DISCUSSION.

SOME RECENT DEFINITIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS.¹

The problem of consciousness, like the poor, is ever with us. Every new departure in philosophy is marked by its own peculiar theory of consciousness, and it is therefore no particular occasion for surprise that in the present upheaval of old landmarks such theories should appear in unusual abundance. The central character of the problem makes repeated effort indispensable, but it also inevitably raises a presumption that each individual solution is at best but tentative and partial. But even if none of the definitions that are offered should win our unqualified approval, their significance as a stimulus to thought and as an index to the trend of things may remain indefinitely great.

If we take as our starting point the fact that consciousness may come and go in relative independence of objects, we reach at once the most fundamental disagreement among current theories when we ask whether this 'independent variable' consists of a unique and irreducible element, different in kind from all other existences, or whether the facts are susceptible of explanation without a hypothesis of this kind. The issue becomes still more sharply defined when we note that the theories which we propose to consider are all agreed in the classification of experiences such as desires, emotions and expectations under the categories of objects. These experiences are by common consent placed on exactly the same footing as all other objects, in the sense that they involve no peculiar stuff or material whereby they may be contrasted with other objects. The fact that such objects are less stable or permanent than physical objects is a circumstance which, however significant it may be for other purposes or from other points of view, has no particular bearing on the problem of consciousness. This use of the term object being agreed upon, the debate turns entirely on the question whether or not objects, plus relations which taken abstractly are not identical with consciousness, will suffice for the formulation of a tenable definition of consciousness.

According to the view advocated by Professor James, nothing further is required. Consciousness is adequately defined as a certain context or grouping of objects. "The peculiarity of our experiences,

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that they not only are, but are known, which their 'conscious' quality is invoked to explain, is better explained by their relations — these relations themselves being experiences — to one another.”¹ As a given experience originally occurs it is ‘a simple that,’ to which subjectivity is imputed, not by virtue of what it is, but by virtue of what it does or of the relations in which it stands. “Its subjectivity and objectivity are functional attributes solely, realized only when the experience is ‘taken,’ *i. e.*, talked-of twice, considered along with its two differing contexts respectively, by a new retrospective experience, of which that whole past complication forms the fresh content.”¹

While the given experience which thus functions in two contexts is necessarily a part of some individual experience, the contexts themselves are apparently distinguishable by the fact that one of them — the subjective — falls wholly within, and is thus identical with, ‘individual experience,’ while the other is mainly outside. Speaking of the contexts in which the perceptual experience of a room may appear, Professor James says: One of them is the reader’s personal biography, the other is the history of the house of which the room is a part. The presentation . . . is the last term of a train of sensations, emotions, decisions, movements, classifications, expectations, etc. . . . On the other hand the very same *that* is the *terminus ad quem* of a lot of previous physical operations, carpentering, papering, furnishing, warming, etc. . . . and the *terminus a quo* of a lot of future ones, in which it will be concerned when undergoing the destiny of a physical room.”²

It is obvious, however, that this differentiation cannot be our final word. To contrast the experienced as such with the unexperienced as such would require some more inclusive experience to which the two were presented. The key to differentiation must be found in the materials which enter into the personal experience. Accordingly Professor James distinguishes the two contexts also by a criterion which the personal experience furnishes, *viz.*, by the difference in behavior between the physical and the psychical. “Mental knives may be sharp, but they won’t cut real wood. Mental triangles are pointed, but their points won’t wound. With ‘real’ objects, on the contrary, consequences always accrue; and thus the real experiences get sifted from the mental ones.”⁴

¹ ‘Does Consciousness Exist?’ *Journal of Phil., Psych. and Sc. Methods*, Vol. I., p. 486.

² *Ibid.*, p. 485.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 481-2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 489. Cf. also Vol. II., p. 282.

It appears, then, that the concept of subjectivity also has two contexts, and that its meaning depends upon the context in which it occurs. In one connection it relates to personal experience as a whole; in the other it is a name for certain selected portions within the total experience. And as the meanings vary so their criteria vary. When the personal experience as a whole is identified with the subjective, the peculiarity of this order is placed in its 'sensible' or 'felt' continuity. As Professor James says, "There is no other *nature*, no other whatness than this absence of break and this sense of continuity in that most intimate of all conjunctive relations, the passing of one experience into another when they belong to the same self."¹ But when we come to distinguish the subjective from the objective as one of the constituents of personal experience, the criterion, as we have seen, is not sought in felt continuity, but in behavior.

This two-fold meaning of the concept of subjectivity naturally gives rise to the suspicion that all is not well with the theory. This suspicion appears to find justification as we proceed. The problem, we may remind ourselves, is to explain consciousness in terms of relations among objects. We have discovered so far three types of relationship; the first being the relation of felt continuity, whereby the individual experience as a whole is differentiated from other facts, while the other two are the relations of 'inner' and 'outer' as discovered or constructed within experience. It seems clear that consciousness is not to be identified with the first of these relationships, for the reason that, being coextensive with the experience of the individual, this relationship can not serve to differentiate between the two contexts which are involved in the situation. It is as much present in the objective as in the subjective context, in so far as these come within the individual experience. And while personal experience may perhaps be properly regarded as a context of objects, the felt continuity of the context need not itself be reducible to terms of context. But, on the other hand, it seems equally clear that consciousness cannot be identified with either of the other relationships, since these presuppose a conscious situation. It is only on this presupposition that the criterion of behavior has any significance. Precisely because the felt continuity or the 'conscious quality' is everywhere it is localizable nowhere. Explanation on this ground inevitably becomes limited to behavior, that is, to terms of context.

This ambiguity in the concept of subjectivity not only invalidates the position, but makes it fairly easy to account for the apparent co-

¹ 'A World of Pure Experience,' *ibid.*, Vol. I., p. 537.

herence of the theory. From the standpoint of personal experience as a whole it is evident that certain elements function in other settings besides those of which the experience becomes cognizant. If, then, we shift our attention to the distinction between 'outer' and 'inner' as it occurs within experience, we find ourselves unable to discriminate upon any basis save that of behavior. This change in point of view is the reason, as it seems to me, why the real problem fails to come clearly into view. If the felt continuity is the differentia of personal experience as a whole, the solution of the problem must be sought at this point, and the claim that felt continuity is not itself a matter of context but rather a unique and irreducible fact retains, at least for the present, an appearance of validity.

In the position taken by Professor Perry we find what is essentially the same attempt to interpret consciousness in terms of context. His presentation, however, while clear and stimulating as far as it goes, seems to meet the issue even less satisfactorily than does that of Professor James. "The field of consciousness," it is stated, "comes into view only when an incomplete experience is recognized as such from the standpoint of an experience regarded as objective. The corrected or discredited experience so determined in an experience of things, is regarded as merely my experience, and may be analyzed as such. But we must have passed beyond the psychical to become aware of it. These psychical data cannot be called things or reals in the same sense as the standard objects, for they are completed and replaced by the latter. We therefore provide a radically different category for them, and recognize that their content is common to themselves and to things, while their specific character is given them by their limitations and context."¹

Viewed as a solution of the difficulty urged against Professor James' theory, this exposition seems to suffer from obvious inadequacies. Indeed, the difference, so far as we are at present concerned, between the two arguments lies mainly in the fact that in the present instance there is not the elaborate shifting in the point of view, because there is not the same effort to meet the demands of the problem. Our attention is directed exclusively to the differentiation between subjective and objective as found within experience, to the neglect of the problem presented in the fact of felt continuity. Professor Perry's statement of the process of differentiation may be accepted *in toto*, but this does not necessarily commit us to any 'definition of consciousness in terms

¹ 'Conceptions and Misconceptions of Consciousness,' *PSYCHOLOGICAL REVIEW*, Vol. XI., p. 289.

of relativity.' Within a given experience we do, no doubt, differentiate by means of behavior or of context, but this in itself argues nothing as to the character of the differentia whereby my experience as a whole is distinguished from other facts. And I may add that an explanation in terms of context is to me a very unenlightening procedure. The objects which I experience are conjoined with each other and with other objects in innumerable ways, of which the set of conjunctions experienced by me is but one. Unless I can point out some specific differentia, whether it be a unique principle of linkage or a unique fact of some other sort, the problem of consciousness seems to remain about where it was at the beginning.

In view of the fact that Professor Perry shows so well the ambiguities that cluster around the term consciousness, it seems a great pity that after routing these enemies of clear thinking in a front attack he should admit them to the very heart of his camp, and even extend to them the comfort of his protection when they present themselves collectively under the guise of the term experience. So long as we do not differentiate unmistakably between the thing of which there is experience and the experience of the thing; or to put it differently, so long as experience is a term which is made to do duty as a name both for the thing and for my knowing of the thing, the precise nature of the difference between these two facts is not likely to stand out in relief. And I submit that this difference is precisely what we are after in the attempt to define consciousness. When an object becomes known, what is present that was not present the moment before? To apply to the object as such a term which connotes the presence of knowing or awareness is to stultify the whole undertaking from the start.

If such a use of the word experience is justifiable at all, it is so only on the basis of a theory which leaves no room for the distinction in question, and is, therefore, under no obligation to take it into account. In at least some of his utterances Professor Dewey appears to maintain a theory of this kind. The first four chapters of the 'Studies in Logical Theory' repeatedly represent the distinction between subject and object as purely functional in character, created by a specific need and existing only during the process of adjustment. The experience that is corrected and transcended, or the experience that is problematic and clamors for a solution, is classified as subjective; but it is so classified, not because it is a unique element, but because it fulfils a unique function. Similarly the concept of object is explicable completely in terms of function, and it has no significance

apart from a determinate experience. At any rate, it is stated that "It is a case of the psychologist's fallacy to read back into the preliminary situation those distinctions of mere conjunction and of valid relationship which get existence, to say nothing of fixation, only within the thought-process."¹ And again, "In so far as the conviction gains ground that the earth revolves around the sun, the old fact [sun revolving around the earth] is broken up into a new cosmic existence and a new psychological condition."¹

In this way it is possible to get along without resort to any heterogeneous element called consciousness. But this result seems to be achieved by the elimination of everything that falls outside of human or infra-human experience. It is true that Professor Dewey attempts to avoid this conclusion. While holding fast to the doctrine that objects apart from the experiential situations in which they function are abstractions, he also maintains that we must and can recognize a reality which antedates the existence of conscious organisms. The object as it is previous to experience is held to be in continual-transformation-in-the-direction-of experience; i. e., this process of transformation is a fact, even though it is not a fact in or for a contemporaneously existing experience.

This explanation, however, seems to surrender all that is significant in the theory. If the functional theory of knowledge is true then time is as much a functional element as is any other constituent of experience. But if time is able to survive this abstraction from the experiential situation; if, in other words, time is essentially the same apart from experience as in experience, then it is not at all evident why the same might not be true of any other constituent of experience. Here, if anywhere, such distinctions are out of place. But if the privilege here accorded to time be extended to other constituents as well, we are at once obliged to admit the existence of objects conceived in the spirit of common sense realism; and the distinction between pre-experiential objects and these same objects as experienced is a problem which recurs once more.³

The foregoing considerations will perhaps serve to create a certain presumption in favor of the theories which explicitly affirm that consciousness is not reducible to something else, whether to relations in the sense of Professor James or to an intra-experiential function. It

¹ Page 37.

² Page 52. Cf. also pp. 42, 75 and 76.

³ The difficulties inherent in the position are excellently shown by Professor McGilvary, 'Pure Experience and Reality,' *Philosophical Review*, Vol. XVI., p. 266.

must be admitted, however, that the elaboration of these theories has not been particularly successful. The view recently put forward by Professor McGilvary is succinctly stated in the following quotation: "There is no object of consciousness, in the usual sense of the word object, which is 'made, and felt to be made, of consciousness exclusively.' . . . What consciousness is made of is consciousness, or in other words, awareness — which is not a very informing sentence, but is meant in the same sense as when one should say that red is just made of red, denying that you can probe deeper into the essence of it; it is to be taken at its face value."¹ With the exception of awareness, Professor McGilvary agrees that all experience may be treated as object. As regards the relation of awareness to its objects, it is held that awareness simply reports what it finds; whether the object existed previous to the finding is a question to be settled in each case by an appeal to empirical criteria, and never on the basis of its immediate relation to the awareness, *i. e.*, never by an attempt to determine whether or not the awareness is constitutive of the object.

While this theory is in appearance quite in accord with the spirit of our present-day empirical temper, its tenability becomes doubtful when we proceed to apply it to the facts. Common sense would agree that relations such as those of space and time exist or may exist independently of awareness. What it would say in the case of the relations of resemblance and difference is perhaps not quite so certain. When we come to the relations of meaning, however, the judgment would in all likelihood be reversed. Such a relation, it would be insisted, not only does not, but cannot, exist apart from consciousness. Here, then, it is necessary to take position. A printed symbol, for example, may mean the City of Washington or it may mean the North Pole; shall we say that this relation between symbol and symbolized might be conceived to exist, like space relations, in the absence of awareness or consciousness? Or are we justified in maintaining that the awareness or consciousness constitutes the relation and that, therefore, the suggestion of independent existence is unmeaning?

This question doubtless raises the issue squarely, but so far as I am able to see it cannot be answered definitively on this plane. For the sake of greater clearness we may distinguish between two aspects of the problem. The theory under consideration is committed to the support of two distinct though related propositions: (*a*) That within experience the distinction between meaning and awareness of meaning

¹ 'Realism and the Physical World,' *Journ. of Phil., Psych. and Sc. Methods*, Vol. IV., p. 685, note.

is everywhere present as a conscious fact (for otherwise we have lost our differentia for personal experience); and (*δ*) that awareness is as readily separable in theory from relations of meaning as it is separable both in theory and in fact from relations of space.

The first of these propositions is obviously a question for introspection. If different observers disagree, there is so far forth no higher court of appeal. In my own case I am unable to verify the assertion that the distinction is present in all types of cases. With regard to the second proposition the personal equation is likewise very prominent. If a person asserts that he can contrive to conceive of meaning relations as existing apart from consciousness, it is not easy to see by what direct method the claim may be shown to be baseless. There remains, to be sure, the right to have it explained why it is that others should have so much difficulty in this same undertaking. An explanation on the basis of habit would scarcely suffice, because in all cases that could fairly be considered parallel to this the fact that an element is found variable or detachable in certain instances makes it possible to conceive of it in this way universally. I may never have experienced fire without heat or human beings without heads but the detachability here involved having been established in other fields, to think the one apart from the other is in neither case difficult.

It will perhaps prove more satisfactory, however, to approach the subject from a different angle. In Professor McGilvary's luminous exposition of James' 'Stream of Consciousness' it is suggested that the great psychologist "was after the 'transcendentalist' as well as after the facts, and in his endeavor to prove that introspection does not reveal an unalterable, time-neutralizing ego, he went to the extreme of asserting the existence of little egos, constantly neutralized by time, and transmuted each into its successor."¹ But however unjustifiable, on logical grounds, this procedure may be deemed to be, the instinct which led straight to the stronghold of transcendentalism seems to have been tolerably accurate. If it be true that "the speciously present consciousness continues flowing down the stream of time, always comprehending some past object as past, but, at every moment, itself so much of a unity that at no time in its steady flow can it be, except by a violent abstraction, spoken of as a new ego coming to birth immediately on the decease of its predecessor,"² the awareness can scarcely be prevented from taking on a metempirical and time-

¹ 'The Stream of Consciousness,' *Journal of Phil., Psych. and Sc. Methods*, Vol. IV., p. 230.

² *Ibid.*, p. 229.

neutralizing character. Our awareness during the waking day is said to be 'sensibly a unit as long as that day lasts.' This unitary character can scarcely reside in the qualitative sameness of the 'parts,' since such a unity would obviously account for nothing. We must, therefore, conceive of this unity as being of a kind which, for lack of a better name, may be termed a numerical unity. But it seems fairly clear that if the awareness of the morning be numerically identical with the awareness of the evening, in spite of the fact that the events of the morning no longer exist, the awareness itself cannot be considered as an event in the same sense, as being on a level with the events which constituted its objects. The awareness and its objects differ from each other as regards their respective relations to time, the relation of awareness to time being of such a sort that a considerable temporal interval is compatible with the numerical identity of the awareness. The main difference between this view and that of the traditional transcendentalist seems to lie in the degree of inclusiveness, the transcendentalist employing but a single 'time-form,' whereas in the present case the number of successive awarenesses, separated from each other by time-gaps, may be indefinitely great.

The first of these contentions, viz., that relations of meanings are constituted by consciousness, finds explicit recognition in the view advocated by Professor Woodbridge. These peculiar relations or connections of meaning, moreover, he considers to be the sole proper connotation of the term consciousness. Consciousness is nothing but a distinct kind of relationship, which is coördinate with other types of relation such as those of time and space. Over and above spatial, temporal and other non-conscious relations, we find that objects possess connections whereby they are enabled to represent one another in the peculiar relationship called meaning — connections which "hold the things in such a network of immaterial groupings, that their presence is other than spatial temporal or specifically qualitative."¹

The claim that consciousness is a specific type of relation is based on the results of a comparison of consciousness with other form of relation. We find, for example, that "space is distinguished from the things in it, not by taking these things in isolation, but by taking them together as different things in space";² and the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, with regard to time and species and consciousness. Again, consciousness is like the rest in that it possesses its own unsharable na-

¹ *Studies in Phil. and Psych.* Garman Commemorative Volume, p. 161.

² 'The Nature of Consciousness,' *Journal of Phil., Psych. and Sc. Methods*, Vol. II., p. 110.

ture. This function of representation can be performed by no other kind of relation. Bread means nourishment, ice means that it will cool water, water means that it will quench thirst, whether the objects in question are actually put to these respective uses or not. Moreover, meanings may change or may be condensed, without any corresponding changes in the other relations of the objects, as when the meanings of the solar system are condensed in a book.

As has already been indicated, the identification of consciousness with meaning probably contains an important truth. That it is the whole truth is, however, much open to doubt. If consciousness is merely a name for the relationship of meaning, the task of maintaining a status of equality and amicable independence among the various forms of relationship becomes about as difficult as in the case of the Spinozistic attributes. In both instances consciousness persistently disturbs the balance of power. The fact that consciousness is a continuum within which all objects whatsoever may find a place is fundamentally incompatible with the requirements of the situation. While it is true that space and time likewise make provision for all manner of fact, it is not true that in order to occupy their appointed places these facts must first divest themselves of all properties which are not specifically spatial and temporal in their nature. To say, however, that consciousness is relationship of meaning seems equivalent to the assertion that a fact can become a fact for consciousness *only* in so far as it is a relation of meaning. If the fact happens to be a spatial or temporal fact this must be interpreted in the sense that its meaning is of the kind describable as spatial or temporal. And the same holds, of course, for qualities. Either, therefore, a fact upon becoming a fact for consciousness transforms itself from an unknowable something into a relation of meaning or it undergoes no such transformation. In the former case the distinction between what is consciousness and what is not is inept, since all is consciousness; while in the latter we have again on our hands the difficulty that no differentia is furnished whereby a given personal experience is distinguished from other facts.

Whether an adequate definition of consciousness can be obtained seems a matter for legitimate doubt. If interpreted in the sense of agnosticism such a doubt would indeed be unwarranted. But if taken as an expression of intelligent scepticism, it has, I think, sufficient standing-ground. The solution of this problem is too intimately bound up with all our 'fundamental' problems to render a satisfactory solution at all likely.

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