THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BULLETIN

THE CHARACTER OF CONSCIOUSNESS.

BY PROFESSOR G. M. STRATTON,

Johns Hopkins University.

In a preceding paper I attempted to state in a general way the difference between mental and physical facts.¹ The topic with which the present paper is concerned is the relation of consciousness to this distinction. Over and above the two fields which we mark off as the psychic and the corporeal is there not something real to which we may give the name consciousness? The question would hardly have seemed pressing had it not been for the remarkable series of articles upon consciousness which have appeared of late in the *PSYCHOLOGICAL REVIEW* and in the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*.

But, perhaps first of all, one should provide against vagueness and a merely verbal discussion, by plunging into and through the purely verbal part of the matter. The word consciousness is famous for the variety of its meanings; Bain has given us no less than thirteen senses in which the word has been employed.² And since his writing, this number has been perceptibly increased. But out of all the conflict of usage there emerge two meanings that are so ingrained in our daily speech that it would seem to me necessary to accord them recognition; though it is to be hoped that, in the interest of clearness, one will drive the other from the field. These meanings we may call, respectively, that of James Mill and that of Sir William Hamilton. "It is easy," says the first of these writers,³ "to see what is the nature of the terms CONSCIOUS and CONSCIOUSNESS, and what is the marking function which they are destined to perform. It was of great importance, for the purpose of naming, that we should not only have names to distin-

¹ 'The Difference between the Mental and the Physical,' this journal, Vol. III, p. 1.

² Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, 4th ed., pp. 539 ff.

³ James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, 2d ed., Vol. I., p. 224.

guish the different classes of our feelings, but also a name applicable equally to all those classes. This purpose is answered by the concrete term Conscious; and the abstract of it Consciousness * * * that is to say, the words are *GENERICAL marks*, under which all the names of the subordinate classes of the feelings of a sentient creature are included." By 'feeling,' of course, Mill means any kind of mental process; so that his definition is practically the same as that given in Professor Baldwin's *Dictionary*, where consciousness is defined as "the distinctive character of whatever may be called mental life."

With this as our meaning of consciousness our problem would, in part at least, at once be solved; consciousness would be but the universal mark of psychic occurrences; it would be nothing above, or in addition to, them; it would be simply the peculiar mode of behavior which they all display and which distinguishes them from material things.

There would remain, however, the question whether, in addition to these two groups of occurrences—the mental and the physical—there were not experienced by us something that could not be called merely the 'distinctive character' or the 'generic mark' of either group; and this brings us to our second meaning of consciousness. "Consciousness," says Sir William Hamilton, in his *Lectures on Metaphysics*, "may be compared to an internal light, by means of which, and which alone, what passes in the mind is rendered visible."¹ The most general characteristic of consciousness, he tells us, is 'that it is the recognition by the thinking subject of its own acts or affections,'² — a statement hardly distinguishable from those to be found in Reid.³ But when directly criticising Reid, he expresses himself in other words. He believes in using the term consciousness 'as tantamount to immediate knowledge in general, whether of self or not'; it is now no longer mere introspection. "*Consciousness and immediate knowledge are thus universally convertible; and if there be an immediate knowledge of things external, there is consequently the consciousness of an outer world.*"⁴

With this latter meaning of the word, which is almost identical with its usage of late by Woodbridge⁵ and by James,⁶ the problem of

¹ *Lectures on Metaphysics*, London, 1859, Vol. I., p. 183.

² *Ibid.*, Vol. I., p. 201.

³ Cf. Hamilton's ed. of Reid, Vol. I., pp. 222 f.

⁴ Hamilton, *Discussions in Philosophy and Literature*, New York, 1868, p. 57.

⁵ Woodbridge, 'The Nature of Consciousness,' *Journal of Philos., Psychol. and Scient. Methods*, Vol. II., p. 119.

⁶ James, 'Does Consciousness Exist?', the same journal, Vol. I., p. 477.

the relation of consciousness to the psychical becomes live. I am not sure that either Woodbridge or James would, with Hamilton, require that the knowledge which we regard as consciousness should be 'immediate knowledge'; there is much in their papers to indicate that the distinction between immediate and mediated knowledge has for them no great importance. They are, however, clear upon the point that consciousness is merely a special type of relation — the cognitive relation, — and that, in some way, it is independent of the distinction between mental and physical things.

Professor Woodbridge has, with great clearness and force, set forth the view that consciousness is not at all defined by means of the distinction between 'the physical' and 'the psychical.' This differentiation, he tells us, "simply divides the field of consciousness into two parts, but does not isolate a separate field in which alone consciousness is found. Physical objects just as much as personal histories may be objects in consciousness. * * * The differentiation in question thus appears simply to reveal between our objects one of the distinctions of which we are conscious."¹ The world would thus appear to be composed of physical objects, mental objects and the 'conscious relation. Whether this would exhaust the whole, according to Dr. Woodbridge's judgment, I could not say.

We shall now have to consider the truth of such a view. Is consciousness to be set off in this way, as something outside the class of activities we regard as psychic? If one has to express objections to the doctrine just set forth, this must not conceal the honor due so lucid and keen a piece of work.

The motives for distinguishing consciousness, as the knowing function, from the field of mental occurrences generally is doubtless that to any experience whatsoever there is at least the possibility of adding another stratum, the *knowledge of* the experience. James Mill was accustomed to say that the difference between these two layers is merely a difference of words; to have a feeling and to be conscious of the feeling are but two names for the same thing. But such a doctrine is unpsychological in the extreme; for it is one thing to be envious of another, and quite another thing to know that you are envious; a young man in love is not necessarily a young man conscious of being in love. When we are *conscious* of our thoughts and feelings, we have set them out before us; we have made them objects, while behind and through them are still seen the original objects of our

¹ Woodbridge, 'The Nature of Consciousness,' *Journal of Philos., Psychol. and Scient. Methods*, Vol. II., 119; esp. p. 124.

regard; whereas until then, our only object was the person envied or beloved. When the experience is thus pushed off and reconstructed, the additional feature may be of the thinnest and simplest sort, as when we have but a vague awareness of some object hitherto unnoticed. Or it may be a thicker and more intricate layer, as when I actively scrutinize the object and make myself clear as to its definite texture and connections. But in any event we have here a peculiar addition to the original facts, and one which may come to them whether they be physical or psychic. It consequently seems to mark the presence of a function free from the limits of the purely psychic field, and therefore to be distinguished as a more general and more inclusive activity.

It would seem to me questionable, however, whether the knowing function is unique in this respect. It doubtless stands alone, inasmuch as no other of our mental operations has exactly this same office of *knowing* all things. But other functions are like the knowing function; for they, too, apply themselves to all things whatsoever, no matter to what group or class these belong. Feeling ranges up and down the world as unconfined as knowledge. It spreads itself like a haze over all that comes before us, over the physical and the mental alike. Just as I can know the house I live in, or know the judgment I have made; so, too, both house and judgment may be tinged with pleasure or with pain. And if it should be said that this pleasure can in turn be made an object of knowledge, so that knowing is the highest and all-including function, I see no hindrance to the reply that the act of knowing can, in its turn, be pleasant or unpleasant. So that knowing seems to reach no regions that are unattainable by feeling.

Nor does either of these activities have wider scope than will. Just as all objects indifferently may be known and may be objects of sentiment, so too they may be objects of volition. I may take up an active attitude toward the house, as toward the judgment. I may will to examine it or to alter it, just as I may will to make any conclusion I have reached an object of attention and of criticism. It would seem, then, that the volitional activity has a free course over the world, different in many ways from knowledge, but equally wide in sweep.

There is consequently a certain plexus of operations which can be imposed upon any object or system of objects. To the bare and neutral presence of the thing there may be added the experience that it is attended to, or is suffused with feeling, or is somehow involved in purpose. The readiness with which these additional layers may appear, their free occurrence with all manner of objects, and their

immense importance for us in every way, give us ample motives for selecting one or all of them for special intellectual honor. But since each is so important and they all are intimately conjoined, we should remember that if we select the knowing function and exclude the feelings and the will, it is *our doing* and does not signify that in the very nature of things knowledge has this superior rank.

Should we then say that all three are extra-psychical activities? Instead of merely one function that spans the distinction between body and mind and therefore refuses to be classed on the mental side, have we not three functions or at least a triple function that may not be regarded as a psychic power? That this would be embarrassing to psychology is perhaps no argument against such a withdrawal. The psychic realm is so largely made up of specialized forms of knowledge, feeling and volition, that if these were taken away it is doubtful whether anything would be left. The province would be not only without inhabitants but also without territory.

But for other reasons it seems to me that all these powers should be retained within the psychic group; and the main difficulty to their retention is removed when once we see that a part may here be greater than the whole. Knowing is but a part of our mental activity, yet it includes both mental and physical objects; it even includes itself. Feeling and will are each but a part; yet each extends over all things. But the way in which we regard knowing or feeling or volition, when we say that it is but a part, is not the same as when we say that it takes in all. When we say that it is limited and is but one among many, we are viewing it after the manner common in logical classification; we are intent upon the attributes it has and upon those it lacks. Knowing is rich in attributes; but something is absent from it, which at once stands forth when we look at will. We are therefore forced to say that knowing is but a specific kind of function, and is distinguished from many other kinds; it is but a part and not the whole.

But when we say that it includes all things, we are no longer intent upon its specific properties; we are looking at its range of operation, at the variety of things upon which it throws its light. In other fields the two points of view are easily kept distinct: space, as regards its properties, is limited and partial; it is logically outside the class we call physical bodies; yet it includes all physical bodies, since they exist in space. Time has but limited properties; it lacks many that space displays, many that motion displays; yet there is no space nor motion which is beyond the reach of time. So that there is nothing unique in the fact that consciousness, in the sense of knowing, is a

member of a special group of functions — belongs on the psychic side and not on the physical — and yet operates freely on both sides of the line.

There is, however, this farther peculiarity about the fundamental functions of the mind, namely, that they include themselves in their range of operation. I can know that I know, I can will to will, I can become sentimental and take a sad pleasure in my own distress. Self-knowledge is mysterious enough, we must all admit; but it is not a mystery essentially different from knowledge of a less reflective type. The direction the function takes, the special character of the items it works upon, does not fundamentally alter the nature of the function itself. To know remains essentially the same type of act whether the object known be a thing or a thought, be a spatial relation or a logical relation; as sight is essentially the same function whether we be looking at a scene without or looking at a reflection of the eye itself.

Moreover, this fact of self-consciousness will perhaps assist us properly to place consciousness in the world of objects known. The fact that consciousness can overspan the distinction between the mental and the physical has led to the conclusion (which, as I have said, seems to me mistaken) that consciousness is something to be classed as outside the psychic field. But since consciousness itself can be known, and can become an 'object,' though not a 'thing,' in consciousness, and can distinguish itself from other objects, — in view of this, should we not feel forced to say, if we consistently followed the direction which Professor Woodbridge takes, that consciousness itself was not at all defined by distinguishing between the conscious relation and the terms related in consciousness? "This differentiation," we might say, in words like his own, "simply divides the field of consciousness into two parts, but does not isolate a separate field in which alone consciousness is found. The conscious relation, quite as much as the terms related, may be an object in consciousness. The differentiation in question thus appears simply to reveal between our objects one of the distinctions of which we are conscious." But reasoning like this, which seemed almost unanswerable when confined to the distinction between mental and physical things, begins to seem no longer trustworthy when we carry it along this farther step. The fact that in consciousness we can surmount the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious does not persuade us that consciousness itself is still eluding us. On the contrary, it makes us more certain as to what consciousness is. It brings home to us in a way more forcible than

were otherwise possible that the knowing function can recognize its own qualitative limitations, can see that (so far as logical classification is concerned) it does not possess all properties and that its form of connection is different from various other forms; and yet in spite of this modesty in regard to its qualities, its function is seen to extend quite beyond the special class of 'objects' in which it puts itself. The situation is in some respects like that of a large mirror in a room, on the opposite wall of which there hangs another large mirror. Each mirror, while remaining but a part of the room and its furnishings, reflects the whole room, including itself,—includes the very mirror in whose surface the whole is reflected. The mirror takes in all, yet remains but a portion of the complex object it has before it. The universal scope of knowing, feeling and will — the fact that they can make even themselves their objects — seems to me no sufficient reason for denying them a place among psychic facts. Each has a limited mode of activity, while each has an unlimited field of action.

Two possible obscurities should perhaps be cleared up at this point. First, does not consciousness antedate the distinction between thought and thing? Are there not periods of what James calls 'pure experience,' in which the innocence of consciousness knows no such difference as that between mind and body? And would not this imply that consciousness is something superior to mental and physical alike? The answer seems to me to be that consciousness is independent of the *thought* of the difference between the two, but not independent of the *actual difference itself*. We need here to keep the genetic problem separate from the ontological. The child's earliest sensations are independent of his thought of sense-organs or of nerves; but not independent of sense-organs and nerves themselves. His perceptions of the outer world precede his power to distinguish between his sensations and his interpretive supplementing of these sensations; yet his perceptions do not precede the actual difference between these two factors in his inner life. As regards the contrast between physical and mental, we may say, therefore, that consciousness precedes the distinction but does not precede the difference. Ontologically the difference is there perpetually, and does not wait for us to become aware of it.

The other possible difficulty I would briefly refer to is this: if one were to say that the difference between mental and physical things consists in some difference in their mode of behavior (as I have said in my preceding paper) would not this be inconsistent with the view here taken that knowing and feeling and willing are to be classed as psychical in spite of their ranging, in their operations,

through all the physical realm? Only a word is needed to point out that *range* is by no means the only characteristic which an operation may reveal. As regards range, there is a certain similarity between thought and gravitation. But *laws* of thought are totally different from the *law* of gravitation. And this difference of their laws is but an expression of a difference in their modes of behavior. So that the distinction between the mental and the physical, which I proposed in my previous paper, is not at all contradicted by saying that some mental things in their operation spread over both mental and physical things.

In answer then to the question with which this paper began, I would say that there is something real to which we may give the name consciousness, but that it is not a reality which our distinction between physical and mental leaves out of account. It is either the 'generic mark' of all psychic processes, or else, in its other sense, it is a special one of these processes—the knowing function. But the knowing function, while singled out in this way for special honor, does not in the nature of things stand out alone. It is but an abstraction within a more complete process, in which emotion and will are found. These, too, conjoin objects into a relation which is quite as real and significant for us as is the knowledge relation. The continuum into which the mind builds its objects, as Professor James and Professor Woodbridge have helped us see, is marked by the fact that one object represents another, leads up to another and finds there its fulfillment. But this fulfillment is more rich and varied than a consideration of knowing would lead us to realize. An object may find itself fulfilled in a cognitive way; but it is equally true that an object may lead up to another and find, not a cognitive, but an emotional or a purposive fulfillment. There are many kinds of psychic continua; there are many kinds of transitions and fulfillments; and the knowledge relation is but one of the many psychic connections to which these terms apply. In applying the word 'consciousness' to the cognitive act, it should not be understood that knowing is the supreme function in the world of objects, or that it really breaks loose from those connections with feeling and will which modern psychology has recognized. But since the term 'consciousness' so readily suggests an independent function, and since it also so readily suggests something different from knowing, it would seem to me best for us to say 'knowledge' when we mean knowledge, and let the term 'consciousness' designate the common and generic features of our psychic acts, for which its historic breadth of usage so well adapts it.