KNOWING ONESELF?
AN ESSAY ON COMTEAN SKEPTICISM ABOUT INTROSPECTIVE SELF-OBSERVATION

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“With little examination,” Russell Hurlburt and Eric Schwitzgebel have observed, “introspection has re-entered psychology and philosophy. Even hard-nosed cognitive neuroscientists ask their subjects about their subjectively felt experience while in the fMRI magnet” (Hurlburt and Schwitzgebel 2007, 5).

William James—at least at the time when he wrote The Principles of Psychology—might well have approved of this development. Introspective observation, as he put it, “is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always” (James 1952, 121, italics removed). When we introspect we look into our own minds and report what we find there, namely states of consciousness. This James takes to be an established fact, accepted by all sides in the debate at the time. As he put it, “[e]very one agrees that we there discover states of consciousness. So far as I know, the existence of such states has never been doubted by any critic, however skeptical in other respects he may have been” (James 1952, 121, italics removed). Indeed, “[a]ll people unhesitatingly believe that they feel themselves thinking, and that they distinguish the mental state as an inward activity or passion, from all the objects with which it may cognitively deal. I regard this belief as the most fundamental of all the postulates of Psychology” (James 1952, 121).

James contracted to write his great textbook of psychology in 1880 and a decade later the monumental work was finished. According to the eminent Harvard historian of psychology, Edwin Boring, the pro-introspection attitude expressed by James was shared by the philosophers, physiologists, and physicists who founded modern scientific psychology in the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s, including “Fechner, Lotze, Helmholtz, Wundt, Hering, Mach and their associates” (Boring 1953, 171). It seems clear that James and the other
founders of psychology who shared his belief in the fundamental role of introspection in psychology—as well as contemporary psychologists, philosophers, and neuroscientists who have invited introspection back into their respective fields—all share a certain basic philosophical supposition (tacitly held, perhaps). The supposition is that introspection is a possible act to perform.

Comte’s Denial of Introspection

Auguste Comte famously denied this supposition. According to him, the very notion of introspection, of interior observation (“l’observation intérieure”), is a “fundamental sophism” and “pure illusion” (Comte 1988, 20). It amounts to the “the supposition of a man seeing himself think”—a clear “absurdity” (Comte 1855, 383). Comte’s denial of introspection was formulated when scientific psychology was in its infancy, exercising a clear influence upon both its formative and subsequent development (Hatfield 2005, 271–72).

We will consider some of Comte’s objections to introspection in this paper. The aim will be to take the Comtean criticism of introspection as the point of embarkation for an exploration of some general philosophical considerations regarding introspective self-observation. This paper is not intended as a contribution to systematic and scholarly Comte history, nor as an excursion into critical exegesis. No general assessment or evaluation of Comte’s overall philosophy will be put forward. We will consider only Comte’s arguments against introspection, as these are made in his Course on Positive Philosophy—a work otherwise dominated by the ambitions of furnishing a comprehensive, systematic, and constructive methodological project (Gane 2006, 2–6). Only Comte’s famous objections to introspection, as these have been generally received, will be our concern.

We begin by making a few prefatory remarks about Comte and his times. Born on January 19 in 1798, in Montpellier near the Southern coast of France, Comte came to the world as the French Revolution was ending, he was a young child when Napoleon Bonaparte declared himself emperor, and he was a teenager when the Battle of Waterloo was fought. In this atmosphere of social havoc and unrestrained radical thought, he developed a system of philosophy—positivism—envisioned as a comprehensive, secularized religion of science and humanity.