

The Interpretation of Consciousness

We sometimes grow weary of our modern thought-leaders when we reflect how unwilling many of them seem to grapple with certain questions of deepest and highest import. The popular subjects of contemporary discussion are after all not very profound, We live on the surface of things. It charms us to have a theory of evolution. We are impatient because of the difficulty of forgoing for ourselves a critical theory of know- [2] ledge; and so leave the whole structure of our empirical science suspended as it were in the air for want of a philosophic basis. One great thinker of our times has made short works of critical philosophy by pointing out that it is wholly at variance with the usages of common language, and with the evidence of the common consciousness of men who do not philosophize, and that, if its position be true, “evolution is a dream.” An “universal postulate” of such doctrine as the one referred to must be [3] that all inconvenient scepticism is to be kept out of mind or severely reproved. Surely all due respect for natural science and its noble work is compatible with hesitations in accepting philosophical conclusions so easily obtained. In fact evolution is no dream; but still the critical philosophy has a place left for its work as it always will have so long as human thought endures. And the most brilliant successes in the domain of science do not absolve us from the duty of deeper study [4] from the requirement that we shall philosophize as well as observe the order of nature.

It is a great boon then to find in such a book as Mr. Shadworth Hodgson’s *Philosophy of Reflection* the greatest earnestness in the study of the deeper philosophical problems united with so great a power over their difficulties. Almost we are persuaded as we read the book, to surrender and become disciples. If we retain after all a critical [5] independence, we feel in the end by means sure that we are the more to be praised for our stubbornness. At all events we are helped and much instructed by our study. We feel throughout that we are in the presence of a man who is fitted to be a true leader in thought. It may be long before another such effort is made to bring into a higher unity the two great currents of European speculation. It will surely be sometime before this one is adequately appreciated at home or abroad. [6]

The following essay does not undertake to give an exhaustive account of Mr. Hodgson’s system as it is now set forth in his three books, *Time and Space*, *The Theory of Practice*, *The Philosophy of Reflection*; but only to expound and criticize his theory as to the interpretation of consciousness, and the immediate consequences of this theory. In a future paper the attempt may be made to discuss some of the remaining doctrines of this philosophy. The mere labor of exposition deserves no doubt a better know- [7] ledge than can here be brought to bear. More difficult yet still more attractive is the task to which much of this paper will be devoted, the task of following out with criticism and suggestion some of the trains of thought to which Mr. Hodgson’s argument give rise.

Let us in our effort at exposition follow in the main Mr. Hodgson's line of argument as to the following topics: (1) the definition of philosophy, (2) the interpretation of consciousness and the division into primary, reflective and [8] direct consciousness as applied to the definition of reality and the problem of things in themselves, (3) the interpretation of consciousness as a stream of presentations and representations, and the consequences of this view in the theory of certitude. — The doctrine once stated we shall have before us the means of questioning the validity of the whole construction, and of substituting for it what we can in case we see defects in itself.

I.

Philosophy, according to Mr. Hodgson, [9] is not simply a "cöordination and a systematization" of the various branches of science (*Philosophy of Reflection*, vol. I, p. 30), nor yet is its task the purely negative one "of disproving and keeping out of science all ontological entities," nor yet is its business "the discovery of Absolute Existence." The peculiar and highest works of philosophy (which indeed has also to systematize the results of science, but only as a subordinate to our preliminary task; *ibid.*, pp. 35, 36), is as follows: — (p. 37) "All the special sciences, in their demonstrations, run up to certain ultimate notions as their basis of demonstration, and there they stop." Such ultimate notions are, [10] those of rational mechanic, viz. "Mass, and Energy Potential and Kinetic." Such again are the fundamental notions of mathematical science. Now these notions, though ultimate for the special sciences, are, according to Mr. Hodgson (*ibid.*, 40), "not ultimate in all respects." They are "ultimate in respect that we can securely reason downwards from them, that is to say, construct valid definitions of them, and base valid demonstrations on them; — but not ultimate in respect that we can analyze them still farther." As to all the notions, says Mr. Hodgson, we can ask the question "What are their objects?" and to [11] answer this question leads us beyond the domain of science. "We start (p. 41) from notions representing concrete objects of experience, and representing these objects already in the most general and abstract state." To ask what? about these notions is to ask a question not answerable by further analysis or higher classification of the objects in question regarded as objects. But now (p. 42) "We find that we can analyze the ultimate notions of science still for farther, by looking upon them as phenomena relative to the percipients, and asking ourselves what features they possess in this their *subjective* character, in [12] their character of states of consciousness as contradistinguished from their character of objects, or portions of an objective world." — "The result is a new, and subjective, analysis of those notions which in their objective aspect (in which they were the bases of the sciences) appeared to be unanalyzable and ultimate." — "That analysis (p. 45) is a final one, in the sense that there is no further conceivable limit the removal of which would throw open another field, as the removal of the objective limit unbarred the entry into the field of subjectivity." — It is also an analysis of the nature and [13] not of

the origin of the things analyzed. This analysis [it is which {manuscript not legible}] forms the distinctive work of philosophy.

“Subjective analysis of the notions which to science are themselves ultimate” — if this is the business of philosophy, then, philosophy must needs undertake as a principal task the interpretation of consciousness. To what does consciousness bear witness? Upon the answer to this question all philosophy will depend. And with this prominence given to the question of the witness of consciousness itself, we [14] who believe in philosophy at all will doubtless find ourselves well content. Let us follow our author then to the next stage of his inquiry. Of what and in what senses are we conscious?

II.

The principle of philosophy, therefore, “is the mode of self-consciousness” (p. 100). Philosophy “consists in a repeated analysis of phenomena as they are *in* consciousness.” All phenomena may be treated in this way, as objects in consciousness; and this way is therefore the most general of all ways of treating objects. To analyze these subjectively, or as [15] they are in consciousness, all phenomena is to follow what our author shall call the method of reflection. Philosophy does not begin with the notion of a “mind, an immaterial substance, with its several distinct and ultimate faculties, of which no further account can be given, but which, with the mind, are employed to explain the genesis as well as to classify the characteristics of the phenomena of consciousness.” On the contrary the only ultimate assumed in this analysis of all objects is the fact of the stream of consciousness, all of whose phenomena may be analyzed and classified. [16] The question is asked as to the origin of this stream of consciousness as a whole, no doubt, is possible as to the fact of the existence of the stream. The whole difficulty is to the correct account of the stream and of its content. Let us pass on to the account as our author gives it.

“We all (p. 108) know what is meant by saying — I find myself having feelings and thoughts, and in the presence of objects around me.” This state of mind, says Mr. Hodgson, has in it “three things, the person having the feelings “and thoughts; the objects around him; and the feelings and thoughts themselves.” [17] Now are these three things inseparable? Is one content of consciousness impossible without the others? By no means. “Infants have feelings and thoughts without having the perception of *themselves* as persons.” — “A series of feelings and thoughts is therefore a condition of the perception of self, and an exist independently of that perception.” These then we find no necessary connection between two at least of the three components of ordinary consciousness. “But” continues Mr. Hodgson, “it is not so evident that a series of feelings and thoughts can exist independently of the other member of our analysis, the objects around us.” But [18] if not so evident, this view can be made quite probable upon a little study. “Low organisms may clearly have feelings of heat and cold, pressure, light, and so on, without referring these to independent objects around them.” Furthermore comparison of feelings, processes of thought about

feelings, are possible without “any reference of these feelings, groups of feelings, or comparison of feelings, to independent objects.” We may and must therefore begin by assuming as a necessary content of consciousness “no more than the series of feelings and thoughts *per se*. This series the [19] author class “primary consciousness,” and he now undertakes to find out whether this alone “will or will not (p. 10) furnish us with an account of the two other members of our object-matter, namely, objects and self.” Now it is plain that neither objects nor self are ever given “*per se*, but always in connection with feelings and thoughts.” In some way then the perception both of things and of self must depend upon and grow out of the states of primary consciousness. And this fact alone shows that in the last analysis both knowledge of [20] self and knowledge of objects must be “subsumed under primary consciousness, as a modification or case of it.”

Wherein consists the modification? Here are states of primary consciousness, following in their order in the experience, let us say, of an infant. Now in this series of states there are connections, regular sequences, bonds [sic {maybe ‘kinds’ meant}] of union. “These thoughts and feelings are — bundles of constantly connected thoughts and feelings. — The connections between them belongs to them.” — “Connected stability in feelings which do not on that account cease to be feelings, — this is the thought or per- [21] ception which is the transition from primary to reflective consciousness.” Now we have not merely a series of conscious states, but a series of objects of consciousness. To recognize the feelings as feelings, is to be what we call “conscious of self.” To recognize the feelings and thoughts as the content of making up certain regular groupings of conscious states is to be what may be named “conscious of objects.” “In primary consciousness (p. 112) there were thoughts and feelings, but there were not the perception either that they were things, or that they were thoughts and feelings.” [22]

So far then we have primary consciousness, and reflection supervening and distinguishing in the content of this primary consciousness different aspects of the same data. How comes it that we not only distinguish our feeling as grouped into things from our feelings as mere feelings, but separate the things into two opposing classes, one containing the self as the thing that has feelings, the other all objects as feelings that are known through the feelings. In other words, out of the very modest change, thus far introduced by r- [23] eflexion into the primary consciousness, how does there arise that total separation of a subject-world and an object-world which has tormented philosophy began to be, and has raised difficulties that seemed to be absolutely insurmountable. Mr. Hodgson is ready with an explanation, one that shall apply as well to the infancy of the individual as to the infancy of the race, and that shall once for all give us the key to the great riddle of the things in themselves.

Direct or separative consciousness, as our author calls it, that [24] form of consciousness whose essence it is to separate the knowing subject from the things known, that form too which governs the whole of our ordinary life and which reaches its most developed shape in natural science, arises thus: — Primary

consciousness begins the work by separating groups or bundles of feelings (p. 114) from one another. The first reflection distinguishes these bundles or groups, with their inherent order and manifold interrelations, as things. But one of the things distinguished is the group of feelings constituting the body of the ob- [25] server. “It is that group around which the rest seem to cluster, which is present when any of the rest are.” Now all things have for reflection two aspects. All are feelings; and all are fixed groups or things. But the feelings at least are dependent upon the thing called the body; while, as it would seem, this thing called the body has no more determining effect to form the groupings that make the things what they are, than nay one of the things has over any other. In so far as they are feelings then, the things are dependent on the [26] body and its states. In so far as they are things, that is determinate groupings of feelings, the things are independent of the body. The knowledge of these facts brings about, according to the Law of Parsimony, the following conceptions or hypothesis as to the whole matter: The body is conceived as that which has the feelings, as distinct from all other things in this respect. The body becomes a person. The other things are separate and different in kind from this person, When after awhile the body is analyzed into an immaterial me and a material [27] part, the separation is retained and made even more complete, The incorporeal soul is “imagined (p. 115) as the subject of the feelings and the body of their union.”

We have now, with Mr. Hodgson, analyzed the complex phenomenon of consciousness with which we set out. The person who knows things he knows, and the feelings and thoughts whereby he knows them, have all been considered. The familiar fact in question is a case of direct consciousness. Direct or separative consciousness springs from and depends [28] upon primary consciousness, wherein is given only the flow of conscious states. The change from primary to direct consciousness depends upon the fact of the stable connection of states of consciousness, and not upon the fact of the distinction by reflection of two opposite aspects of these states. Direct consciousness is an effort to combine the results of primary and reflective consciousness by means of an hypothesis framed according to the law of parsimony. This hypothesis is that one aspect of the things, the aspect by virtue of which they are feelings belongs to one peculiar thing, the self or [29] person; while the other aspect, the objective one, by which the things appear as fixed groups of qualities, belongs to the things themselves as such. Our examination of the phenomena of direct consciousness has been itself a new application of reflection, a reflection on the process of formation of the notion of separate objects. The result of the examination is a correction of the illusions of direct consciousness, and may be stated in several distinct propositions as follows: —

First: Since knowledge of things and knowledge of self depend upon primary consciousness, neither knowledge [30] springs from an original intuition.

Second: The hypothesis of an absolute existence of things apart from consciousness is an illusion of the separative consciousness (p. 117).

Third: “The separation of the two aspects, subjective and objective, is impossible without a prior distinction of them as inseparable” (*ibid.*).

Fourth: Reflection upon the series of states of consciousness adds nothing to this series that was not potentially there already. “There is nothing in reflective consciousness which was not potentially [31] in primary, and nothing in direct which was not potentially in reflective.” Thought, conception, cannot transcend its subject-matter, feelings or perception. This is the true force of Locke’s and Aristotle’s principle (pp. 129, 130).

And now, what is the bearings of this analysis on philosophic method? Philosophy in its analytic or methodological branch will, says our author, be a continued application of the same process here applied to the account of direct consciousness, viz. the method of reflection. Having seen how the common notions of existence spring up and how [32] we can only come to an understanding of them by asking what is their meaning, by applying the method of reflection to distinguish the double aspect of all the objects of thought, we now come to the insight that we can hope to solve the philosophic problems proposed at the outset only by the continued application of the same method of reflection to all classes of facts. In reflection, in asking and testing the meaning of every notion or class of notions is the only final meaning of verification. Philosophy must be throughout or philosophy of reflection. The failures [33] of metaphysics have been failures to apply the reflective method consistently and thoroughly. Our interpretation of consciousness has thus led us to see that if all objects of science and belief, all theories and speculations are founded in the last analysis upon a comparison and grouping of the phenomena of primary consciousness, then all testing and philosophical understanding of the products of thought must consist in reflection upon the processes by which our notions have been formed. The question What? must [manuscript ends]