V.—DISCUSSIONS.

COMPARISON OF SOME VIEWS OF SPENCER AND KANT.

THE following definite comparison of some views of Spencer and of Kant may be deemed of sufficient interest for publication.

Mr. Spencer holds "that Space is a relative reality"¹ while entirely rejecting Kant's idea to the effect that Space is a property of the perceiving mind, or a subjective phenomenon.

But if Space be relative, how can it be otherwise than partly subjective at least? For that which is "phenomenal"—every "phenomenon" must be, at any rate, partly subjective or dependent on the subject. And Mr. Spencer indeed affirms:—

"There is some ontological order whence arises the *phenomenal*² order we know as Space" (*Principles of Psychology*, vol. i., 3rd ed., p. 227).

This—to judge from the wording—is an inferred conclusion, not a statement of an hypothesis. This means that when we are contemplating or analysing Space, we are not contemplating something absolutely existing—as most seem to suppose—which we want to analyse, but we are contemplating a phenomenon or effect; i.e. the effect of the action of some unknown existence on our consciousness. What acts on consciousness to produce the impression "space," we cannot say. One is not analysing space then as something existing independently: but one is analysing the *resultant* of the action of something on the mind (according to the *Principles of Psychology*).

But is Mr. Spencer's conclusion demonstrable: if so, Kant, whom he repudiates entirely, is at least partly right. Now, it is at least certain that space (regarded in the *Principles of Psychology* as a "phenomenal order") cannot be conceived to be absent. In the *First Principles* (5th ed.), the author says:—

"The non-existence of space cannot by any mental effort be imagined" (p. 34). Nevertheless if what "we know as Space" be phenomenal, phenomenal space must have been non-existent before mind existed: since (by Mr. Spencer's definition) phenomenal space is the product or resultant of the action of an "ontological order" or absolute existence on mind. The non-

¹ "All we can assert is that Space is a relative reality" (*First Principles*, 5th ed., p. 165).

² The italics are mine.

existence of space must be imagined then, if we are to conceive space to be generated by the action of some other entity ("ontological order") on our minds or brain-consciousness. Perhaps Mr. Spencer may reply: we cannot conceive this, and yet it may be possible. But Mr. Spencer considers he has proved it apparently: as he affirms distinctly (not as a mere hypothesis)—"There is some ontological order whence arises the phenomenal order we know as Space" (*loc. cit. sup.*). And again—"All we can assert is, that Space is a relative reality".¹ "Our conception of Space is produced by some mode of the Unknowable" (*First Principles*, p. 165). According to the author then, Space is *not* an absolute existence, or it is *not* something that exists independently of brain-consciousness (mind).

In spite of this, on p. 49 in his criticism of Kant's idea, Mr. Spencer remarks as follows:—

"The question here is—What does consciousness directly testify? And the direct testimony of consciousness is, that Time and Space are not within but without the mind; and so absolutely independent of it that they cannot be conceived to become non-existent even were the mind to become non-existent" (*First Principles*, p. 49).

But if Space be "absolutely independent" of mind—which Mr. Spencer affirms to be "the direct testimony of consciousness"—how can Space be "a relative reality" as he states it is (at p. 165). For, by very definition, "relative" means *related* to mind, and *not* independent of mind? How reconcile what seems to be an open contradiction? And the author's statement in his *Principles of Psychology*, vol. i., may be here appended in full:—

"More certain, then, than the Relativity of Relations as we conceive them, is the existence of Non-relative Forms to which they refer; since proof of the first involves perpetual assumption of the last. There is some ontological order whence arises the phenomenal order we know as Space" (p. 227).

¹ This passage quoted in full is: "All we can assert is that Space is a relative reality; that our consciousness of this unchanging relative reality implies an absolute reality equally unchanging in so far as we are concerned; and that the relative reality may be unhesitatingly accepted in thought as a valid basis for our reasonings; which, when rightly carried on, will bring us to truths that have a like relative reality—the only truths which concern us or can possibly be known to us" (*First Principles*, p. 165).

This distinctly implies therefore that what we know as Space is a phenomenon or effect produced by the action on consciousness of some unknown cause or absolute entity. In a parallel way to this, Kant regarded Space as a phenomenon. He says, for example:—

"We can then only talk of Space or of extended being from Man's point of view. If we leave out of account the subjective condition under which alone we can have external perception (however we may be affected by objects); then the presentation ('*Vorstellung*') we have of Space means nothing at all" (Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Verlag von Philipp Reclam, Leipzig, p. 55, translation of passage).

This can only mean that what "we know as Space" is the "phenomenal order"; i.e., we can only view Space as a phenomenon, whatever concealed cause ("ontological order") may be acting on our brain-consciousness to produce the effect called by us "Space". The Space we are conscious of is then *not* an absolute existence, according to the *Principles of Psychology*. But the previously quoted passage from the *First Principles* implied that Space was an absolute existence, in that Mr. Spencer says that by "the direct testimony of consciousness," space is shown to be "absolutely independent" of mind. This then looks like a contradiction in terms. In view of this, may it not be legitimate to regard Space as the "ontological order" itself; while no "phenomenal order" (dissimilar) exists?

"Absolutes" are said to be inconceivable, or at least they cannot possibly be more than undefined conceptions. But does not Space as viewed by us come under this category; it is undefined as a conception, a something, and yet not an entity in the ordinary sense, since it has none of the properties of an entity (or thing) usually so termed. Contrast with this Matter, which is clearly an entity; because Matter has definite properties or attributes, *inertia*, shape, elasticity, capacity to resist, etc. But where is the attribute of Space (which can justify its being called an existence) unless indeed Space have the indefinite attribute of infinity, or unless to be without shape be an attribute, the converse of the attribute of shape.

But is not this indefiniteness favourable to the view that in the case of Space we have some appreciation of absolute existence?

All sense-impressions are known to result from physical interaction between the brain and existences. We may say the brain alone, because all the senses terminate in the brain. Now this physical interaction may in some cases (for certain reasons, we may question if in all) produce a so-called transformation, "transfiguration" or phenomenon. Thus colour, for instance, is the resultant of the interaction between vibratory motion and the brain-consciousness. This ends in a transformation or phenomenon, as we see that vibratory motion and colour are not identical: the "resultant" (so to speak) is like neither of the two component forces.

We can certainly say now that where there is no physical interaction of forces between a given existence and the brain-consciousness, there can be no transformed ("transfigured") impression received. Colour, for instance, evidently could not be impressed on brain-consciousness without interaction of forces. Space we know (whether a phenomenon or an absolute) cannot be acted on by force, and can itself produce no physical action. Matter, on the other hand, can both act physically on the brain, and be acted on itself. So far we are within the regions of certainty.

May then Space be truly a case of an absolute, appreciated as it actually is; because where there is no physical interaction

of forces, no resultant (phenomenal) transformation is possible in the impression received?

Absence of resistance to force (or yielding to motion freely) may under certain circumstances produce a distinct impression, although a negative one: and sometimes a void encountered unawares may act on consciousness more strongly than a rigid resistance. May this have some application on the question as to how the idea of the existence of Space is physically generated?

But while appreciating much of acknowledged excellence in Mr. Spencer's works: nevertheless the wording of the following proposition seems to contain an objectionable ambiguity, which it may be desirable to point out. Mr. Spencer says:—

"We are forced to the conclusion that the relations of co-existence . . . as we know them, do not obtain beyond consciousness." (*Principles of Psychology*, vol. i., p. 223.)

These final words "*beyond consciousness*" are ambiguous: they tend to imply beforehand that that which corresponds to any relation of co-existence is beyond consciousness; whereas this is just the point the author wants to prove. It may be suggested that this disadvantageous ambiguity might have been avoided by some such slight change in the wording of the proposition as to the following (say):—

"We are forced to the conclusion that the relations of co-existence . . . as we know them, do not obtain in the existences themselves".

The question here is—Does the perceived relation of form or shape belong to the existence in itself; if so, the information sought in this particular research cannot be said to be "*beyond consciousness*". To seek for anything that is "*beyond consciousness*" would be absurd evidently. It might very well be that a perception of form or shape might be identical with what actually exists: although we may have no absolute knowledge or proof that this is so. Mr. Spencer however seems to think he can demonstrate a negative about an absolute, *viz.*, that an existence in itself has *not* form.

It appears that Mr. Spencer thinks it justifiable to apply the same reasoning to *perceptions* as to *forces*, or to subject them to analogous laws. He argues that because a resultant force¹ differs from its components in value and direction, that therefore a resultant perception (due to an interaction between brain force and that coming from an existence in the universe) must have undergone an analogous modification; *i.e.* that the perception must be a "*transfiguration*" of what exists. But while a resultant force changes in *value*, it does not change in *kind* or quality. No proof here exists that a perception represents a change in *kind* or quality passed through: and yet Mr. Spencer makes this argument a basis for the sweeping proposition that every perception involves

¹ See *Principles of Psychology*, vol. ii., p. 505 pp., etc.

preceding transfiguration or transformation. How can we know that a space relation of an object (its form) presents a change in kind or quality undergone in the mere procedure of investigating what exists? Mr. Spencer however appears to consider he can demonstrate that existences in themselves are without form :¹ although to our measurements they present form. The contrary view that form is absolute, is one of ancient standing. Antiquity is no proof. But in any case, since it is important that a statement should be free from obscurity before any proof (for or against) is attempted, it may be in the interests of truth to have pointed out what appears to be a confusing ambiguity in the wording of the proposition above quoted : not to insist further on the questionableness of the method adopted in support of the proof offered, as expressed in the words—"We are forced to the conclusion" etc.,

To summarise the main point. It is certain that a "transfiguration" or transformation cannot occur without a physical cause, *i.e.*, without the interaction of physical forces. It is certain that Space can neither be acted on by forces nor itself influence by means of forces. Therefore it appears impossible to conceive Space to be the result of any transfiguration (to be a phenomenon or "phenomenal order").

On the other hand, it is certain that Matter is both acted on by forces and can react by forces. Therefore (contrariwise) it is easily conceivable that an observed attribute of Matter (say *inertia*) may be the result of some accomplished transfiguration. In other words, the attribute *inertia*, as it appears to us, need not be the same as that which exists. It is not *demonstrable* that there is a difference; because the relative and the absolute may be conceivably identical. The same applies to form. But it is demonstrable that with no forces to act, there can be no change effected. Moreover to suppose Space to be a consequence of an accomplished transfiguration would be to imagine Space to be capable of varying or of being different from what it appears to us—which it is impossible to imagine.

Form (viewed as absolute) can be easily conceived to become a perception in brain-consciousness. Nothing would be gained by a transfiguration here. Vibrations at the rate of several billions per second cannot be impressed numerically on brain-consciousness without transfiguration into Colour, graduated with the rate of vibration : as, for instance, the observed position of a line in the spectrum instantly gives the period numerically. But, if, on the other hand, a square or a triangle exist absolutely, there is no difficulty in imagining it to be impressed on brain-consciousness without foregone transfiguration. In any case, it is not difficult to conceive that (say by natural selection, etc.) there may be a mechanism in the brain to prevent such transfiguration from

¹ In the *Principles of Psychology*, vol. ii., p. 494, may be found a parallel statement on this head, *viz.* : "No relation in consciousness can resemble, or be in any way akin to, its source." (The italics are mine.)

occurring when it is not wanted. Or practice may effect much, just as by practice we see single with two eyes, and view objects the right way up, although the images are reversed on the retina. The transfiguration (in the sense of inversion here) may quite possibly be neutralised by a special adaptation in the brain-mechanism. In the end, one is even not hampered in a dissection under the microscope, although the image is again reversed here. The inversion is corrected by the faculty of touch, and one ceases to think of its existence. Possibly by lengthened practice (aided by touch) one could see correctly with a cylindrical cornea. It is astonishing what self-correction and self-adaptation can do, by practice, with the senses generally.

But what it is ventured to contend for here is that while there is no proof that (where there is no demonstrated practical purpose) transfiguration in sense perception must have occurred: there is proof that transfiguration cannot have been passed through without the action of force. While the old Realism is doubtless no longer sustainable as a whole: it appears probable that some investigators in the branch of natural knowledge called "psychology" go too much to the opposite extreme in assuming¹ that *every* perception on the brain-consciousness is the result of transfiguration. It would seem more likely that the truth is here represented by a compromise.

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¹ It appears that Kant assumed this also; but it does not seem that he attempted to give any proof of the proposition, as Mr. Spencer has.