

Lecture I. Recent Criticisms of "Consciousness" (Page 2)

* See especially his "Behavior: an Introduction to Comparative Psychology," New York, 1914.

Behaviourism has not, however, sprung from observing the folly of men. It is the wisdom of animals that has suggested the view. It has always been a common topic of popular discussion whether animals "think." On this topic people are prepared to take sides without having the vaguest idea what they mean by "thinking." Those who desired to investigate such questions were led to observe the behaviour of animals, in the hope that their behaviour would throw some light on their mental faculties. At first sight, it might seem that this is so. People say that a dog "knows" its name because it comes when it is called, and that it "remembers" its master, because it looks sad in his absence, but wags its tail and barks when he returns. That the dog behaves in this way is matter of observation, but that it "knows" or "remembers" anything is an inference, and in fact a very doubtful one. The more such inferences are examined, the more precarious they are seen to be. Hence the study of animal behaviour has been gradually led to abandon all attempt at mental interpretation. And it can hardly be doubted that, in many cases of complicated behaviour very well adapted to its ends, there can be no prevision of those ends. The first time a bird builds a nest, we can hardly suppose it knows that there will be eggs to be laid in it, or that it will sit on the eggs, or that they will hatch into young birds. It does what it does at each stage because instinct gives it an impulse to do just that, not because it foresees and desires the result of its actions.*

* An interesting discussion of the question whether instinctive actions, when first performed, involve any prevision, however vague, will be found in Lloyd Morgan's "Instinct and Experience"

(Methuen, 1912), chap. ii.

Careful observers of animals, being anxious to avoid precarious inferences, have gradually discovered more and more how to give an account of the actions of animals without assuming what we call "consciousness." It has seemed to the behaviourists that similar methods can be applied to human behaviour, without assuming anything not open to external observation. Let us give a crude illustration, too crude for the authors in question, but capable of affording a rough insight into their meaning. Suppose two children in a school, both of whom are asked "What is six times nine?" One says fifty-four, the other says fifty-six. The one, we say, "knows" what six times nine is, the other does not. But all that we can observe is a certain language-habit. The one child has acquired the habit of saying "six times nine is fifty-four"; the other has not. There is no more need of "thought" in this than there is when a horse turns into his accustomed stable; there are merely more numerous and complicated habits. There is obviously an observable fact called "knowing" such-and-such a thing; examinations are experiments for discovering such facts. But all that is observed or discovered is a certain set of habits in the use of words. The thoughts (if any) in the mind of the examinee are of no interest to the examiner; nor has the examiner any reason to suppose even the most successful examinee capable of even the smallest amount of thought.

Thus what is called "knowing," in the sense in which we can ascertain what other people "know," is a phenomenon exemplified in their physical behaviour, including spoken and written words. There is no reason--so Watson argues--to suppose that their knowledge IS anything beyond the habits shown in this behaviour: the inference that other people have something nonphysical called "mind" or "thought" is therefore unwarranted.

So far, there is nothing particularly repugnant to our prejudices in the conclusions of the behaviourists. We are all willing to admit that other people are thoughtless. But when it comes to ourselves, we feel convinced that we can actually perceive our own thinking. "Cogito, ergo sum" would be regarded by most people as having a true premiss. This, however, the behaviourist denies. He maintains that our knowledge of ourselves is no different in kind from our knowledge of other people. We may see MORE, because our own body is easier to observe than that of other people; but we do not see anything radically unlike what we see of others. Introspection, as a separate source of knowledge, is entirely denied by psychologists of this school. I shall discuss this question at length in a later lecture; for the present I will only observe that it is by no means simple, and that, though I believe the behaviourists somewhat overstate their case, yet there is an important element of truth in their contention, since the things which we can discover by introspection do not seem to differ in any very fundamental way from the things which we discover by external observation.

So far, we have been principally concerned with knowing. But it might well be maintained that desiring is what is really most characteristic of mind. Human beings are constantly engaged in achieving some end they feel pleasure in success and pain in failure. In a purely material world, it may be said, there would be no opposition of pleasant and unpleasant, good and bad, what is desired and what is feared. A man's acts are governed by purposes. He decides, let us suppose, to go to a certain place, whereupon he proceeds to the station, takes his ticket and enters the train. If the usual route is blocked by an accident, he goes by some other route. All that he does is determined--or so it seems--by the end he has in view, by what lies in front of him, rather than by what lies behind. With dead matter, this is not the case. A stone at the top of a hill may start rolling, but it shows no pertinacity in trying to get to the bottom. Any ledge or obstacle will stop it, and it will exhibit no signs of discontent if this happens. It is not attracted by the pleasantness of the valley, as a sheep or cow might be, but propelled by the steepness of the hill at the place where it is. In all this we have characteristic differences between the behaviour of animals and the behaviour of matter as studied by physics.

Desire, like knowledge, is, of course, in one sense an observable phenomenon. An elephant will eat a bun, but not a mutton chop; a duck will go into the water, but a hen will not. But when we think of our own desires, most people believe that we can know them by an immediate self-knowledge which does not depend upon observation of our actions. Yet if this were the case, it would be odd that people are so often mistaken as to what they desire. It is matter of common observation that "so-and-so does not know his own motives," or that "A is envious of B and malicious about him, but quite unconscious of being so." Such people are called self-deceivers, and are supposed to have had to go through some more or less elaborate process of concealing from themselves what would otherwise have been obvious. I believe that this is an entire mistake. I believe that the discovery of our own motives can only be made by the same process by which we discover other people's, namely, the process of observing our actions and inferring the desire which could prompt them. A desire is "conscious" when we have told ourselves that we have it. A hungry man may

say to himself: "Oh, my lunch." Then his desire is "unconscious." But it only differs from an "unconscious" desire by the presence of appropriate words, which is by no means a fundamental difference.

The belief that a motive is normally conscious makes it easier to be mistaken as to our own motives than as to other people's. When some desire that we should be ashamed of is attributed to us, we notice that we have never had it consciously, in the sense of saying to ourselves, "I wish that would happen." We therefore look for some other interpretation of our actions, and regard our friends as very unjust when they refuse to be convinced by our repudiation of what we hold to be a calumny. Moral considerations greatly increase the difficulty of clear thinking in this matter. It is commonly argued that people are not to blame for unconscious motives, but only for conscious ones. In order, therefore, to be wholly virtuous it is only necessary to repeat virtuous formulas. We say: "I desire to be kind to my friends, honourable in business, philanthropic towards the poor, public-spirited in politics." So long as we refuse to allow ourselves, even in the watches of the night, to avow any contrary desires, we may be bullies at home, shady in the City, skinflints in paying wages and profiteers in dealing with the public; yet, if only conscious motives are to count in moral valuation, we shall remain model characters. This is an agreeable doctrine, and it is not surprising that men are unwilling to abandon it. But moral considerations are the worst enemies of the scientific spirit and we must dismiss them from our minds if we wish to arrive at truth.

I believe--as I shall try to prove in a later lecture--that desire, like force in mechanics, is of the nature of a convenient fiction for describing shortly certain laws of behaviour. A hungry animal is restless until it finds food; then it becomes quiescent. The thing which will bring a restless condition to an end is said to be what is desired. But only experience can show what will have this sedative effect, and it is easy to make mistakes. We feel dissatisfaction, and think that such and such a thing would remove it; but in thinking this, we are theorizing, not observing a patent fact. Our theorizing is often mistaken, and when it is mistaken there is a difference between what we think we desire and what in fact will bring satisfaction. This is such a common phenomenon that any theory of desire which fails to account for it must be wrong.

What have been called "unconscious" desires have been brought very much to the fore in recent years by psycho-analysis. Psycho-analysis, as every one knows, is primarily a method of understanding hysteria and certain forms of insanity*; but it has been found that there is much in the lives of ordinary men and women which bears a humiliating resemblance to the delusions of the insane. The connection of dreams, irrational beliefs and foolish actions with unconscious wishes has been brought to light, though with some exaggeration, by Freud and Jung and their followers. As regards the nature of these unconscious wishes, it seems to me--though as a layman I speak with diffidence--that many psycho-analysts are unduly narrow; no doubt the wishes they emphasize exist, but others, e.g. for honour and power, are equally operative and equally liable to concealment. This, however, does not affect the value of their general theories from the point of view of theoretic psychology, and it is from this point of view that their results are important for the analysis of mind.

* There is a wide field of "unconscious" phenomena which does not depend upon psycho-analytic theories. Such occurrences as automatic writing lead Dr. Morton Prince to say: "As I view this question of the subconscious, far too much weight is given to the point of awareness or not awareness of our conscious processes. As a matter of fact, we find entirely identical phenomena, that is, identical in every respect but one--that of awareness in which sometimes we are aware of these conscious phenomena and sometimes not"(p. 87 of "Subconscious Phenomena," by various authors, Rebman). Dr. Morton Prince conceives that there may be "consciousness" without "awareness." But this is a difficult view, and one which makes some definition of "consciousness" imperative. For my part, I cannot see how to separate consciousness from awareness.

What, I think, is clearly established, is that a man's actions and beliefs may be wholly dominated by a desire of which he is quite unconscious, and which he indignantly repudiates when it is suggested to him. Such a desire is generally, in morbid cases, of a sort which the patient would consider wicked; if he had to admit that he had the desire, he would loathe himself. Yet it is so strong that it must force an outlet for itself; hence it becomes necessary to entertain whole systems of false beliefs in order to hide the nature of what is desired. The resulting delusions in very many cases disappear if the hysteric or lunatic can be made to face the facts about himself. The consequence of this is that the treatment of many forms of insanity has grown more psychological and less physiological than it used to be. Instead of looking for a physical defect in the brain, those who treat delusions look for the repressed desire which has found this contorted mode of expression. For those who do not wish to plunge into the somewhat repulsive and often rather wild theories of psychoanalytic pioneers, it will be worth while to read a little book by Dr. Bernard Hart on "The Psychology of Insanity."** On this question of the mental as opposed to the physiological study of the causes of insanity, Dr. Hart says:

* Cambridge, 1912; 2nd edition, 1914. The following references are to the second edition.

"The psychological conception [of insanity] is based on the view that mental processes can be directly studied without any reference to the accompanying changes which are presumed to take place in the brain, and that insanity may therefore be properly attacked from the standpoint of psychology"(p. 9).

This illustrates a point which I am anxious to make clear from the outset. Any attempt to classify modern views, such as I propose to advocate, from the old standpoint of materialism and idealism, is only misleading. In certain respects, the views which I shall be setting forth approximate to materialism; in certain others, they approximate to its opposite. On this question of the study of delusions, the practical effect of the modern theories, as Dr. Hart points out, is emancipation from the materialist method. On the other hand, as he also points out (pp.

38-9), imbecility and dementia still have to be considered physiologically, as caused by defects in the brain. There is no inconsistency in this. If, as we maintain, mind and matter are neither of them the actual stuff of reality, but different convenient groupings of an underlying material, then, clearly, the question whether, in regard to a given phenomenon, we are to seek a physical or a mental cause, is merely one to be decided by trial. Metaphysicians have argued endlessly as to the interaction of mind and matter. The followers of Descartes held that mind and matter are so different as to make any action of the one on the other impossible. When I will to move my arm, they said, it is not my will that operates on my arm, but God, who, by His omnipotence, moves my arm whenever I want it moved. The modern doctrine of psychophysical parallelism is not appreciably different from this theory of the Cartesian school. Psycho-physical parallelism is the theory that mental and physical events each have causes in their own sphere, but run on side by side owing to the fact that every state of the brain coexists with a definite state of the mind, and vice versa. This view of the reciprocal causal independence of mind and matter has no basis except in metaphysical theory.* For us, there is no necessity to make any such assumption, which is very difficult to harmonize with obvious facts. I receive a letter inviting me to dinner: the letter is a physical fact, but my apprehension of its meaning is mental. Here we have an effect of matter on mind. In consequence of my apprehension of the meaning of the letter, I go to the right place at the right time; here we have an effect of mind on matter. I shall try to persuade you, in the course of these lectures, that matter is not so material and mind not so mental as is generally supposed. When we are speaking of matter, it will seem as if we were inclining to idealism; when we are speaking of mind, it will seem as if we were inclining to materialism. Neither is the truth. Our world is to be constructed out of what the American realists call "neutral" entities, which have neither the hardness and indestructibility of matter, nor the reference to objects which is supposed to characterize mind.

* It would seem, however, that Dr Hart accepts this theory as 8 methodological precept. See his contribution to "Subconscious Phenomena" (quoted above), especially pp. 121-2.

There is, it is true, one objection which might be felt, not indeed to the action of matter on mind, but to the action of mind on matter. The laws of physics, it may be urged, are apparently adequate to explain everything that happens to matter, even when it is matter in a man's brain. This, however, is only a hypothesis, not an established theory. There is no cogent empirical reason for supposing that the laws determining the motions of living bodies are exactly the same as those that apply to dead matter. Sometimes, of course, they are clearly the same. When a man falls from a precipice or slips on a piece of orange peel, his body behaves as if it were devoid of life. These are the occasions that make Bergson laugh. But when a man's bodily movements are what we call "voluntary," they are, at any rate prima facie, very different in their laws from the movements of what is devoid of life. I do not wish to say dogmatically that the difference is irreducible; I think it highly probable that it is not. I say only that the study of the behaviour of living bodies, in the present state of our knowledge, is distinct from physics. The study of gases was originally quite distinct from that of rigid bodies, and would never have advanced to its present state if it had not been independently pursued. Nowadays both the gas and the rigid body are manufactured out of a more primitive and universal kind of matter. In like manner, as a question of methodology, the laws of living bodies are to be studied, in the first place, without any undue haste to subordinate them to the laws of physics. Boyle's law and the rest had to be discovered before the kinetic theory of gases became possible. But in psychology we are hardly yet at the stage of Boyle's law. Meanwhile we need not be held up by the bogey of the universal rigid exactness of physics. This is, as yet, a mere hypothesis, to be tested empirically without any preconceptions. It may be true, or it may not. So far, that is all we can say.

Returning from this digression to our main topic, namely, the criticism of "consciousness," we observe that Freud and his followers, though they have demonstrated beyond dispute the immense importance of "unconscious" desires in determining our actions and beliefs, have not attempted the task of telling us what an "unconscious" desire actually is, and have thus invested their doctrine with an air of mystery and mythology which forms a large part of its popular attractiveness. They speak always as though it were more normal for a desire to be conscious, and as though a positive cause had to be assigned for its being unconscious. Thus "the unconscious" becomes a sort of underground prisoner, living in a dungeon, breaking in at long intervals upon our daylight respectability with dark groans and maledictions and strange atavistic lusts. The ordinary reader, almost inevitably, thinks of this underground person as another consciousness, prevented by what Freud calls the "censor" from making his voice heard in company, except on rare and dreadful occasions when he shouts so loud that every one hears him and there is a scandal. Most of us like the idea that we could be desperately wicked if only we let ourselves go. For this reason, the Freudian "unconscious" has been a consolation to many quiet and well-behaved persons.

I do not think the truth is quite so picturesque as this. I believe an "unconscious" desire is merely a causal law of our behaviour,* namely, that we remain restlessly active until a certain state of affairs is realized, when we achieve temporary equilibrium. If we know beforehand what this state of affairs is, our desire is conscious; if not, unconscious. The unconscious desire is not something actually existing, but merely a tendency to a certain behaviour; it has exactly the same status as a force in dynamics. The unconscious desire is in no way mysterious; it is the natural primitive form of desire, from which the other has developed through our habit of observing and theorizing (often wrongly). It is not necessary to suppose, as Freud seems to do, that every unconscious wish was once conscious, and was then, in his terminology, "repressed" because we disapproved of it. On the contrary, we shall suppose that, although Freudian "repression" undoubtedly occurs and is important, it is not the usual reason for unconsciousness of our wishes. The usual reason is merely that wishes are all, to begin with, unconscious, and only become known when they are actively noticed. Usually, from laziness, people do not notice, but accept the theory of human nature which they find current, and attribute to themselves whatever wishes this theory would lead them to expect. We used to be full of virtuous wishes, but since Freud our wishes have become, in the words of the Prophet Jeremiah, "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked." Both these views, in most of those who have held them, are the product of theory rather than observation, for observation requires effort, whereas repeating phrases does not.

* Cf. Hart, "The Psychology of Insanity," p. 19.

The interpretation of unconscious wishes which I have been advocating has been set forth briefly by Professor John B. Watson in an article called "The Psychology of Wish Fulfilment," which appeared in "The Scientific Monthly" in November, 1916. Two quotations will serve to show his point of view:

"The Freudians (he says) have made more or less of a

'metaphysical entity' out of the censor. They suppose that when wishes are repressed they are repressed into the 'unconscious,' and that this mysterious censor stands at the trapdoor lying between the conscious and the unconscious. Many of us do not believe in a world of the unconscious (a few of us even have grave doubts about the usefulness of the term consciousness), hence we try to explain censorship along ordinary biological lines. We believe that one group of habits can 'down' another group of habits--or instincts. In this case our ordinary system of habits--those which we call expressive of our 'real selves'--inhibit or quench (keep inactive or partially inactive) those habits and instinctive tendencies which belong largely in the past"(p. 483).

Again, after speaking of the frustration of some impulses which is involved in acquiring the habits of a civilized adult, he continues:

"It is among these frustrated impulses that I would find the biological basis of the unfulfilled wish. Such 'wishes' need never have been 'conscious,' and **NEED NEVER HAVE BEEN SUPPRESSED INTO FREUD'S REALM OF THE UNCONSCIOUS.** It may be inferred from this that there is no particular reason for applying the term

'wish' to such tendencies"(p. 485).

One of the merits of the general analysis of mind which we shall be concerned with in the following lectures is that it removes the atmosphere of mystery from the phenomena brought to light by the psycho-analysts. Mystery is delightful, but unscientific, since it depends upon ignorance. Man has developed out of the animals, and there is no serious gap between him and the amoeba. Something closely analogous to knowledge and desire, as regards its effects on behaviour, exists among animals, even where what we call "consciousness" is hard to believe in; something equally analogous exists in ourselves in cases where no trace of "consciousness" can be found. It is therefore natural to suppose that, what ever may be the correct definition of "consciousness," "consciousness" is not the essence of life or mind. In the following lectures, accordingly, this term will disappear until we have dealt with words, when it will re-emerge as mainly a trivial and unimportant outcome of linguistic habits.

Publications by Name

[A-D](#) [E-O](#) [P-T](#) [U-Z](#)

Publications by Date

[17](#) [74](#) [75](#) [78](#) [80](#) [82](#) [84](#) [85](#) [86](#) [87](#) [88](#) [89](#) [90](#) [91](#) [92](#)
[93](#) [94](#) [95](#) [96](#) [97](#) [98](#) [99](#) [00](#) [01](#) [02](#) [03](#) [04](#) [05](#) [06](#) [07](#) [08](#)

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