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## SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS OBJECT

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It is the purpose of this paper to discuss social consciousness with reference to its function in the development of consciousness of the self and of particular objects, and especially in building up the consciousness of a Group Self or Ideal Personality. The first two problems have had considerable treatment in recent psychological literature, but the further implications of this general point of view remain to be worked out.

It is fairly well accepted that the individual comes gradually to self-consciousness through his interaction with other individuals. Every human being, if he is to live at all, is, from infancy, surrounded and cared for by persons. These persons fit into and help to constitute a social group. The child is nourished, sheltered, guided and disciplined by this human environment. All objects and influences are mediated by the persons near him. His very sensations are determined and modified by them. These persons are the moving objects in his field of vision and are therefore the first to catch his eye and to furnish vivid tactual and auditory sensations. As he becomes old enough to appreciate it even dimly, he finds himself talked to, and talked about, now made the center of attention and again ignored by the grown-ups. He exerts influence over these others by his cries, calls and antics. He discriminates between them and discovers that he has peculiar charms for certain ones. All such experiences contribute to the polarization of consciousness in the ego and alter, the self and others. This process continues to be elaborated through life, at least during any vital contact with other persons. The self is thus always changing in consciousness, and does not attain a final form or completeness. A permanent,

unmodified self would be the counterpart of a fixed and changeless social order, if indeed there could be any consciousness whatever in such an order.

Further light has been thrown upon this operation of social relations in developing the consciousness of self, by the investigations of the actual modes of communication between individuals.<sup>1</sup> The study of language has yielded fruit here almost in direct proportion to the emphasis put upon the dynamic, motor phase of speech. The approach to the more abstract word-symbols from the side of instinctive reactions and sign language has given unity and simplicity to the interpretation of the psychological process. Gesture is the term employed to designate any movement, sign, or vocalization which conveys meaning. In sign language, as in the signals of a train crew, or in the motions and facial expressions accompanying animated speech, the gestures are reduced or 'truncated' until they are often merely vestigial in character. Originally, the vocalizations were quite secondary to the movements and bodily attitudes, as is now the case with dogs and monkeys in their play or fighting; but spoken and written words are so suited to more elaborate and refined communication that they have become dominant in developed human experience. If, then, speech is regarded from the standpoint of the physiological adjustments involved, such as the action of the vocal organs, and the subtle, facile play of facial expression and bodily attitudes, it is apparent that this inclusive use of the term 'gesture' for all forms of direct communication is not forced or arbitrary.

Now, it has been shown that the consciousness of self arises in carrying on this interplay of gesture and response. The particular point in the process where such reflective consciousness appears is in the control of one's own gestures in reference to the gestures or responses of another, or of several other persons. One becomes aware that the other reacts according to one's own movements. One sees himself from the other's standpoint. This entering into the consciousness of other persons and making comparison with one's own, is essentially the social consciousness. In competitive games of skill and prowess an individual is thrown back upon self-analysis to determine how he may direct himself to outwit his opponent or to outdo his best efforts. He may secure the assistance of a trainer and coach. It is their business to help him to become aware of his weak points by viewing himself as they view him. They bring him

<sup>1</sup>G. H. MEAD. 'Social Consciousness and the Consciousness of Meaning,' *PSYCHOLOGICAL BULLETIN*, 1910, 7, 397.

to consciousness of himself by opposing him, by giving him practice in self-direction. He secures by this friendly criticism and testing a familiarity with his own sensations and movements, which enables him to improve and to realize a larger and more efficient self.

The use of oral, and especially of written, speech affords an incalculably great variety of social contacts and associations through which the personality of the modern individual is developed. Such a range of comparison, coöperation and conflict is altogether beyond the limits of sense perception, and is necessarily the work of the imagination. Here, the give and take of actual conversation is repeated among the people remembered and imagined. This dramatic rehearsal and anticipation of actual events in the mind is a genuine social experience and is quite as significant in its contribution to self-consciousness as the original upon which it is fashioned.

If we turn to the accounts given of our consciousness of physical objects, we find that here too the social consciousness is regarded as the determining condition.<sup>1</sup> The only way in which objects come to have significance for us is in reference to our conduct, and that conduct is social in its nature. It is obvious that the individual gets his introduction to objects in childhood, and practically through life, by means of the social medium. The uses of objects, their names, their values and their properties are designated for him. The child's frequent confusion of the labels and meanings of the adult world are amusing to his elders; but with maturity, his mistakes cease to be entertaining. He is required to conform, and if he should still persist in employing the fanciful and chance associations of childhood, he would be deemed unfit to share in the normal world of men and things. He cannot longer call ink-spots, 'buttons'; or confuse stacks of oats with 'dishes of ice cream.' He is bound to regard these and all other objects in the orthodox manner of the group to which he belongs or suffer real inconveniences and penalties. Books must not be apperceived as fuel, nor street lights as targets.

One of the greatest difficulties in realizing this social determination of individual perception is the failure to recognize sufficiently the dynamic, functional character of perception. Owing to our long established, facile habits of seeing, touching and manipulating things, we have scarcely any consciousness of these acts through which alone the objects in the world about us are 'given.' Since the process of knowing them is overlooked, the objects appear to stand

<sup>1</sup> JOSIAH ROYCE. 'Self-consciousness, Social Consciousness and Nature.' *Studies in Good and Evil*, Chapter VIII.

there stark and stiff in space. It seems the depths of metaphysical debauchery to assert that these physical realities have their being in the social consciousness. But when perception is stated in functional terms, the way is opened to an appreciation of its social aspect. Functionally the object is always conditioned by its uses. A sword is a weapon for hewing and piercing the enemy. Hung upon the wall of one's 'den,' it is a shining ornament. If it, and all objects of its class, had never been used except in this way, a sword would have no suggestion of blood and carnage. This principle applies to the inmost nature of steel as well as to its form. The physical properties of it are the formulæ of certain reactions obtained in the laboratory in the solution and statement of the problems of the physicist. 'Steel' is the name for definite forms of behavior, describable phases of experience. Its very hardness is a declaration of characteristic uses. These uses have been generalized, simplified and associated into definite sensations of touch and strain so that we are accustomed to feel of the metal and upon the ground of that feeling to pronounce the object hard. We do not take into account the long, complex and obscure process which has contributed to the facility with which we pass from the sensation to the judgment. The recovery of that process is difficult and, in its entirety, may be impossible. But that there is such a process and, in large part, *what* the process is, have been brilliantly and permanently recorded by modern psychology. Every object perceived *means* something to the perceiver. That meaning is of the essence of the object's reality. To be sure, the meaning may change but that is only to say that the object changes as well as the self perceiving it. All this is only to assert and insist upon the trite doctrine that all objects of our experience *are* objects of our experience, and that it is futile to discuss them, even as existing, outside of this experience. Few persons, however, are able or disposed to analyze and reconstruct in conscious reflection this subject-object relation. And of those professional psychologists who do accomplish it, many are not interested to follow out the implications of the facts. The result is that the naïve assumption of the self somehow related to the brain, with an object over against it, out there in space, continues to fortify the object in its mysterious isolation. Its inner essence is thus allowed a rôle of great importance, though in fact it is a sham and delusion. Its 'substance' is all conditioned—that is, relative—but the conditioning operation is constantly overlooked and an entity is posited as existing in its own right.

Now just as the object possesses and preserves its identity and reality only as an experienced object, so the self for which it is a presentation has its nature and function within a social order, as has been stated above. The case is not adequately expressed by pointing out that the perceiving self is one of many similar selves interacting upon each other. The mind of the individual is a social affair through and through. The instincts of man are social and their fulfillment involves the realization of a group life. All the processes of emotion and knowledge are phases of this social experience. The objects of perception are registrations of these group habits and activities. Their uses and names are fixed by the group's struggle for existence and the accompanying activities. In order to live and be in good standing with his people, an individual must live their life, see nature with their eyes, and keep the ancestral meanings for the things encountered. Departure from this way of viewing the world easily puts one out with his fellows, makes him appear uncanny and dangerous, if not criminal. The control and direction which social acts thus exert in sense-perception is comparable to the social aspect of the formation of language. The latter involves auditory and visual perceptions and motor adjustments. The words are as fixed as the things they designate. They have essentially the same definiteness and objectivity. To the primitive mind, words are real existences as much as sticks and stones, yet these words, to our reflective analysis, are social objects having no reality or function apart from the usage of a group. The physical objects of our environment are dependent to the core upon functional, social experience. The world of nature is our world, not as the possession of separate individuals but as the structure and operation of social consciousness in and through individuals. The self-consciousness of individuals is real and genuine but it has its reality within the social order and within the order of nature, standing related to both of these and they to it, in the manner just indicated.

I have dealt with the determination of finite self-consciousness and of physical things in the medium of social consciousness. I wish now to present some considerations concerning the development of group consciousness and the corresponding Object or Ideal Self, as these appear in reflective thought.

The process by which a sense of the group arises is not fundamentally different from that already described in the case of individual self-consciousness. Indeed the two develop together. The members of a group become conscious of the group as such through experiences

which put it into contrast with other groups, as in war; or the feeling for the group as a whole may arise when coöperation with other groups is planned, as in setting the bounds of the hunting grounds or in the common use of a water supply, or in the exchange of goods. In all such matters, the group is forced to take some account of itself, of its fighting strength, its base of supplies, its ceremonials, its industries and products as compared with those of neighboring peoples. The preparation of a tribe or nation for war is not unlike that of an individual contemplating a conflict with an enemy. There is the same envisaging of the situation, an attempt to anticipate the movements and strength of the opponent, a working up of emotion by recalling the injuries to be avenged and by tasting the sweets of victory in imagination. Perhaps it is in defeat or disaster that the group is most sharply stung into a realization of its needs. At such times the past is reviewed and vivified; old men are counselled; old ceremonials are reënacted; emotion rises to unusual pitch and overflows into channels long in disuse or cuts new paths into adventurous experiments. All such groping about, all such trial and error and partial success welds together the group, gives it a sense of solidarity and of corporate power. It is a significant fact that the group consciousness is most developed among those peoples which have preserved their identity against the greatest odds. The Jewish race is the stock illustration. Their race-consciousness has been strong enough not to give way under the strain of persecution, exile and ostracism, and has been hardened and annealed by these experiences.

Quite different results have appeared among those peoples inhabiting regions where the food supply was adequate and accessible and where neighboring tribes were sufficiently peaceful to require little, if any, military organization. Such conditions prevailed in the life of certain African tribes with the result that they developed scarcely any social coherence. Their customs were slight and insecure, their group-consciousness did not develop persistently and their tribal deities attained little definite character or influence.<sup>1</sup>

It is also of importance to note that the group-consciousness, like the consciousness of self in the individual, grows in the direction of stress and interest. Where war is the conspicuous and absorbing occupation of a people, it becomes conscious of itself as a military group and the attainment of that feeling about itself is registered in its war god. Where the cultivation of rice is a stable and well organized occupation, a rice deity appears. In a country where the

<sup>1</sup> IRVING KING. *The Development of Religion*, p. 95.

appearance of vegetation follows quickly and surprisingly upon the rainfall, it is natural that the alert and taut attention of the group should magnify the rain as god. Drouth and recurring showers, especially when the latter follow upon ceremonials designed to bring rain, serve to establish this religious object more securely. Here probably is the key to polytheism. Polytheism is the natural accompaniment of the numerous social habits or selves of the group. Since these habits have grown up under the pressure of varying interests, they have not been adequately coördinated. They persist within the life of the tribe or nation, alternating in importance and prominence according to the exigencies and fortunes of the group. The attainment of monotheism occurs where the life interests are simple enough or sufficiently unified to express themselves naturally through, and in reference to, one main activity or natural object. Some primitive peoples may possibly represent that status. But the significant monotheism of civilized man is only approached where the group life attains unity in its social organization, and is centered in the person of a monarch. In this type of society, the dominant function of the king has usually been that of leadership in war; but this has generally involved the necessity of caring for the food supply, transportation, public works and the codification of laws with reference to the various interests of the people. The tendency, under these circumstances, has been for the national consciousness to exalt the ruler as its highest objectification, and to deify him. The group then employs this representative, ideal Person, as a means of seeing itself in its moral and practical relations. He is another Self with whom genuine social relations are experienced quite in the same manner as with the individuals of the same or other groups. Thus the social consciousness is extended and enriched.

As the group thus comes to consciousness of itself through the organization and exercise of social control, the Group Spirit gains definiteness and idealization. The imagery and patterns through which the Group Spirit is represented are determined by those interests which are the foci of attention in the actual life of the people. Thus Yahwe, the embodiment of the Group Spirit of the ancient Hebrews, was represented as a Sheep in their pastoral period, as a Bull in a later stage, and finally as a King when the tribes were controlled by judges and kings.<sup>1</sup> It is important to realize, however, that in each instance the emotional attitude toward the object gave

<sup>1</sup> I have sketched this development in my book, *The Psychology of Religious Experience*, Chapter X.

it a significance far beyond what we may call its 'natural' character. The sense of group identity, the sources of material welfare, and the means of victory in war, were bound up with Yahwe under all these forms. Under the monarchy, he took on the new qualities of kingly wisdom and power, which were emphasized by the best interpreters of the national consciousness. As the human king became the agent and medium through which the social organism sought a fuller life, he became the type of that far loftier, wiser and mightier Being, loyalty to whom must determine the final prosperity and destiny of the nation.

This supreme Being or Object of the social consciousness is thus identified with the supreme social values of the group. In a pastoral stage of culture the highest social concerns center in the flocks and herds. The ritual and ceremonial of the tribe reflect this with the full color of life. The Hebrew religion to this day carries in its central ceremonial, the feast of the Passover, its original pattern, in which the supreme object is the Lamb. When the monarchical stage is reached the highest values of the social order are bound up with the wisdom and justice and power of the monarch. These qualities are therefore held to be the essential attributes of the Supreme Being. All the ritual of worship exalts and invokes these attributes, and the most fundamental demands upon the people are to respect and reverence them. In self-criticism, at moments of crisis, the reflective individuals of the group identify themselves with the point of view of this ideal Self, and thus bring their own conduct more clearly into consciousness.

In the very nature of the process here set forth the Supreme Being embodies the highest social values, and is in the highest degree personal.<sup>1</sup> These social values vary among different peoples, but, for a given tribe or race, it is not in the least difficult to determine what they are. It is also true that the degree and quality of personality differ in the deities of these different religions, but they possess all the personal elements which the group has achieved and learned to prize. It is not to be supposed that a group which has not attained to some definite consciousness of itself, and in the individuals of which there is no clear notion of self or personality, should be able to conceive their gods in personal terms. But it is just as inconceivable that the deities should be impersonal at a stage in which the

<sup>1</sup> I am at a loss to understand how this point should have escaped a recent reviewer of my book, cited above. See MARY WHITON CALKINS. 'Defective Logic in the Discussion of Religious Experience.' *J. of Phil., Psychol., etc.*, 1911, 8, 606.



social organism is discriminated, and in which individual consciousness has arisen. All of these phases of consciousness move forward together. It is only in a highly organized society, where there is much specialization of industry and refinement of the arts of life, that individuals of rich and well organized personalities may be found. Likewise it is only in such a social order, and for such individuals, that it is possible to find a highly developed conception of a personal God. It is probably true also that the development of a social consciousness, with the necessary self-conscious individuals experiencing it, involves the conception of a supreme Object, regarded as personal. If our conscious experience is through and through a social affair so that the very objects of physical nature are determined by it, it is inevitable that the Object of the group consciousness should be personal and social.<sup>1</sup> It is also inevitable that the idea of God, if it functions vitally at all, should grow in richness and vitality and not "tend to become faded and washed out as the development of society proceeds."

One is inclined to think that a serious difficulty in the minds of some of the critics of a functional, social psychology of religion is that they regard the explanation of the object as identical with explaining it away! But even Berkeley had a wholesome respect for objects while vehemently insisting that they are merely ideas! Surely no one thinks any the less of the value or importance of human experience since psychology has explained the soul. The explanation, in psychological terms, of the God-consciousness, does not destroy that consciousness. Such consciousness is the counterpart and implication of our social experience, in so far as that experience is organized and vital. Our minds are fashioned in a social medium and our intellectual operations are conversations from first to last. In scientific thinking, the process becomes highly abbreviated and schematic but never wholly escapes the interlocutory form. In moral reflections, where a course of action is sought, the process is often quite simply that of a discussion between the various selves involved, and not without the sense of an Ideal Self serving as an Umpire or Judge. In the experiences characteristic of developed religion this practical, personal attitude is dominant. One enters into immediate and vital relations with the Divine Personality, communes with Him, prays to Him and depends upon Him.

<sup>1</sup>This point is apparently overlooked by Professor Coe in his discussion of 'Religion from the Standpoint of Functional Psychology.' *American Journal of Theology*, April, 1911, pp. 304 f.

There is a radical difference between this attitude and that of the psychologist at the moment of making a psychological inquiry. But fortunately the psychologist is a man who is required to live in a practical way a large part of the time. If he did not know and practice the difference between being a psychologist and a practical man, he would not get through a single day. Suppose he started shopping as a psychologist and gave himself to his scientific reflections at every turn. If he kept to his task, he would probably become so interested in studying the process of perception while standing at the street corner waiting for a car, that he would not be able to get aboard when it arrived! His behavior, however, would not disprove the reality of the street car, nor the fact that other people actually traveled on it.

Our social experience is the basic phase of all our experience. Within it are gradually discriminated selves and things, the social group and the ideal Social Self. All of these are modified and developed with the growth of experience. An understanding of their nature and functions affords control for their further determination and use.