

Lecture I. Recent Criticisms of "Consciousness"

There are certain occurrences which we are in the habit of calling "mental." Among these we may take as typical BELIEVING and DESIRING. The exact definition of the word "mental" will, I hope, emerge as the lectures proceed; for the present, I shall mean by it whatever occurrences would commonly be called mental.

I wish in these lectures to analyse as fully as I can what it is that really takes place when we, e.g. believe or desire. In this first lecture I shall be concerned to refute a theory which is widely held, and which I formerly held myself: the theory that the essence of everything mental is a certain quite peculiar something called "consciousness," conceived either as a relation to objects, or as a pervading quality of psychical phenomena.

The reasons which I shall give against this theory will be mainly derived from previous authors. There are two sorts of reasons, which will divide my lecture into two parts

(1) Direct reasons, derived from analysis and its difficulties;

(2) Indirect reasons, derived from observation of animals

(comparative psychology) and of the insane and hysterical

(psycho-analysis).

Few things are more firmly established in popular philosophy than the distinction between mind and matter. Those who are not professional metaphysicians are willing to confess that they do not know what mind actually is, or how matter is constituted; but they remain convinced that there is an impassable gulf between the two, and that both belong to what actually exists in the world. Philosophers, on the other hand, have maintained often that matter is a mere fiction imagined by mind, and sometimes that mind is a mere property of a certain kind of matter. Those who maintain that mind is the reality and matter an evil dream are called "idealists"--a word which has a different meaning in philosophy from that which it bears in ordinary life. Those who argue that matter is the reality and mind a mere property of protoplasm are called "materialists." They have been rare among philosophers, but common, at certain periods, among men of science. Idealists, materialists, and ordinary mortals have been in agreement on one point: that they knew sufficiently what they meant by the words "mind" and "matter" to be able to conduct their debate intelligently. Yet it was just in this point, as to which they were at one, that they seem to me to have been all alike in error.

The stuff of which the world of our experience is composed is, in my belief, neither mind nor matter, but something more primitive than either. Both mind and matter seem to be composite, and the stuff of which they are compounded lies in a sense between the two, in a sense above them both, like a common ancestor. As regards matter, I have set forth my reasons for this view on former occasions,* and I shall not now repeat them. But the question of mind is more difficult, and it is this question that I propose to discuss in these lectures. A great deal of what I shall have to say is not original; indeed, much recent work, in various fields, has tended to show the necessity of such theories as those which I shall be advocating. Accordingly in this first lecture I shall try to give a brief description of the systems of ideas within which our investigation is to be carried on.

* "Our Knowledge of the External World" (Allen & Unwin), Chapters III and IV. Also "Mysticism and Logic," Essays VII and VIII.

If there is one thing that may be said, in the popular estimation, to characterize mind, that one thing is "consciousness." We say that we are "conscious" of what we see and hear, of what we remember, and of our own thoughts and feelings. Most of us believe that tables and chairs are not "conscious." We think that when we sit in a chair, we are aware of sitting in it, but it is not aware of being sat in. It cannot for a moment be doubted that we are right in believing that there is SOME difference between us and the chair in this respect: so much may be taken as fact, and as a datum for our inquiry. But as soon as we try to say what exactly the difference is, we become involved in perplexities. Is "consciousness" ultimate and simple, something to be merely accepted and contemplated? Or is it something complex, perhaps consisting in our way of behaving in the presence of objects, or, alternatively, in the existence in us of things called "ideas," having a certain relation to objects, though different from them, and only symbolically representative of them? Such questions are not easy to answer; but until they are answered we cannot profess to know what we mean by saying that we are possessed of "consciousness."

Before considering modern theories, let us look first at consciousness from the standpoint of conventional psychology, since this embodies views which naturally occur when we begin to reflect upon the subject. For this purpose, let us as a preliminary consider different ways of being conscious.

First, there is the way of PERCEPTION. We "perceive" tables and chairs, horses and dogs, our friends, traffic passing in the street--in short, anything which we recognize through the senses. I leave on one side for the present the question whether pure sensation is to be regarded as a form of consciousness: what I am speaking of now is perception, where, according to conventional psychology, we go beyond the sensation to the "thing" which it represents. When you hear a donkey bray, you not only hear a noise, but realize that it comes from a donkey. When you see a table, you not only see a coloured surface, but realize that it is hard. The addition of these elements that go beyond crude sensation is said to constitute perception. We shall have more to say about this at a later stage. For the moment, I am merely concerned to note that perception of objects is one of the most obvious examples of what is called "consciousness." We are "conscious" of anything that we perceive.

We may take next the way of MEMORY. If I set to work to recall what I did this morning, that is a form of consciousness different from perception,

since it is concerned with past. There are various problems as to how we can be conscious now of what no longer exists. These will be dealt with incidentally when we come to the analysis of memory.

From memory it is an easy step to what are called "ideas"--not in the Platonic sense, but in that of Locke, Berkeley and Hume, in which they are opposed to "impressions." You may be conscious of a friend either by seeing him or by "thinking" of him; and by "thought" you can be conscious of objects which cannot be seen, such as the human race, or physiology. "Thought" in the narrower sense is that form of consciousness which consists in "ideas" as opposed to impressions or mere memories.

We may end our preliminary catalogue with BELIEF, by which I mean that way of being conscious which may be either true or false. We say that a man is "conscious of looking a fool," by which we mean that he believes he looks a fool, and is not mistaken in this belief. This is a different form of consciousness from any of the earlier ones. It is the form which gives "knowledge" in the strict sense, and also error. It is, at least apparently, more complex than our previous forms of consciousness; though we shall find that they are not so separable from it as they might appear to be.

Besides ways of being conscious there are other things that would ordinarily be called "mental," such as desire and pleasure and pain. These raise problems of their own, which we shall reach in Lecture III. But the hardest problems are those that arise concerning ways of being "conscious." These ways, taken together, are called the "cognitive" elements in mind, and it is these that will occupy us most during the following lectures.

There is one element which SEEMS obviously in common among the different ways of being conscious, and that is, that they are all directed to OBJECTS. We are conscious "of" something. The consciousness, it seems, is one thing, and that of which we are conscious is another thing. Unless we are to acquiesce in the view that we can never be conscious of anything outside our own minds, we must say that the object of consciousness need not be mental, though the consciousness must be. (I am speaking within the circle of conventional doctrines, not expressing my own beliefs.) This direction towards an object is commonly regarded as typical of every form of cognition, and sometimes of mental life altogether. We may distinguish two different tendencies in traditional psychology. There are those who take mental phenomena naively, just as they would physical phenomena. This school of psychologists tends not to emphasize the object. On the other hand, there are those whose primary interest is in the apparent fact that we have KNOWLEDGE, that there is a world surrounding us of which we are aware. These men are interested in the mind because of its relation to the world, because knowledge, if it is a fact, is a very mysterious one. Their interest in psychology is naturally centred in the relation of consciousness to its object, a problem which, properly, belongs rather to theory of knowledge. We may take as one of the best and most typical representatives of this school the Austrian psychologist Brentano, whose "Psychology from the Empirical Standpoint,"* though published in

1874, is still influential and was the starting-point of a great deal of interesting work. He says (p. 115):

* "Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkte," vol. i, 1874. (The second volume was never published.)

"Every psychical phenomenon is characterized by what the scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (also the mental) inexistence of an object, and what we, although with not quite unambiguous expressions, would call relation to a content, direction towards an object (which is not here to be understood as a reality), or immanent objectivity. Each contains something in itself as an object, though not each in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgment something is acknowledged or rejected, in love something is loved, in hatred hated, in desire desired, and so on.

"This intentional inexistence is exclusively peculiar to psychical phenomena. No physical phenomenon shows anything similar. And so we can define psychical phenomena by saying that they are phenomena which intentionally contain an object in themselves."

The view here expressed, that relation to an object is an ultimate irreducible characteristic of mental phenomena, is one which I shall be concerned to combat. Like Brentano, I am interested in psychology, not so much for its own sake, as for the light that it may throw on the problem of knowledge. Until very lately I believed, as he did, that mental phenomena have essential reference to objects, except possibly in the case of pleasure and pain. Now I no longer believe this, even in the case of knowledge. I shall try to make my reasons for this rejection clear as we proceed. It must be evident at first glance that the analysis of knowledge is rendered more difficult by the rejection; but the apparent simplicity of Brentano's view of knowledge will be found, if I am not mistaken, incapable of maintaining itself either against an analytic scrutiny or against a host of facts in psycho-analysis and animal psychology. I do not wish to minimize the problems. I will merely observe, in mitigation of our prospective labours, that thinking, however it is to be analysed, is in itself a delightful occupation, and that there is no enemy to thinking so deadly as a false simplicity. Travelling, whether in the mental or the physical world, is a joy, and it is good to know that, in the mental world at least, there are vast countries still very imperfectly explored.

The view expressed by Brentano has been held very generally, and developed by many writers. Among these we may take as an example his Austrian successor Meinong.* According to him there are three elements involved in the thought of an object. These three he calls the act, the content and the object. The act is the same in any two cases of the same kind of consciousness; for instance, if I think of Smith or think of Brown, the act of thinking, in itself, is exactly similar on both occasions. But the content of my thought, the particular event that is happening in my mind, is different when I think of Smith and when I think of Brown. The content, Meinong argues, must not be confounded with the object, since the content must exist in my mind at the moment when I have the thought, whereas the object need not do so. The object may be something past or future; it may be physical, not mental; it may be something abstract, like equality for example; it may be something imaginary, like a golden mountain; or it may even be something self-contradictory, like a round square. But in all these cases, so he contends, the content exists when the thought exists, and is what distinguishes it, as an occurrence, from other thoughts.

* See, e.g. his article: "Ueber Gegenstande hoherer Ordnung und deren Verhaltniss zur inneren Wahrnehmung," "Zeitschrift fur Psychologie and Physiologie der Sinnesorgane," vol. xxi, pp.

182-272 (1899), especially pp. 185-8.

To make this theory concrete, let us suppose that you are thinking of St. Paul's. Then, according to Meinong, we have to distinguish three elements which are necessarily combined in constituting the one thought. First, there is the act of thinking, which would be just the same whatever you were thinking about. Then there is what makes the character of the thought as contrasted with other thoughts; this is the content. And finally there is St. Paul's, which is the object of your thought. There must be a difference between the content of a thought and what it is about, since the thought is here and now, whereas what it is about may not be; hence it is clear that the thought is not identical with St. Paul's. This seems to show that we

must distinguish between content and object. But if Meinong is right, there can be no thought without an object: the three elements of act, content and object are all required to constitute the one single occurrence called "thinking of St. Paul's."

The above analysis of a thought, though I believe it to be mistaken, is very useful as affording a schema in terms of which other theories can be stated. In the remainder of the present lecture I shall state in outline the view which I advocate, and show how various other views out of which mine has grown result from modifications of the threefold analysis into act, content and object.

The first criticism I have to make is that the ACT seems unnecessary and fictitious. The occurrence of the content of a thought constitutes the occurrence of the thought. Empirically, I cannot discover anything corresponding to the supposed act; and theoretically I cannot see that it is indispensable. We say: "/ think so-and-so," and this word "I" suggests that thinking is the act of a person. Meinong's "act" is the ghost of the subject, or what once was the full-blooded soul. It is supposed that thoughts cannot just come and go, but need a person to think them. Now, of course it is true that thoughts can be collected into bundles, so that one bundle is my thoughts, another is your thoughts, and a third is the thoughts of Mr. Jones. But I think the person is not an ingredient in the single thought: he is rather constituted by relations of the thoughts to each other and to the body. This is a large question, which need not, in its entirety, concern us at present. All that I am concerned with for the moment is that the grammatical forms "I think," "you think," and "Mr. Jones thinks," are misleading if regarded as indicating an analysis of a single thought. It would be better to say "it thinks in me," like "it rains here"; or better still, "there is a thought in me." This is simply on the ground that what Meinong calls the act in thinking is not empirically discoverable, or logically deducible from what we can observe.

The next point of criticism concerns the relation of content and object. The reference of thoughts to objects is not, I believe, the simple direct essential thing that Brentano and Meinong represent it as being. It seems to me to be derivative, and to consist largely in BELIEFS: beliefs that what constitutes the thought is connected with various other elements which together make up the object. You have, say, an image of St. Paul's, or merely the word "St. Paul's" in your head. You believe, however vaguely and dimly, that this is connected with what you would see if you went to St. Paul's, or what you would feel if you touched its walls; it is further connected with what other people see and feel, with services and the Dean and Chapter and Sir Christopher Wren. These things are not mere thoughts of yours, but your thought stands in a relation to them of which you are more or less aware. The awareness of this relation is a further thought, and constitutes your feeling that the original thought had an "object." But in pure imagination you can get very similar thoughts without these accompanying beliefs; and in this case your thoughts do not have objects or seem to have them. Thus in such instances you have content without object. On the other hand, in seeing or hearing it would be less misleading to say that you have object without content, since what you see or hear is actually part of the physical world, though not matter in the sense of physics. Thus the whole question of the relation of mental occurrences to objects grows very complicated, and cannot be settled by regarding reference to objects as of the essence of thoughts. All the above remarks are merely preliminary, and will be expanded later.

Speaking in popular and unphilosophical terms, we may say that the content of a thought is supposed to be something in your head when you think the thought, while the object is usually something in the outer world. It is held that knowledge of the outer world is constituted by the relation to the object, while the fact that knowledge is different from what it knows is due to the fact that knowledge comes by way of contents. We can begin to state the difference between realism and idealism in terms of this opposition of contents and objects. Speaking quite roughly and approximately, we may say that idealism tends to suppress the object, while realism tends to suppress the content. Idealism, accordingly, says that nothing can be known except thoughts, and all the reality that we know is mental; while realism maintains that we know objects directly, in sensation certainly, and perhaps also in memory and thought. Idealism does not say that nothing can be known beyond the present thought, but it maintains that the context of vague belief, which we spoke of in connection with the thought of St. Paul's, only takes you to other thoughts, never to anything radically different from thoughts. The difficulty of this view is in regard to sensation, where it seems as if we came into direct contact with the outer world. But the Berkeleyan way of meeting this difficulty is so familiar that I need not enlarge upon it now. I shall return to it in a later lecture, and will only observe, for the present, that there seem to me no valid grounds for regarding what we see and hear as not part of the physical world.

Realists, on the other hand, as a rule, suppress the content, and maintain that a thought consists either of act and object alone, or of object alone. I have been in the past a realist, and I remain a realist as regards sensation, but not as regards memory or thought. I will try to explain what seem to me to be the reasons for and against various kinds of realism.

Modern idealism professes to be by no means confined to the present thought or the present thinker in regard to its knowledge; indeed, it contends that the world is so organic, so dove-tailed, that from any one portion the whole can be inferred, as the complete skeleton of an extinct animal can be inferred from one bone. But the logic by which this supposed organic nature of the world is nominally demonstrated appears to realists, as it does to me, to be faulty. They argue that, if we cannot know the physical world directly, we cannot really know any thing outside our own minds: the rest of the world may be merely our dream. This is a dreary view, and they there fore seek ways of escaping from it. Accordingly they maintain that in knowledge we are in direct contact with objects, which may be, and usually are, outside our own minds. No doubt they are prompted to this view, in the first place, by bias, namely, by the desire to think that they can know of the existence of a world outside themselves. But we have to consider, not what led them to desire the view, but whether their arguments for it are valid.

There are two different kinds of realism, according as we make a thought consist of act and object, or of object alone. Their difficulties are different, but neither seems tenable all through. Take, for the sake of definiteness, the remembering of a past event. The remembering occurs now, and is therefore necessarily not identical with the past event. So long as we retain the act, this need cause no difficulty. The act of remembering occurs now, and has on this view a certain essential relation to the past event which it remembers. There is no LOGICAL objection to this theory, but there is the objection, which we spoke of earlier, that the act seems mythical, and is not to be found by observation. If, on the other hand, we try to constitute memory without the act, we are driven to a content, since we must have something that happens NOW, as opposed to the event which happened in the past. Thus, when we reject the act, which I think we must, we are driven to a theory of memory which is more akin to idealism. These arguments, however, do not apply to sensation. It is especially sensation, I think, which is considered by those realists who retain only the object.* Their views, which are chiefly held in America, are in large measure derived from William James, and before going further it will be well to consider the revolutionary doctrine which he advocated. I believe this doctrine contains important new truth, and what I shall have to say will be in a considerable measure inspired by it.

* This is explicitly the case with Mach's "Analysis of Sensations," a book of fundamental importance in the present connection. (Translation of fifth German edition, Open Court Co.,

'consciousness' exist?*" In this essay he explains how what used to be the soul has gradually been refined down to the "transcendental ego," which, he says, "attenuates itself to a thoroughly ghostly condition, being only a name for the fact that the 'content' of experience IS KNOWN. It loses personal form and activity--these passing over to the content--and becomes a bare Bewusstheit or Bewusstsein überhaupt, of which in its own right absolutely nothing can be said. I believe (he continues) that

'consciousness,' when once it has evaporated to this estate of pure diaphaneity, is on the point of disappearing altogether. It is the name of a nonentity, and has no right to a place among first principles. Those who still cling to it are clinging to a mere echo, the faint rumour left behind by the disappearing

'soul' upon the air of philosophy"(p. 2).

* "Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods," vol. i, 1904. Reprinted in "Essays in Radical Empiricism"

(Longmans, Green & Co., 1912), pp. 1-38, to which references in what follows refer.

He explains that this is no sudden change in his opinions. "For twenty years past," he says, "I have mistrusted 'consciousness' as an entity; for seven or eight years past I have suggested its non-existence to my students, and tried to give them its pragmatic equivalent in realities of experience. It seems to me that the hour is ripe for it to be openly and universally discarded"(p. 3).

His next concern is to explain away the air of paradox, for James was never wilfully paradoxical. "Undeniably," he says, "'thoughts' do exist." "I mean only to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it does stand for a function. There is, I mean, no aboriginal stuff or quality of being, contrasted with that of which material objects are made, out of which our thoughts of them are made; but there is a function in experience which thoughts perform, and for the performance of which this quality of being is invoked. That function is KNOWING"(pp. 3-4).

James's view is that the raw material out of which the world is built up is not of two sorts, one matter and the other mind, but that it is arranged in different patterns by its inter-relations, and that some arrangements may be called mental, while others may be called physical.

"My thesis is," he says, "that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff

'pure experience,' then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. The relation itself is a part of pure experience; one of its 'terms' becomes the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the knower, the other becomes the object known"(p. 4).

After mentioning the duality of subject and object, which is supposed to constitute consciousness, he proceeds in italics: "EXPERIENCE, I BELIEVE, HAS NO SUCH INNER DUPLICITY; AND THE SEPARATION OF IT INTO CONSCIOUSNESS AND CONTENT COMES, NOT BY WAY OF SUBTRACTION, BUT BY WAY OF ADDITION"(p. 9).

He illustrates his meaning by the analogy of paint as it appears in a paint-shop and as it appears in a picture: in the one case it is just "saleable matter," while in the other it "performs a spiritual function. Just so, I maintain (he continues), does a given undivided portion of experience, taken in one context of associates, play the part of a knower, of a state of mind, of

'consciousness'; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective 'content.' In a word, in one group it figures as a thought, in another group as a thing"(pp. 9-10).

He does not believe in the supposed immediate certainty of thought. "Let the case be what it may in others," he says, "I am as confident as I am of anything that, in myself, the stream of thinking (which I recognize emphatically as a phenomenon) is only a careless name for what, when scrutinized, reveals itself to consist chiefly of the stream of my breathing. The 'I think' which Kant said must be able to accompany all my objects, is the

'I breathe' which actually does accompany them"(pp. 36-37).

The same view of "consciousness" is set forth in the succeeding essay, "A World of Pure Experience" (ib., pp. 39-91). The use of the phrase "pure experience" in both essays points to a lingering influence of idealism. "Experience," like "consciousness," must be a product, not part of the primary stuff of the world. It must be possible, if James is right in his main contentions, that roughly the same stuff, differently arranged, would not give rise to anything that could be called "experience." This word has been dropped by the American realists, among whom we may mention specially Professor R. B. Perry of Harvard and Mr. Edwin B. Holt. The interests of this school are in general philosophy and the philosophy of the sciences, rather than in psychology; they have derived a strong impulsion from James, but have more interest than he had in logic and mathematics and the abstract part of philosophy. They speak of "neutral" entities as the stuff out of which both mind and matter are constructed. Thus Holt says: "If the terms and propositions of logic must be substantialized, they are all strictly of one substance, for which perhaps the least dangerous name is neutral- stuff. The relation of neutral-stuff to matter and mind we shall have presently to consider at considerable length." *

* "The Concept of Consciousness" (Geo. Allen & Co., 1914), p. 52.

My own belief--for which the reasons will appear in subsequent lectures--is that James is right in rejecting consciousness as an entity, and that the American realists are partly right, though not wholly, in considering that both mind and matter are composed of a neutral-stuff which, in isolation, is neither mental nor material. I should admit this view as regards sensations: what is heard or seen belongs equally to psychology and to physics. But I should say that images belong only to the mental world, while those occurrences (if any) which do not form part of any "experience" belong only to the physical world. There are, it seems to me, prima facie different kinds of causal laws, one belonging to physics and the other to psychology. The law of gravitation, for example, is a physical law, while the law of association is a psychological law. Sensations are subject to both kinds of laws, and are therefore truly "neutral" in Holt's sense. But entities subject only to physical laws, or only to psychological laws, are not neutral, and may be called respectively purely material and purely mental. Even those, however, which are purely mental will not have that intrinsic

reference to objects which Brentano assigns to them and which constitutes the essence of "consciousness" as ordinarily understood. But it is now time to pass on to other modern tendencies, also hostile to "consciousness."

There is a psychological school called "Behaviourists," of whom the protagonist is Professor John B. Watson,* formerly of the Johns Hopkins University. To them also, on the whole, belongs Professor John Dewey, who, with James and Dr. Schiller, was one of the three founders of pragmatism. The view of the "behaviourists" is that nothing can be known except by external observation. They deny altogether that there is a separate source of knowledge called "introspection," by which we can know things about ourselves which we could never observe in others. They do not by any means deny that all sorts of things MAY go on in our minds: they only say that such things, if they occur, are not susceptible of scientific observation, and do not therefore concern psychology as a science. Psychology as a science, they say, is only concerned with BEHAVIOUR, i.e. with what we DO; this alone, they contend, can be accurately observed. Whether we think meanwhile, they tell us, cannot be known; in their observation of the behaviour of human beings, they have not so far found any evidence of thought. True, we talk a great deal, and imagine that in so doing we are showing that we can think; but behaviourists say that the talk they have to listen to can be explained without supposing that people think. Where you might expect a chapter on "thought processes" you come instead upon a chapter on "The Language Habit." It is humiliating to find how terribly adequate this hypothesis turns out to be.

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