II.—PURPOSE.

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IN recent epistemological and metaphysical discussion the conception of purpose is freely used, and important conclusions are frequently derived from it. "The purposive nature of our intelligence" is emphasised as a cardinal principle of general psychology, and the primacy accorded to cognition in what may be called the "mechanical" systems of psychology is being transferred to the active or volitional side of our mental life. The methods of formal logic are criticised, and the procedure of science is analysed, from a standpoint which demands the recognition of purpose as a determining factor, and both relativist and absolutist metaphysics find the conception of purpose, in various senses, a most useful instrument of interpretation. My object in this paper is to make an endeavour, however imperfect, to discover the meaning of this much-used conception.

The most immediately obvious meaning of purpose is its psychological sense, and for convenience we may take as a starting-point the definition given by Professors Baldwin and Stout in the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, vol. ii, viz., "a project which is adopted for execution, but not yet executed." In the same volume a project is defined by Professor Baldwin as "a possible course of action conceived simply, but not decided upon." Combining the two statements we may say that, in the view of these authorities, a purpose is a possible course of action, conceived and adopted for execution, but not yet executed. It is further explained that a purpose is an unrealised end (in the sense of a remote, rather than an immediate, end), and it is said to differ from intention in being

limited to the elements actually present to the mind. This description corresponds very fairly to what is meant by purpose in specific relation to conduct; but it seems to me to be too narrow a definition even of conscious purpose, in view of much common usage. The terms "purpose" and "intention" may often be applied indifferently, and this not through mere looseness of terminology, but because of a substantial identity of meaning. From the point of view of law and ethics, it is no doubt necessary to insist on the distinction between "purpose" and "intention," and from the same point of view it may be necessary to define purpose as a conceived course of action directed to a remote end. But if we leave out of account the problems of these normative sciences, we must allow that purpose is not necessarily a conceived course of action, that it is not always directed to a remote end, and that it is not limited to the "elements actually present to the mind." In logic, for instance, we may quite fairly speak of the purpose or intention of a statement, and we may insist, as Mr. Schiller does,* that this purpose must be taken into account in determining the meaning of the statement. Purpose in this sense is not a conceived course of action, nor is it necessarily directed to a remote end. It may be a merely momentary purpose, and its end may be immediate. Nor is it necessarily anything definitely conceived. It may be no more than a vague, partly subconscious disposition, imperfectly realised by the person whose purpose it is. It would be absurd to say that in every statement a man makes he has some definite purpose present to his mind, and yet it may fairly be said that no intelligible statement is purposeless. Indeed, one of the most satisfactory ways in which language (in the widest sense) may be discriminated from involuntary exclamation or gesture is to discover whether or not the supposed sign has a purpose. Again, there are cases in which a person acts under

* *Studies in Humanism*, pp. 9, 10.

the influence of an indefinite and growing purpose, of which he becomes definitely conscious only at a comparatively advanced stage in his course of action. Becoming aware of his purpose, he may look back on his previous action and recognise that, without his knowing it, his doings had been dominated by this purpose from the first. As Professor Taylor points out, "it is a familiar fact of experience that we often learn what our purposes are for the first time by the pain which attends their defeat." And again, "when I speak of feeling as 'purposive' or 'teleological,' I do not mean to make what, to my own mind, would be the monstrous assumption, that it necessarily presupposes *conscious* anticipation of its guiding end or purpose. All that I mean is that the processes of conscious life are as a matter of fact only intelligible with reference to the results in which they culminate, and which they serve to maintain; or, again, that they all involve the kind of continuity of interest which belongs to attention."* It seems to me, therefore, that, even in the merely psychological sense, purpose cannot be limited to what is clearly and definitely conceived by the purposing mind.

Professor Taylor's statements, however, have been challenged by Mr. Schiller,† on the ground that they ignore the element of "agency" in purpose. "Professor Taylor hardly seems to conceive purpose in the natural way. He habitually regards it rather from the external standpoint of the contemplative *spectator* than from that of the purposing *agent*, and it will always be found that a philosophy which refuses to enter into the feelings of the agent must in the end pronounce the whole conception of agency an unmeaning mystery. . . . This external way of conceiving agency from the standpoint of a bystander was Hume's fundamental trick, the root of all his naturalism, and the basis of his success as a critic of causation." I find it somewhat difficult to understand Mr. Schiller's objection to

* *Elements of Metaphysics*, p. 55, note.

† *Studies in Humanism*, p. 230.

the attitude of the spectator. It is surely the business of the philosopher and the scientific man to understand the objects of his study. His ultimate aim may be practical; but his endeavour is to understand, in order that he may act or regulate his action. And in order to understand he must be a spectator—a spectator of himself and of the world. To “enter into the feelings of the agent” can only mean either to have the feelings of the agent, which every man has in so far as he is an agent, or to be a “spectator” of the feelings of the agent, *i.e.*, to understand them and take account of them. Mr. Schiller’s contention, then, must mean that Professor Taylor ignores an essential element in the conception of purpose, the element of “agency.” Similarly, his criticism of Hume seems to mean, so far as I understand it, that Hume, in his analysis of Causation, neglected certain elements in Causality, and more especially (I take it) the element of agency. For it can hardly be meant that Hume refused “to enter into the feelings” of a cause. If, then, “this external way of conceiving agency from the standpoint of a bystander” or a “spectator” leaves “no room for the conception of agency,” we must either give up the scientific and philosophical attempt to understand ourselves and the world or “pronounce the whole conception of agency an unmeaning mystery.”

But, assuming that a spectator may observe himself and other beings to be agents, we may consider whether, and in what sense, “agency” is an element in purpose. This seems to me to depend on the answer to the question whether or not the agent is necessarily an agent conscious of the ends of his action. Activity and purpose are each teleological: every activity and every purpose is a tendency to an end. There are many activities in which the agent is unconscious of the end; and there are many purposes in which the agent is conscious of the end. Can we say that there are activities which are entirely purposeless? We do speak of some activities as purposeless or aimless, when we mean that their ends are vague or

indefinite. But vagueness or indefiniteness in the end of an activity is not necessarily a sign of the absence of conscious purpose, for there are endless degrees of definiteness in an agent's consciousness of his end, and consequently many activities with vague and indefinite ends are activities in which the agent is conscious of the end. On the other hand, there are activities, both of living and of inanimate things, in which there is no consciousness of the end. It may, of course, be maintained that such activities are purely mechanical, and are, therefore, not entitled to the name of activities in the strict sense, *i.e.*, in the sense of tendencies to ends. But that would mean that there is no activity in the strict sense, except activity consciously directed to an end, and I do not think that those who insist on the importance of agency as an element in purpose are prepared to admit this. For if there is no activity, except activity consciously directed to an end, there is no purpose except conscious purpose, and the attitude of Hume is justified, except as regards one section, an island, of reality, in which alone it is necessary to take purpose and agency into account. Are, then, these unconscious activities purposive? If they are not, it seems necessary to admit the existence of agents without purposes. But if the conception of agency is extended so as to include agents without purposes, it is difficult to see how it can be regarded as an "immediate experience," for we have no immediate experience of unconscious agents. To postulate such agents must mean, it seems to me, either to maintain that there is an arbitrary and incalculable factor in the means to any end or the cause of any effect, or to say that in every tendency to an end there is a system of conditions, having a real unity and not being merely a collection or sum of independent elements. To adopt the first of these suppositions would be equivalent to regarding nature as ultimately unintelligible. But in the second sense, that in which an agent is regarded as a real system of conditions, having a definite unity, agency is the most important,

if not the sole, element in purpose, and, indeed, in every activity.

It may, however, be contended that while in unconscious tendency to an end, as viewed from the standpoint of science, there is no purpose or agency, the whole scientific conception of things is only relatively true and must be taken as a construction of conscious agents, acting under the guidance of conscious purposes. It may not be possible directly to find purpose and agency in the unconscious processes of nature; but indirectly the whole universe, as it is for us (*i.e.*, the only universe we can know, the only universe that matters), is dominated and determined by the purposes of conscious agents. All our statements, whether they are individual propositions or systems of doctrine, can only be understood by reference to the purposes of the conscious agents who make them, and their degree of truth is relative to these purposes. Now, in one sense, this is a contention which cannot be denied. It is so obvious that there is no need to defend or illustrate it. Every statement, and every theory, has definite meaning and truth only in its context. This context may, as Mr. Schiller contends,* be the purpose of the person who makes the statement or frames the theory, though I think it a great exaggeration to say that "the whole of one's concrete personality" goes to the making of each of one's assertions. [That may be the case ultimately, from an "absolute" point of view; but I should have thought that practically, from the "pragmatist" point of view, much less than the whole would suffice.] We cannot, however, in my opinion, identify the context with the purpose of the assessor. If the meaning and truth of the statement depends upon its context, it must be possible to comprehend and state this context. If the context is uninterpretable or inscrutable, if it is a purpose which cannot be fully and definitely expressed, the meaning and truth which depend upon it must be arbitrary, and the statement

* *Studies in Humanism*, p. 86.

must in the last resort be unintelligible. Now, if the context is the whole of the assertor's personality, it is obviously a context which cannot be fully and definitely expressed. And if the context is a specific purpose, which can be definitely stated, we must further ask,—is the context the assertor's purpose as it appears to himself or is it the assertor's purpose as it is understood by others? Very frequently the assertor misreads his own purpose. Nothing, for instance, is more common than the supposition of an assertor or theorist that his purpose is the pure, unprejudiced investigation of truth, when in reality, and in the opinion of others, his purpose is to convince other people of the truth of some preconceived opinion. It is a snare which besets us all. We are often self-deceived, and we cannot therefore take our own conception of our purpose as necessarily determining the meaning and truth of our statements. On the other hand, it is equally obvious that our purposes are often misunderstood by other people, and we cannot, therefore, take their conception of our purpose as determining the meaning of our statements. The nature and purposes of a conscious agent, whether as recognised by himself or as interpreted by others, may, in certain circumstances, be a more or less important part of the context of his statements; but they are not necessarily the sole context and in many cases they are a negligible element in the context. In so far as they enter into the context, they do so, not in virtue of their being conscious acts or purposes, but in so far as they are conditions on which the truth of the statement depends. If a colour-blind man makes assertions about colour, if an inaccurate observer or a careless reader of documents makes scientific or historical statements, we are bound to take into account the colour-blindness, the inaccuracy or the carelessness in estimating the meaning and value of the statements. Similarly, if a man is known to be endeavouring to deceive us, we must take his purpose into account. But we take these things into account, not merely because they are characteristics or purposes of conscious agents, but because they

are grounds or conditions of the statements. Every statement rests on grounds or conditions and its meaning and value depend on these grounds or conditions, which constitute its context. If the whole context of any statement, including the contexts of every element in its more immediate context, could be fully expressed, the statement would be completely determined, both as to its meaning and its truth. And thus an absolutely true statement is not a statement which is true independently of any grounds or conditions, nor a statement which is true under each possible condition in a totality of conditions, but a statement of which the whole system of conditions has been made explicit. Accordingly the relativity of the whole scientific conception of things is not, I think, due to its being a product of conscious purpose, but is another way of saying that the conditions on which it depends have not been made fully explicit.

The question of the existence of purpose in nature may however, be looked at from another point of view. It is generally admitted that every purpose has an end, in whatever sense we use the term "purpose." Indeed, purpose and end are so closely connected that we often use the terms as if they were equivalent. Conscious purposes are undoubtedly conscious ends; any difference there may be between them is a difference of aspect. Can we say the same of all ends, whether or not they are ends which a conscious agent sets before himself? If purposes imply ends, do ends always imply purposes? We do recognise ends other than those of conscious beings. We recognise ends in organic beings, both conscious and unconscious, and in general it may be said that wherever there is function there are ends. Now the essence of function is the mutual fitting or the mutual conditioning of elements in a system. The function of an organ or the function of an element in a chemical combination or the function of any property or quality in a material object is the way in which it conditions and is conditioned by the other organs, elements or properties,

so as to maintain the unity of the whole. Function and end are thus present in every system, in everything which has a unity, however imperfect, in everything which is not a mere collocation, if such a thing as a mere collocation is possible. Wherever there is system, there is end. Can we say that wherever there is system there is purpose?

As a matter of fact, we constantly attribute purpose to organic beings. We investigate the purposes of organs, and in many cases the apparent purpose of an organ is a guide to the determination of its nature. And again we attribute purpose to the parts of such inorganic systems as machines, as well as to the machines as wholes. It may, of course, quite rightly be pointed out that, in this last case, our attribution of purpose is a recognition that the machine is the expression of human purposes or that it has been deliberately designed as a means to human ends, and accordingly that what we call the purpose of the machine is the purpose of a conscious agent. But I do not think that this is a full statement of the case. The parts of the machine, however they may have been put together, have purposes or functions analogous to those of the organs of a plant, and we cannot say that these are the expression of human purpose, although we do regard them as purposive. There is, however, an obvious rejoinder to my contention. The attribution of purpose to organic and inorganic systems is merely a metaphorical use of language, due to our tendency to interpret everything in terms of our own experience as self-conscious beings. We read purpose into unconscious things, just as we call the sea cruel or the wind biting. Now, language is undoubtedly full of metaphor, and most of the abstract terms we use in philosophical discussion are metaphorical. Every metaphor rests on some analogy between the primary and the metaphorical use of the term, and the analogy may have endless degrees of exactness. It may be exceedingly fanciful it may have a core of significance which entitles us to regard the metaphor as an imaginative insight, or it may be so exact

that the discrepancy is almost negligible. Now if the attribution of purpose to organic and inorganic systems is metaphorical, the analogy on which the metaphor rests does not include consciousness as a common characteristic. We do not attribute purpose to these systems on the ground that they are conscious agents. We do not personify them. Our attitude is not that of the Highlander at the battle of Prestonpans, who thought that the watch he found was a "wee beastie." Our point of view is not that of animism. If we apply the term "purpose" metaphorically to systems other than the system of our conscious life, it is because we find in those systems a relationship between part and part and between part and whole analogous to that which we find in our own purposive existence. The analogy is a real and not a fanciful one, it can be made explicit, and it seems to me to indicate the essential meaning of purpose.

On the other hand, in nature, as conceived from the purely mechanical standpoint of physical science, we do not find purpose. The deliberate abstractness of the scientific point of view excludes it. The scientific attitude does not expressly exclude the possibility of regarding the universe as a system in which every element has its function or its purpose in relation to the other elements and to the whole. But it does leave the whole out of account. It endeavours to explain everything, not by making explicit its relations to the whole, but by showing its relations to other parts. A is related to B, B to C, C to D, and so on *ad infinitum*. It is, doubtless, a presupposition of the possibility of such relations that the universe is a system, that the parts are parts of a real whole; but the mechanical standpoint abstracts from this. So far as the mechanical interpretation of nature is concerned, it is a matter of indifference whether the universe is conceived as a real system, or a chance collocation or an endless series of interrelated phenomena, regarded as the effects of a hypothetical First Cause. This abstract point of view is, of course,

applicable not merely to inorganic phenomena, but also to organisms, conscious and unconscious. But wherever it is applied it leaves elements in isolation, considers its objects as if they had no real systematic relation, and, consequently, regards them as without purpose.

These considerations suggest, though, doubtless, they do not conclusively prove, that we find purpose in things in proportion as we find in them systematic unity, and that a thing has a purpose in so far as it is a unity of conditions in a system, in so far, that is to say, as it has individuality and is not a separate and colourless element—an isolated part. Actual systems vary indefinitely in the degree of their unity, and, consequently, in the degree in which they may be regarded as exhibiting purpose. The degree of unity of any system may, I think, be regarded as equivalent to the degree of unity between means and end, which characterises the system. The closer the relation between means and end, the more perfect is the systematic unity. In the most perfect kind of system, the system which appears in the life of a self-conscious being, there is the most complete unity between means and end. This is sometimes obscured by the tendency to regard the end as the last stage in a course of action, and most, if not all, thinkers who lay special emphasis on the element of process in conscious purpose seem to me to be, however unwittingly, under the dominance of this idea. Process for them is process from one thing to another, from a definite beginning, through a series of means to a particular end. The process in its various stages, the successive unfolding of the means, is practically treated as a series or combination of particulars which ultimately culminates in the end. The end is regarded as relatively, if not entirely, independent of the means. You can, it is said, attain the same end by a variety of means. Now, in proportion as you regard the end as dissociated from the means, as external to the means or as indefinitely related to the means, you are approaching the mechanical and receding

from the teleological standpoint. For the extreme mechanical standpoint is one in which process is everything and end is nothing, a standpoint from which the world is regarded as an endless series of distinct elements, so that if you desire to find an end in it, you must simply "stop somewhere," intervene at some point and declare that the stage at which you intervene is the end of all that has gone before. But in no system is end separated from means, and in a self-conscious system end and means are in indissoluble unity. One may even, I think, maintain the apparently paradoxical contention that in the case of a self-conscious being there is only one means to any end. In all our desires and purposes the end is present from the beginning. In so far as the means are realised the end is realised: we do not have to wait for the end until the means are completed. The specific nature of the means is an element in the end; the end, apart from the means, is not the end that we really seek. That the means is often an element in the end is at once evident from the numerous instances in which the pursuit of an object is desired as well as, yet not apart from, the object itself. To take the ancient example, in our purpose of attaining truth the search for truth is itself an element in the end. But, it may be said, there are often alternative means for the attainment of the same end, and we have constantly to choose between such alternatives. Superficially this appears to be true; but I do not think that it will bear examination. All our ends are exceedingly complex. They are ends within ends, elements in a comprehensive system of ends. They are not, at the times in which we desire them, clearly present to our minds in all their detail and in all their complex relations. Indeed, when we say that our end or our purpose is so-and-so, we are referring only to the most obvious or important elements in our end, and not to our end in its concrete individuality. When the end is thus vaguely conceived and comparatively undetermined, the means are correspondingly vague and

indefinite. There are always alternative means to an indefinite end. But the necessity of making a choice between these alternative means impels us to a more full and exact definition of our end. We are compelled to bring into consciousness real, though perhaps subordinate, elements in the end which we had hitherto not clearly conceived. The deliberation which results in our choice between the apparently alternative means is at once a definition of our end and a discovery of the only possible means. Otherwise our choice would in the last resort be unmotivated; we should be in the impossible position of Buridan's ass. I say, *e.g.*, that my end is to arrive at a particular place. There are various ways of getting there, and I can choose between them. Whenever I begin to consider the alternatives I see that my end is much more complex than the general end of arrival, say, in some town. My end is to reach the town, if possible, at a particular time, to arrive at a convenient station, to make the journey at a definite or indefinite limit of expense, to travel with enough comfort to enable me to do some work on the journey, to go through picturesque rather than dull country and so on almost *ad infinitum*. It may not be possible for me, in the given circumstances, to harmonise all these ends, and it may therefore be necessary to sacrifice some of the less important of them. But when my choice is made, the means adopted are the only available means, within my knowledge, for the accomplishment of my end. The end pervades and dominates the means, and this high degree of unity between means and ends is the special characteristic of our self-conscious life.

The unity of a merely organic system is less complete. Its ends are less complex and its organs, as means, are not to the same extent identical with its ends. The organs, as means, are still dependent on the ends, on the organic system as a whole; but the fact that there are separate organs, having more or less definite functions (*i.e.*, corresponding to more or less particular ends) indicates that the systematic co-ordination of the ends is

less intimate, less perfect in its unity, than the co-ordination of ends in a self-conscious agent. The functioning of the organs as means is not necessarily an element in the ends. There is a greater possibility of regarding it as a distinguishable unity of conditions on which the ends depend, although the special adaptation of an organ to its ends indicates that the ends are not mechanically related to the organ, entirely external to it, but are in a sense present in it. In a quasi-organic system, such as that of a machine, the relative independence of end and means is still greater, and in inorganic systems or processes this relative independence is as great as it can be, consistently with the existence of any systematic unity. But wherever we have process leading to a result, we have means and end, and wherever there is means and end there is a certain degree of systematic unity; the end is present in the means in the form of the natural adaptation of the means to the result. We recognise in language the various degrees of unity in the various systems by using the term "purpose" mainly with reference to systems of the highest unity, such as self-conscious systems, and by substituting for it the term "function" as we descend in the scale, while in systems of the lowest degree of unity "function" tends to pass into "property."

Although it seems to me that this systematic unity is the essence and core of purpose, I do not mean to suggest that self-conscious purpose is merely a variant of purpose in its lowest form or degree. The typical system is a self-conscious system, the typical purpose is self-conscious purpose, and it may be possible to construct a metaphysic which shall show that in the last resort the system of the whole universe, comprehending all lesser systems, is a self-conscious system, and that the purpose of the universe is a self-conscious purpose. But it seems to me that in certain current speculations there is a tendency to ignore the less perfect forms of purpose, to treat self-conscious purpose as a peculiar and inexplicable phenomenon, the essential features of which are relative lawlessness, indetermination, and contin-

gency, and thus to misunderstand, not merely the nature of purpose in general, but also the nature of self-conscious purpose in particular. This appears specially in the emphasis that is laid upon selection as an element in purpose. If our attention is directed solely to self-conscious purpose, we tend to regard selection as a more or less arbitrary process, by means of which conscious agents introduce order and unity into a given chaos of phenomena, with the result that we construct a system of scientific and other laws which have a value relatively to ourselves and our purposes, but not necessarily any ultimate validity. Now, selection seems to me to be undoubtedly a most important element in purpose, taken in the broadest sense. For selection means system, not merely, however, in the sense that it is a conscious agency or process, by means of which system is produced out of chaos, but in the sense that selection presupposes system, both in the things selected and in the selecting agent. As a matter of fact, selection appears, not merely in self-conscious agents, but in unconscious organisms. Plants select as well as human beings, and their selection depends, on the one hand, upon the systematic nature and structure of the selecting organism and, on the other hand, upon the nature of the things selected. Similarly, all human selection is dependent on principles, which appear both in the nature of the selecting agent and in the nature of the things selected. A perfectly arbitrary selection, a selection determined by no principles, inexplicable by any reference either to the nature of the agent or to that of the things selected, would be indistinguishable from chaos. And it is impossible for us to select out of chaos. The principles governing our selection are part of our nature as conscious beings. They are not independent of one another, but are systematically related. If this were not so, we should have to suppose chaos selecting out of chaos, an unthinkable hypothesis. Let us suppose, then, a systematic purposive self-consciousness confronting a chaos. Even if its selection depends on its own purposes, it must select in accordance with

the nature of the things it selects. They must be adapted to its purposes, which is to say that their nature must be in systematic relation to the nature of the selecting agent. And if that is so, the supposed chaos is not a chaos, but a system relatively undefined, a system which the selecting agent is, by his selection, rendering explicit. Selection, then, presupposes system, and free selection is not arbitrary or unprincipled selection, but rational selection, selection in which the selecting principles, both in the things selected and in the selecting agent, are clearly recognised in their systematic unity.