III.—THE ABSOLUTE AS UNKNOWABLE.

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IN the somewhat widespread revolt against the neo-Hegelian identification of reality with thought, or knowledge, there are evidently two courses which it is possible for one who sympathises in a general way with the Hegelian contention to adopt. He may attempt, on the one hand, to find some other form of experience actually open to us which is more adequate to the demands upon it than thought is, or, on the other hand, he may conclude that there is no such known form of experience within our reach, and may have recourse to a hypothetical synthesis, whose existence we are forced to postulate, but whose nature is entirely unknown. I wish in the present paper to consider certain aspects of this latter alternative in the form in which it is represented by Mr. Bradley.

Mr. Bradley's chief objections to Hegelianism are two in number. In the first place, life is more than thought, if we mean by thought what other people mean; and if we mean something different from other people, and do not define ourselves, we are talking in the air. Life is feeling and will, as well as thought, and so these also must come within the Absolute. In the second place, thought does not in itself supply an intelligible unity. It proceeds by way of relations, and this can never give us a unity which we really understand. Of course there is a certain *de facto* unity; things are somehow brought together in thought. But the mere fact that we can think of an object does not of itself make the object intelligible; and so long as, starting from a given point, we simply *find* the connexion of something else with it, as we do in relational thinking, we fall short of an answer to the real problem of philosophy, as to how this connexion exists.¹ Thought points in the direction of a unity, but never reaches it; if it did reach it, it would cease to be

¹ MIND, vol. v., p. 472.

thought. Accordingly the Absolute is, for us, unknowable. What we do know is not outside the Absolute, but it is inadequate to express its real nature. It is true that one concept may be more adequate than another, and philosophy is bound to give each its relative order of importance. But when we have reached our highest category, we are not, as Hegel thought, in the presence of reality in its own proper nature; the final synthesis still lies beyond.

Mr. Bradley is thus at one with the neo-Hegelian in representing the Absolute as a single experience within which all existence whatsoever is included;¹ he differs in holding that the self, or self-conscious thought, is not a final statement of this Absolute. The world is no longer a rounded intellectual system, such as we actually know, at least in its main outlines, with some degree of completeness, and appended to which there are a number of incomplete reproductions in the form of human lives. It is, indeed, extremely difficult to add on these latter to a world already complete in terms of scientific generalisations, and avoid the appearance of a number of selves as our ultimate, instead of a single self. If the individual is really to be put inside the Absolute, he will naturally be conceived, not as a reproduction of God's life complete intellectually without him, but as one of the constituent elements of this life, part of the stuff out of which it is made, as a sensation enters into and helps to constitute a conscious state of our own. But in this case, we may as well abandon at once the contention that, for our knowledge, the world is intelligible. By working up the material of our own lives, our sensations, desires, etc., into new and strange products in the life of God where they have their real truth, we are destroying our knowledge both of ourselves and God; we neither know the product, nor the fate of the constituent parts within that product.

Now in so far as Mr. Bradley is engaged in criticising the Hegelian theory of thought as the ultimate unity, I am in accord with him, at least in his results. But in trying to discover something higher than thought, and inclusive of it, there are two roads which it is possible to follow. We may take this "something higher" as a static something, in which the irreconcilable facts of thought, feeling, will are mixed together to give a product which is unlike any of them, and which our experience gives us no means of grasping; or we may ask whether this ultimate concept is not revealed in experience even as it exists for us. In other

¹ *Appearance and Reality*, p. 146.

words, we may consider whether these various factors may not find their explanation, not by being mixed together and changed in the operation, but by each retaining its proper character, and being given a place as one phase of a unitary process to which it is functionally related; and in this case the whole process within which these various phases appear would furnish our clue to the ultimate nature of reality, not thought, or feeling, or will, by itself, or combined with something else to form a new product. This latter is the conclusion I shall wish to suggest: the highest conception is experience as an activity, within which thought plays a particular part, to be determined more exactly by psychology; and it is therefore from experience in this aspect, as active, that we are to get our notion of reality as a whole.

Now the monistic postulate, in the first place, on which Mr. Bradley builds, I think is open to question. Because the world is a unity, it does not follow that it must be the unity of a single inclusive experience, or whole of feeling. There is a positive difficulty in the way of this which I do not think Mr. Bradley sufficiently recognises. A psychical fact is not something that, as a matter of direct experience, can be worked up into all sorts of new combinations, and still retain its nature unchanged; and accordingly the facts of experience as we feel them, in their apparent limitation, must either be denied altogether, even as appearance—and this is what we do practically when we say that our experience exists in reality, only in a wholly *different form*—¹ or else they must be taken as only *known* in the Absolute experience, and as falling in existence outside this. I think it is possible to say something for this latter conception of knowledge,—the conception that knowledge always implies the separate factual existence of the reality known, distinct from the experience of knowing, and that it is not merely the ideal extension of a fact immediately present in feeling. And all that I wish to point out here is, that if this could be established, there would no longer be any *impossibility* that thought should know reality as it is. Thought, says Mr. Bradley,

¹ We overlook the incompatibility of the existence *both* of reality, and of an appearance differing from the reality, because we have in mind implicitly the more usual conception of a reality *distinct* from our experience, which, of course, may be in itself very different from our subjective notion of it. There is no difficulty about this, because the appearance is made a second subjective fact existing alongside the real fact. But when we deny this separation, and make appearance and reality the very same bit of existence, I confess my entire inability to understand how any appearance distinct from the *real* appearance, i.e., the reality, still remains.

always involves a separation of the what and the that. We get reality in feeling, but it is never the whole of reality; there are always broken edges from which lines of connexion lead us continually beyond. Thought is the endeavour to complete this partial reality given to us in feeling. It completes it, however, only by the application of ideas, and these are always meaning divorced from existence. The very essence of thought is thus its ideal character. Accordingly, while it can never be satisfied until idea and existence, the what and the that, are recombined, it also is impossible that it should reach its goal, since if it did so it would cease thereby to be thought, and become something quite different.¹ But this, it seems to me, is essentially the old demand that thought, in order to know reality, should actually be that reality. If the reality known must come bodily within the experience of knowing, then of course so long as we are thinking we cannot escape from mere thought. But if we can know, not simply that something exists, but something *as* it exists, beyond our act of knowing it, there is no reason why this might not be an experience whose nature was the nature of ultimate existence. It simply is a question now as to whether we actually have a form of experience open to us which is capable of standing the tests. Let us suppose that there is such a form of experience in our own lives, in which the objections to the relational aspect of thought are overcome; and that we can afterwards think of, or know, this. The *thinking* does not cease to be relational, of course, but the reality thought of does; and accordingly we cannot bring up the process by which we think it to prove that reality itself is still relational. Now the possibility of this rests, as I have said, on the supposition that the reality of which the idea is asserted is not, as Mr. Bradley would have it, an unknown synthesis, which is revealed to us by the actual presence of one section of it in our momentary feeling,² but rather a fact into which this feeling is not, in most cases, intended to enter at all. There is such a momentary feeling, and it reveals to us reality; it forms the medium, that is, through which our knowledge of reality is attained: but it is a medium which we entirely ignore, so far as the meaning, or reference, of the judgment is concerned. When I start to judge about an apple, my sensation is, indeed, involved, but I do not intend to say anything whatever *about* my sensation, or about reality as including

¹ *Appearance and Reality*, pp. 163 ff.

² *Ibid.*, p. 258 *et al.*

my sensation. Suppose, then, we are supplied with the notion of a reality which exists in a non-discursive form, and some knowledge of which in detail we have already acquired. We know that this detail is not exhausted, but this does not destroy the value of the knowledge we have; the object we know is red, and it is none the less red because it is round, and smooth, and has countless other characteristics which are still undiscovered. Apart, then, from any further judgment we may pass about this, we are able to know, or mean it—mean it as something which exists in its own truth, distinct from the perceptual experience by which we see it, or the possible judgments we might pass about it if we began to analyse. If, now, we go on to learn something new about the object, this, in *our process of discovery*, appears as a new relation which has to be added to the reality already there; *actually* we recognise that this process takes place only in our experience, and that the whole fact was already in existence in its non-discursive form before the judgment was made. If, however, this extraneousness of the object judged about to the elements of our experience is not heeded, we can never reach anything in knowledge which is not infected with the relational form. This is what I understand Mr. Bradley to maintain. There is a reality, and this reality shows itself in our experience—in feeling, sensation, perception. Sensation does not, that is, come as a duplicate of the reality known, but it is an actual element of the reality itself, and as such enters into the judgment. Judgment says that this reality, of which a section reveals itself in feeling, is extended beyond the mere feeling by the reference of an idea. Accordingly, the subject “this apple”—in the judgment “this apple is red”—does not represent a fairly adequate outline which is to be filled in by subsequent judgments, and which, by reason of its distinction from our knowledge of it, can be recognised as containing, in reality, a great deal of which we do not know; it is rather a component part of reality, which exists as the “burning focus” of our present sensational experience, and whose boundaries are to be gradually extended till it becomes we know not what in an ever-growing synthesis. The real subject is, therefore, the whole of reality, since the idea cannot be predicated of the nominal subject, which, by reason of its complete identity with our present experience and knowledge, is itself merely, and not itself completed by the idea.¹ In

¹ From the other standpoint the nominal subject is not identical with my experience, but distinct from it, and consciously recognised as going

every possible judgment the nominal subject thus points beyond itself; thought would no longer be thought if it ceased to be the reference of an ideal content, divorced from fact, and extending beyond the given.¹ Since, then, the ultimate subject of the judgment comes into our experience only under the form of feeling extended by ideal relations, and since these relations are *only* ideal, and we have no way of telling how they are reconciled with the real in the ultimate synthesis which we never reach, our last word must be that the Absolute is, not only in detail, but in every sense, unknowable.

I shall not attempt to argue here at length against this theory—the theory that judgment is the reference of an idea to a reality which is all of a piece with the real fact given to us directly in feeling. I shall be content simply to oppose to it the conception which seems to me more true. I should deny, once more, both that it is the feeling which is extended, and that it is extended by an idea. The sensation, or perception, has, so far as the purport of the judgment is concerned, nothing to do with the reality to which the idea is applied; this is rather the fact for which the perception stands as a representation, and from which it is as an existence entirely distinct. It is, again, not the idea as such which is applied to reality. The idea is simply our tool which we use to discover the attribute we are after; this attribute itself, however, is perfectly concrete and individual, and we recognise it as such. I am looking, we will say, for a piece of wrapping paper, and I guide my search by means of the concept brown. When however I say, “This paper is brown,” I do not suppose that the paper has somehow been brought into connexion with an abstract colour, but only that here in the universe is a particular real piece of paper which answers in colour to my idea of brown, and which I can use, but whose colour is itself, of course, as definite a brown as could possibly exist. It may indeed be that I cannot tell exactly what this particular colour is, and I may not be, usually I am not, especially interested in its particularity; but, nevertheless, in any judgment which intends to refer to a concrete

beyond it in content; and so there is no contradiction in predicating the new attribute of it.

¹ I should say also that thought can never cease to move by way of relation, but this says nothing about the reality which is known by thought. If thought is not only a factor in reality, but knows other reality besides itself, then a non-relational fact may conceivably be known by a thought which still keeps the relational form, and an absolute truth by a thought which itself is partial.

existence, I am perfectly aware that the quality which I am referring to reality is a definite quality, and that it must be so for the judgment to have meaning.

Now I believe that this is our natural way of looking at the matter, and that, consequently, it has so much the advantage. It certainly does not fall in readily with our ordinary conceptions to suppose that the external world, so far as known, is nothing but a mosaic of bits of human experience, and that it probably has no existence at all apart from such finite centres of feeling.¹ Commonly it is believed most emphatically to have an existence independent of human sensibility. The only thing that would make a different theory acceptable would be the impossibility of justifying the common-sense view in any satisfactory way. I do not see why the conception of an ultimate consciousness distinct from ours, within which the outer world has its reality, is not a sufficiently respectable theory to deserve at least consideration.² It only remains, then, to ask whether we actually have a knowledge of any type of experience which overcomes the difficulties that Mr. Bradley finds in thought. And my thesis is that we have, in any conscious act of a non-discursive kind, a sufficient indication of the direction in which we are to look for this. Let us take a case where we are doing something in full consciousness of its meaning, but where the action is sufficiently habitual to do away with the need of our constantly having to form new judgments, or to think. In such an experience we have the elements of our activity present in their relations, without these relations being mere opaque facts; we do not start from A and find B, of whose connexion no further account is to be given, but B is already implicitly present in the end of action, by reference to which each partial element has its place determined. In the experience of consciously performing an act in which the relations of the various steps that constitute the act, the means that make it possible, are actively realised, we have, indeed, the only way in which Mr. Bradley's demand is conceivably to

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

² Mr. Bradley mentions this in a foot-note (*Appearance and Reality*, p. 282) only to reject it with some contempt as hardly needing refutation. Of course if we follow him in his static conception of reality, there is some justification for this; the mere reduplication of a fact does not explain much. If, however, every fact of experience has a functional value also—and that for common sense is its obvious value—then the independent existence of the world for God's consciousness need no more be meaningless than my knowledge is useless because my neighbour knows the same thing. I and my neighbour have different parts to play in the world.

be met. That we should understand a fact, in distinction from simply having to admit it as a fact, has no assignable meaning except by reference to end or purpose. Of course, in any experience of ours, we come short of a self-existent and self-intelligible reality. Our experience is only a small part of the whole world, and so it can neither stand alone when we come to examine it, nor can it avoid the necessity of constantly having to stop and think, in order to adjust itself to new circumstances which lie outside of and condition it. An absolute reality would, on the contrary, contain all conditions within itself, and contain them consciously; every so-called past event would, in its relations, be eternally present; a step once taken would not drop from memory, as it does with us, and only persist as a *de facto* condition of present consciousness; it would persist consciously, as an influence which had its share in directing the course of future accomplishment. But while we have to recognise that any actual experience of ours falls short of representing adequately what the life of God must be, this does not prevent its exhibiting essentially the same general features; and if we thus get the type of reality in our own lives, it is comparatively an easy task to apply it to the outer world. What an object really means for us is its relation to our own activities. A chair means the act of sitting, paper the act of writing, a gun the act of shooting. Apart from such a unity of end, the object is but a congeries of relations, which we can think only discursively, by passing from one relation to another. But when the object is actually being used, those elements in it which have a bearing upon the end in view may come into an altogether more intimate sort of connexion. Here the whole act, and so the object as it enters into the act, may be bound together by the abiding presence in consciousness of the end towards which the action is directed—an end which is not something separate from the action, but which is itself realised in the various related steps which make up the action's progress. Relations are still there, in the sense that we have a complex whole whose parts can only be *thought* as related; but they are not felt as mere relations, but as phases of the inner unity of the act. Of course, however, metaphysically speaking, the act is not literally the object; as a means to the accomplishment of the act it can stand to us for the service it performs, but in itself it is a member of an independent and permanent world. This world never enters bodily into any experience of ours, and so we get at it in the first place only as a fact which we perceive or think about; and this knowledge of

it on our part is, like all intellectual acts, discursive and relational. To make the real object merely relational, however, is to lose sight of the fact that this relational form of thinking, even in our own experience, is not ultimate, but only a means to an end, which we should have no need of if we did not start with a knowledge that was partial and incomplete. Accordingly, while we can never experience objects directly, but must always approach them indirectly by the way of judgment, we can believe that there is a direct experience in which they exist, and in which the discursive form of thinking entirely disappears, as it tends to disappear in the activities to which our own thought leads up. Of course in this ultimate experience the object does not play the same part that it does in ours; the chair is not God's act of sitting down. We are constantly making this distinction between the objective purpose of a thing, and its subjective, teleological use with reference to our own lives. And in detail we can never tell just how objects enter into God's activity of consciousness. The general nature and meaning of his life we may, without egotism, suppose that we are getting gradually to know in the higher, or social, content of human life, but this does not tell us how any particular thing is related to this purpose. We can only discover the mechanical laws of this framework of the eternal consciousness, as represented in the relation of objects to one another, not to the meaning which they subserve. But if we suppose such an ever-flowing stream of conscious purpose, we have a *principle* of explanation for external things; they are the elements of this conscious life, as in the poet's dream the various images form the stuff of his inspired vision—elements which we cannot relate in detail to the whole, but which, nevertheless, we can believe are so connected, and thus are lifted above the merely relational form of existence which they present to us when we think them. Nor, on this theory, do we need to put outside the real existence of the object even its relation to human use; it is this, too, though it is vastly more than this. We need not suppose that cork trees were made for the sole and express convenience of the bottlers; this is on the face of it absurd. And yet, in point of fact, corks are made from the cork tree, and they fill a certain place in life, and so they cannot be wholly foreign to a reality which covers the entire sphere of existence. In the displacement of the theological by the scientific spirit, we have passed to an entirely exaggerated disparagement of the importance of the human element in the universe. If corks are made, we must suppose that

even cork-making enters into the meaning of the cork tree as an objective¹ fact; it is only when we promote this to the place of first importance that we run the risk of being absurd.

With this explanation, I do not think that Mr. Bradley's strictures as regards the self are any longer fatal. It is quite true that I can never in a single pulse of thought exhaust all the contents of my own life; I cannot exhaust all that is immediately present in the background of feeling, even, to say nothing of my past and future experience. But this is to make self-consciousness consist simply in thinking about oneself, in the purely intellectual enumeration of a given content. Such an act of thought might perhaps cover the whole ground in the end, but it would undeniably require time, and at no single moment would the whole be present. But if we find the principle of self-consciousness in an active process which *includes* duration, this objection is overcome. In so far as the elements of consciousness are related to an overruling end, they can be eternally present in a sense which is not possible in the case of a mere thought enumeration. As having a relation to the process as a whole, which needs to be taken account of in each successive step, they are, in their influence, still consciously present, even when in another sense they are passed and left behind; whereas they have no such continued existence if they are only thought of in the form of a list. It is true that my life, as mine, shows no such absolutely inclusive unity, but no one supposes that human experience is capable of standing without any change whatever for ultimate existence. My life is a gradual development, in which, by means of various partial and disconnected experiences, I *come to know* reality which exists before it reveals its meaning to me; and so it cannot adequately represent a life which is eternally self-conscious. But if the *principle* of self-consciousness is present even in these partial experiences, I do not see why it is not possible, on the basis of what we actually know, to conceive a whole of experience in which all elements are present in their relation to an inclusive purpose, and to do this without any self-contradictions.

Mr. Bradley's criticism of Hegelianism is, it is unnecessary to say, exceedingly acute, and I believe that up to a certain point it is conclusive. But in the conception which he would substitute for Hegel's he loses, I am persuaded,

¹ The objectivity of a thing of course includes, in any ultimate statement, its social relations.

the whole gain which Hegel has been the means of winning for philosophy. If Hegel's work is of any value, it is by reason of his finding the very core and centre of reality in the intelligible relations which are to be found, first in the physical world, and, at a higher level, in the social life of man. Reality thus becomes, not a something we know not what, out of all relation to our practical concerns, but it is thoroughly and genuinely knowable. Now to take all known realities as mere ingredients of a larger whole of experience, in which they are transformed and swallowed up, is to abandon this for what not even the doctrine of degrees of reality can prevent our having to call, again, an unknowable. It is one thing to say that some fact of my experience, my sin or suffering, which in my ignorance I call a blot upon the universe, does really have a place to fill, which we could understand if we could see the universe in its entirety; it is another to say that it does this by being transformed in a more inclusive state of consciousness. The first statement I should quite agree with; but I should insist that a conscious fact, in order to fill this place in a larger whole, far from being changed for knowledge, must be precisely itself. My suffering, as a fact of experience, is not changed by performing a service in the life of the whole; when I know the use which it serves I know more about it, but it is still just this same experience which I knew before, whose meaning is enlarged. There is a difference between a fact in the external world, and a fact of immediate experience, which Mr. Bradley ignores. A supposed fact may, it is true, be wholly altered by added knowledge, but this is possible only because the fact was not really what at first we supposed it to be, but was something quite different. This can be the case when we approach the fact indirectly, through the medium of knowledge, which may at any time be false or inadequate. But an experience is just what it is in experience, and nothing else. It can have new light thrown upon it, not, if we keep to the natural view, by being transformed in a larger consciousness simultaneous with it, but by entering into a continuous stream of consciousness, and so being related to a purpose. Each conscious act is itself alone; the added meaning which we afterwards discover concerns the part which it plays in the rational whole of action. In our own life, it can get its explanation by reference to the future course of our life history, though it still remains the sole and real fact at this particular point in the temporal series. Afterwards we come to interpret it differently, but this new experience does not flow together with the old; the two keep temporally quite distinct, and

both alike, in their distinction, are equally necessary steps in the whole process. And in so far as it finds its explanation in the purpose of the universe as a system of interrelated lives, it still remains itself; it has its relation to the eternal consciousness of God, not as losing itself in this, but as known to be itself and nothing else, and distinct from the wider knowledge of it which God possesses. There is, accordingly, no incompatibility between a knowledge of it which shall be adequate so far as it goes, and a wider knowledge of the conditions which make it possible, and of the purpose which explains it; the latter, far from overwhelming it, implies its existence exactly as it is experienced. And while the larger purpose may be only imperfectly recognised by us, it yet represents no new or strange form of experience, but something whose relationship to the elements which enter into it we have exemplified every moment of our lives.