

3 February 1964

READING 3

DISPERSAL OF THE ATTENTION

The chequered history of Psychology – perhaps the most difficult of all kinds of knowledge – has shown an incessant struggle between the fact-finders and the inventors of theories. The facts remain; whereas the theories, which make man forget the facts, have, one after another, been discarded.

Keeping strictly to our present aim – the study of attention – we find this almost wholly neglected during the present century. But very good work had been done in this field following the foundation by Wundt of the first psychological laboratory at Leipzig in 1879. People from many countries worked there and their discoveries were summarised in the first, systematic account of Attention by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* published in 1890 (Vol. 1, Ch. 11). In the light of recent work on the brain (of whose structure these workers were wholly ignorant) the examples he gives take on a new importance and will save us a great deal of trouble, especially if we keep to the System description of the three kinds of Attention – attention dispersed, attention roused by emotion, and attention roused and controlled by voluntary effort.

First – *attention dispersed*. We all of us start life more or less the same in relation to attention; and I don't think we can quarrel with the following quotation from the *Principles* (Vol. 1, p. 417) about 'that extreme mobility of the attention with which we are familiar in children and which makes their first lessons such rough affairs'.

Any strong sensation whatever [James goes on] produces accommodation of the organs which perceive it, and absolute oblivion, for the time being, of the task in hand. This reflex and passive character of the attention (as contrasted with 'active' or 'voluntary' attention) which, as a French writer says, makes the child *seem to belong less to himself* than to every object which happens to catch his notice, is the first thing which the teacher must overcome. It *never is* overcome in some people, whose work to the end of life, gets done in the interstices of their mind-wandering.

As we grow up this passive sensory attraction of the attention becomes less *direct* and more *derived*.

This (says James) is when the impression, without being strong or of an instinctively exciting nature is connected by previous experience and education with things that are so – the 'motives' of the attention. A faint tap *per se* is not an interesting sound, but a tap as a signal, as that of a lover on a window-pane, will alert it. As Herbart wrote in the mid-eighteenth century: 'How a bit of bad grammar wounds the ears of the purist! How a false note hurts the musician, or an offence against good manners the man of the world!'

Finally in other kinds of people with advancing age, comes in another main cause of dispersal of the attention, namely what James calls '*mental associations*', and which we studied before Christmas as 'repetitive chains of thought'.

Each of us should be able to recognise quickly which of these is beginning to disperse our attention at any moment, so as to acquire the ability to reunite our attention again without delay.

Is it *sensation*, inner or outer, immediate or derived? Is it mental association? It is suggested that you try a few experiments, each lasting perhaps 2 minutes (sometimes with the eyes open, sometimes shut). Just try to collect your attention and hold it on one thing (e.g. a word, or an idea such as 'I am here now'). Find what it is that chiefly interferes with *your* attention.

* * *