting the functional trichotomy described above.

The distinction of the mental realm (individual, universal) from the material, and the relation between the two aspects of the mental realm itself have been refined by Herbert Witzmann, a student of Steiner. As already indicated above, Witzmann introduces two core psychological concepts: decomposition and recomposition. Decomposition refers to the process of fragmentation produced by bodily activity – see, for instance, the feature-based segmentation, or, as we wish to call it here: the nonconceptual differentiation⁷ – that takes place along the visual pathway. Beginning with the nonspecific nature of the neuronal signal in response to stimulus input from the different perceptual qualities, this fragmenting or decomposing process results in a transitional mental state of cognitive irritation (Witzmann, 1989; Wagemann, 2010, 2011). This fragmentation has to be overcome via 'recomposition' – the act of administering conceptual coherence upon this disorganized input – an activity which the observer performs with his thinking capacity. The Steiner/Witzmann concept of decomposition and recomposition is in line with James' approach of psych-physically surmounting a physiological threshold (James, 1898, p. 23).⁸ Also with regard to James' notion of a wider (universal) and a narrower (individual) consciousness, the Steiner/Witzmann concept provides a very similar – although epistemologically more precise – description: Initially, the observer approaches the decomposed stimuli in a perceptive mode of mental activity because these stimuli are a given, they appear without mental contribution. To overcome this early state of cognition, we need to adopt a productive mindset in order to gain access to the universal lawfulness.⁹ In this regard, Witzmann points to the experiential relation between the individual act of thinking (Denkakt) and the universal content of thinking (Denkinhalt) consisting of an oscillation between that which we do/produce (determining action or Bestimmung – i.e. the soul-quality) and that

which comes about and offers itself as a content (retroactive determination or Rückbestimmung – i.e. the spirit-quality). According to Witzmann, the decomposition state of the stimuli can be overcome by relating a universal concept (thought content) to the fragmented stimulus input and thereby individuating the universal concept and resulting in individual consciousness. In Steiner's and Witzmann's sense this process normally proceeds subconsciously but can be made conscious by meditative observation.

James also gravitates towards this approach as is evident from the following: "Pure experience' is the name which I gave to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the material to our later reflection with its conceptual categories. Only new-born babes, or men in semi-coma from sleep, drugs, illness, or blows, may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a *that* which is not yet any definite *what*, ready to be all of sorts of whats; full both of oneness and of manyness" (James, 1912, p. 93/94). As noted before, it is important to differentiate between the phenomenal characteristics of sensory incoherence as a given on the one hand (pure "manyness" without content) and mentally produced coherence on the other ("oneness" as conveyed by thought content). Experiencing both characteristics together inevitably implies that the process of sensation has already come to an end, we are already in the realm of mentally informed perception. If oneness and manyness were indeed primary features of "pure experience", there would be no need for surmounting a threshold with the aim of gaining object-related awareness.

In summary, the trichotomy between body, soul and spirit is not an anachronism from antiquity but has informed scholars up until and including today. In the following we will continue to recur to this threefold terminology – and continue to align our differentiation of the three realms along these precursors, in particular that of Steiner (1904/2003): that which is different from the bodily or material mode of appearance and yet belongs to the individual and his or her manner of experiencing is referred to as the soul. That which is different from the material mode of appearance and, in addition, is dependent on the individual only in so far as it is mirrored as a content of experience in his or her consciousness – but otherwise constitutes a state of universal lawfulness, a conceptual phenomenon of its own – is referred to as the *spiritual*. Note that this understanding of the spiritual is not in opposition to an understanding of the individuality of the human being (individual personhood) as also being of spiritual nature. To the contrary, the individual, in his thinking capacity, can unfold into – and become one with – the universal lawfulness while not losing his individual personhood. As an individual human being we can only fully appreciate the spiritual/the universal if we become part of it. But we can become part of it without losing our individuality because the anchoring in the individual (the body and the soul) allows for an individualization of the universal. A tile also does not lose its individual shape when becoming part of a roof, and nonetheless it adopts a new meaning and function once it is in this new role. Our thinking is the bridge between the spiritual in the universal and the spiritual in the individual.

6. An extended enquiry into the experiential and conceptual aspects of mindfulness

Based on those reports from other scholars we decided to conduct a first-person enquiry to see for ourselves whether there is substance to these accounts. In doing so we follow up on our earlier pilot study (Weger & Wagemann, 2015) but now with a more specific focus: to examine the experiential (soul) and conceptual (spirit) qualities more thoroughly. We agreed on a brief (10min) daily mental exercise in which we sought to create the image of a blue circle on a grey background. No further specifications were made.

⁷ We consider the term "feature-based segmentation" which is often used in mainstream psychology to be inappropriate because it already implies that a conceptual structure is projected onto a sensory event – which in reality is only happening at the level of deliberate mental activity (thinking) or third-person observation, not on the neuronal level. Instead we favor the term "non-conceptual differentiation" which is also more in line with Witzmann's approach.

⁸ With respect to Aristotle the concepts of decomposition and recomposition can be clearly associated with his theory of growth and decay in which he discerns the deprivation of a form (result of decomposition) versus the form as a determining feature of existing things (result of decomposition) (Aristotle, 1994, 1042 b).

⁹ This is a crucial difference to Husserl who assumes that we get access to universality in a passive or receptive mode of mental activity (e.g. Husserl, 1999, p. 57). In his view, both the non-conceptual sense impressions and the intentional content of a perception are parts of a passively given reality which is supposed to be universal in nature. Whereas Husserl's position could be defined as a "sophisticated version of direct (i.e., non-representationalist) realism" (Beyer, 2015), the Steiner/Witzmann concept, though being non-representational as well, is characterized by the actively producing feature of procedural consciousness that reconnects with the universal meaning of reality. As mentioned, James also sees the necessity of mental activity in surmounting the physiological threshold of decomposition.

We both kept a diary every day (or nearly every day) and agreed on a first telephone exchange 10 days later and continued the exercise for altogether four weeks, at which point we met up to discuss and systematize our findings. We made a host of observations but only summarize those that appeared to us to be of significance.

- a) We could clearly distinguish between the effort that was required to conduct this exercise on the one hand, and the actual visual images that resulted from this effort on the other. Sometimes no images resulted at all, the effort was only sufficient to generate a label (the word “blue circle”, for instance) which was, in comparison to the image, a hollow placeholder.
- b) Creating a perfect blue circle out of our own mental effort was not possible. Instead, it was like putting together individual features (shape, color) into agglomerations of fragments that allowed themselves to be merged more or less but had a dynamic of their own and were not malleable enough for us to be able to align them to create a complete figure. The size initially appeared to be easier to generate than the color. Using the method of contrasting hypotheses, we scrutinized this tentative observation but subsequently found no confirmation for it. On the other hand, smaller and more distant blue circles were easier to come by consistently.
- c) Amidst the futile effort to build up a blue circle relying on our own mental power, a more advanced or even a perfect blue circle was occasionally there all of a sudden – this object “offered itself” momentarily and disappeared equally quickly. These moments were rare, unexpected and could not be controlled – but they never occurred without our preceding effort, not during those four weeks at least. They resulted in an inner experience of confirmation.
- d) As indicated, the moments when the perfectly shaped circle appeared could not be controlled – but once experienced, we could sustain the orientation of our attentional compass needle towards the possibility of this happening (i.e. the perfect circle appearing). Maintaining this state was in our control (it was a highly effortful process, though); inducing the perfectly shaped blue circle was not in our control.

We draw several conclusions from the trial: The distinction between our effort (our own deliberate mental action) and the content was obvious. The effort was perceived as resulting from ourselves – it was not there without our deliberate work (i.e. it depended on us). In line with the earlier accounts we call this the soul level. This part of the trial was obvious to us. Less obvious was an account of the sudden appearance of a (nearly) perfectly shaped blue circle. Is this already an example of the conceptual level? There are arguments in favor of and against such an account. In favor of it was the realization that it was of an altogether different nature than the effort proper – calling it to also be understood and labeled differently from the soul level. Against this interpretation was the observation that it still appeared in sensory characteristics (form and color are still visual/perceptual qualities) and we thus question whether we have penetrated far enough yet into the conceptual realm to really call it to be different from a form of mental imagining that would still be driven by perceptual/material aftereffects. What is clear is that our own preparation was a necessary condition for the occasional perfect circle to appear – but not a sufficient one, something else had to come about from the “other side” – the concept which offered itself. We could not control it, we had to await it and it would often not appear – which was not a particularly convenient insight to our mindset as deliberately controlling and carefully manipulating experimenters.

Strictly speaking, the advanced nature and even near perfection of the circle was an indication of its lawfulness – and in that sense

we consider it meaningful to refer to it as the level of the conceptual/spiritual as described above. And yet note that this lawfulness still “dressed” itself in the coordinates of a perceptual mode – a mode which, due to our own mostly material and perceptual experiences so far, is perhaps our own mode and level of understanding. We suspect that if anything it is a preliminary mode of the conceptual/spiritual to appear, proportional to the level of experience and the power of the stage of consciousness which it appears on. Our sense is that in cultivating this mindset further, in developing a readiness to perceive, an awareness of the lawful phenomenon that is still in a state of potential, not fleshed out in visual content yet – this, so we assume, is the appropriate road to enquire further into the properties of the conceptual/spiritual. As for us, this will need to await further practice and scrutiny but at least a direction of enquiry is now evident (for further in-depth readings on developing and cultivating a meditative mindset see, for instance, [Steiner, 1904/2003](#); [Stockmar, 2012, 2015](#); [Zajonc, 2009](#)).

7. Conclusion

We have started our enquiry by pointing out that it is insufficient to explore psychological phenomena in purely behavioral terms. Other aspects – namely the experiential and conceptual dimensions – are equally important facets but the methods needed to study them are different from conventional third person exploration because experience and conceptual insight unfold only in first-person encounter. We have hence briefly alluded to the need to relate to appropriate forms of inward enquiry but also pointed to the stumbling blocks and historic tensions associated with this so-called method of introspection. Next we described ways to develop and systematize such introspection more deliberately, referring to the work of recent scholars who made substantial proposals in this direction. In the context of this historic outlook we also relate the experiential to what has been historically referred to as the soul, and the conceptual to what has historically been referred to as the spirit. A centerpiece of our work is the attempt to track and enquire into these experiential and conceptual – here: soul and spirit – dimensions in a methodologically developed inner-enquiry framework.

From the review it is evident that we consider it inappropriate to qualify soul and spirit as emanations of – or appendices to – the material. What, then, is the relationship between the material and the soul/spirit? We consider it important to emphasize that the material/perceptual and the spiritual/conceptual are *not* altogether different categories of phenomena that have nothing in common. Rather, we see them as *different modes of expression* of what in reality is *one*: The material, in its form-aspect is already spiritual/conceptual; and the spiritual/conceptual, in its readiness to find expression on or about ponderous matter, is already material ([Steiner, 1924/1998](#)). Upon closer examination the material escapes purely physics-based observation, even with the most sophisticated third-person measurement instruments (here: particle accelerators) in the same way in which the spiritual also escapes purely physics-based third-person observation ([Dürr, 1986](#)). An inward-directed, first-person mode of enquiry is needed to capture the full breadth of reality for either of the realms. The soul is the fulcrum or mediator in between the two. Additional and more recent approaches have been put forward to explicate this relationship between the material and the spiritual (for more details see, for instance, [Atmanspacher's Dual-Aspect Monism](#); [Pereira's Triple-Aspect-Monism](#); and our own account of the body's and the mind's rhythmic processes playing a central role in this process; cf. [Atmanspacher, 2012](#); [Pereira, 2014](#); [Wagemann, 2010, 2011](#); [Weger & Edelhaeuser, 2014](#)).

Moreover, it is important to note that if we search for evidence of the spiritual/the conceptual in the material, we need to focus on the form-aspect of the material, its pattern of lawfulness – and capture it

with the appropriate instruments of the spiritual/the conceptual within us: our stage of conscious thinking. We cannot expect to find the spiritual in a material that is bare of the conceptual or that is investigated by disregarding its conceptual quality. In addition to studying the material/behavioral aspects of a phenomenon, we thus need to employ a qualitatively different type of perceptual instrument or sense organ to become aware of this primary quality – an inward perceptual instrument or mode of enquiry that operates on the stage of our conscious experience. The realm of experience, as we see it and describe it above, is the opening venue for soul and spirit

qualities to become recognizable to a consciousness that has been cultivated by the methods proposed here and elsewhere. In our inner experience, so we noticed, the reality of the conceptual becomes as tangible and as concise as the reality of the perceptual becomes tangible and concise in our outward, sense-based experience (behavioral observation, see Fig. 1). And yet note that it can be a rather long-winded path – although our own struggle may not be too representative; the behavioral approach has been so prominent in our own academic upbringing that it is somewhat difficult to venture into new territory.

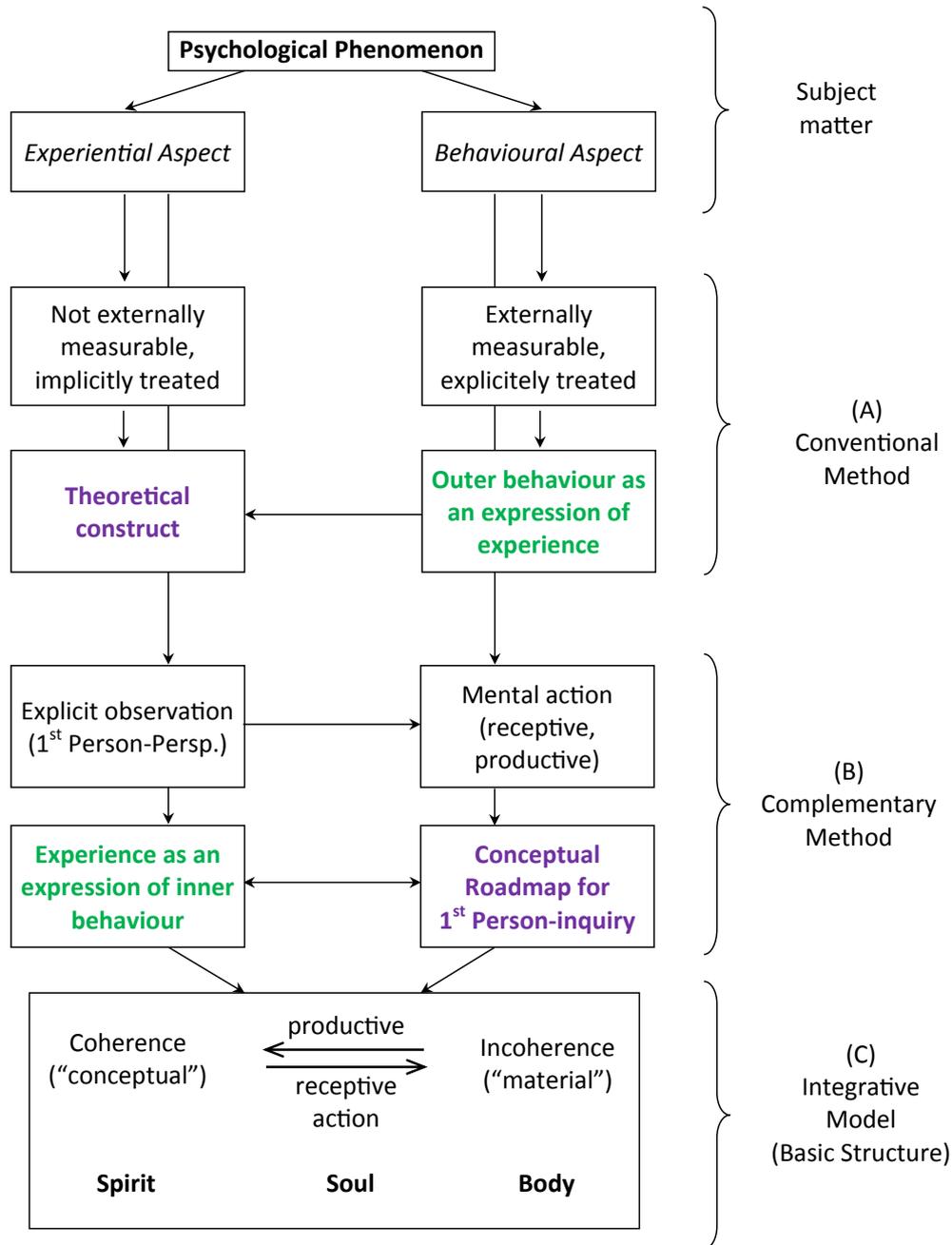


Fig. 1. Section A: The conventional research method in psychology does not investigate experience as such because experience cannot be approached and measured from a third-person perspective. Instead, psychological research focuses on what is directly measurable – external behavior – and uses it as an indirect expression of experience. Experience is thus operationalized via its behavioral coordinates. Importantly, however, in this constellation the relationship between the behavioral signature, the inferred theoretical construct, and the experience proper remains ultimately unresolved. **Section B:** Our proposal towards a complementary method seeks to explore the experience-component of psychological phenomena from a first-person perspective. From our pilot studies as well as from the reviewed literature (cf. Witzmann, 1983) it is evident that psychological experience is based on specific forms of mental activity (receptive, productive) that can be understood as an inner behavior. This inner type of behavior is initially unconscious but can be made conscious by explicit first-person observation. Researching the relationship between mental gestures of behavior and the respective states of experience allows for a development of methodological roadmaps that can be used by other researchers both for guidance and for validation. **Section C:** A result in this roadmap-sense is, for instance, the relationship between productive mental activity and the experience of conceptual coherence (Witzmann also refers to this as “basic structure”, Witzmann, 1983).

Fellow researchers who are likewise interested in this theme will not be able to gain much genuine knowledge about these qualitative aspects of soul and spirit from the reports and observations of others, including our own. They will need to instantiate or allow for an experience of these qualities on their own stage of conscious experience. Nonetheless, they can then provide a roadmap for their colleagues to examine and replicate these findings in their own experience. Nothing more or less is of course the case regarding a standard outward/third-person form of enquiry: If the researchers do not wish to trust their colleagues' findings at face value, they will certainly need to see for themselves. The same regarding the question about soul and spirit: What others have to say about it is only of outer/symbolic character – as much as it is of an outer character to speak of emotions such as fear or joy or curiosity or love until one has noticed these qualities in one's own experience and then wakes up to a whole new level of reality.

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