

### III.—MR. BRADLEY AND THE SCEPTICS.

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WHAT is the reason why those who claim to possess some unconditional knowledge of Reality, seek to avoid an encounter with the sceptic? Why are they still content to assume that the only sceptical opponent they have to face is either one who professes to know that "Reality is such that our knowledge cannot reach it," or else one who "condemns all reflexion"—or at any rate careful reflexion—"on the essence of things"?<sup>1</sup> Surely it cannot be, because these are the easiest kinds of sceptical opponent to refute? Perhaps, then, it is the sceptic's fault for having never sufficiently helped the other party to understand his actual objection. And so it seems worth while to make this attempt. Mr. Bradley's book may, I suppose, be taken as containing the latest statement of the strongest justification that can be found for the claim to possess some unconditional knowledge of Reality. The work has been reviewed as a whole by Dr. Ward in a recent number of *MIND*, and it is therefore unnecessary here to attempt any general appreciation of its merits and defects. My object is rather to raise a special question, only using the book so far as relevant to that.

The task would be easier if Mr. Bradley's own assertion of knowledge were less intermittent. Though his main intention appears to be to claim the knowledge and to defend it, there are frequent lapses into the recognition that assertion is risky and knowledge incomplete. Some of his scepticism, indeed, is of the kind he himself derides, the kind which is not genuine but dogmatic. And against this we might, if it seemed worth while, urge the old objection: which have been so often repeated. For if, as he says (p. 544), "in the end, no possible truth is quite true," then in the end it is not quite true that no possible truth is quite true; and so on for ever, like the house that Jack built. Or again, if nothing but error "could answer the purpose of truth" (p. 549), perhaps that doctrine is hardly erroneous enough to answer this useful purpose. But these are probably slips of expression; there are indications, here and there, that he recognises as relevant the genuine sceptical question:

<sup>1</sup> *Appearance and Reality*, pp. 2, 4.

“What do you mean, and what test of its truth would you allow?” He admits at times, for instance, that the Absolute knowledge claimed is “no more than an outline” (p. 548); that Absolute truth is “abstract, and fails to supply its own subordinate details” (p. 546); and, like almost all philosophers, he frequently shows some of the modesty of true scepticism,—a sense of our human ignorance, and an attempt to remove it by labour rather than by caricaturing objections in order to batter them down. Though Mr. Bradley more than once (*e.g.*, pp. 153, 512) refers to metaphysics as a sort of “game,” and quotes (p. xiv.) from his note-book passing thoughts of a somewhat playful kind, the solid work he has done, in Logic and in the criticism of false metaphysics, could only be done by a man who, as he says, “feels in his heart that science is a poor thing if measured by the wealth of the real universe,” and who is anxious to make it richer. This feeling, in any case, is the root of the only sceptical<sup>1</sup> inquiry worth the name. And in two different ways Mr. Bradley’s genuine scepticism seems to destroy his own claim to put forward a positive doctrine. Sometimes it leads him to offer us a self-contradictory assertion, sometimes a tautology. It is the latter result especially that I wish here to discuss, but the former may, perhaps, usefully be noticed in passing.

Surely, to profess that a piece of knowledge is unconditional, and at the same time to admit that it is in any respect incomplete, is a contradiction. Twilight may, as Mr. Bradley reminds us, have a charm of its own, but that does not justify our calling it absolute daylight “so far as it goes”.<sup>2</sup> Twilight is daylight not absolute but obscured by the shadow of the earth, and the same may be said of the darkest midnight; were the shadow away the light would change its character, for us, importantly. How the earth casts its shadow over human knowledge may be seen in one of the supposed truths which Mr. Bradley tries to make us believe about Reality,—that it “is such that it does not contradict itself” (p. 136). The very question whether it does or does not contradict itself gets its meaning only from our human practice of using words, or of thinking thoughts dependent on language. If we mean by Reality all that exists, then to say that it does contradict itself (since it includes all opposites) would seem to be truer, were the

<sup>1</sup> The word is here used as Mr. Bradley uses it in his Preface, p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Appearance and Reality*, p. 140.

notion in any way applicable. But the notion itself fails, in the same way as if we were to decide that Reality is, in other respects, a sort of magnified man. The picture of Reality obeying the laws of human thought is as evidently anthropomorphic as any of the other now discarded pictures of the Deity. It is true that an inconsistent Reality is not intelligible to us; but that is perhaps a reason why we should confess our failure to understand it. Of course, if Mr. Bradley merely means to say that some of our beliefs are sounder than others, there seems no fault—except extreme flatness—to be found with that assertion. But obvious flatness is seldom a fault of Mr. Bradley's remarks.

Flatness of a less obvious kind, however,—tautology, elaborate and well-disguised—is the chief objection the sceptic would raise against Mr. Bradley's doctrine of Reality. Any one who is truly anxious "to become aware of and to doubt all preconceptions" may find one disastrous preconception everywhere pervading Mr. Bradley's work,—the assumption that between a false assertion and a true assertion no middle ground exists. Mr. Bradley's superficial treatment of this question in his *Principles of Logic*<sup>1</sup> is, I think, one of the weak spots in that interesting volume.

Ideally, of course, such middle ground does not exist. If a so-called assertion<sup>2</sup> is really a single assertion, then it must be either true or false. That is what 'a single assertion' means. But when we speak of *actual* assertions (so-called), the case is different. Actual 'assertions' may be complex,—partly true and partly false; or again they may, for lack of meaning, fail to be really assertions at all. If I say, for instance, that Absolute Reality is Absolute Reality, I am (on the face of it) not asserting anything, but only using a sentence empty of meaning. As Mr. Bradley himself remarks,<sup>3</sup> "If this ['A is A'] really means that no difference exists on the two sides of the judgment, we may dismiss it at once. It is no judgment at all."

The question what constitutes an assertion, as opposed to a mere noise, is not an easy one. Like all other questions it easily admits of a verbal answer; but to answer it so as to be able to apply the answer securely in practice, is the diffi-

<sup>1</sup> Bk. i., ch. v., § 24.

<sup>2</sup> The word assertion is here throughout used so as to render the distinction between it and 'judgment' irrelevant.

<sup>3</sup> *Principles of Logic*, p. 181.

culty. For instance, an assertion may have a meaning to its maker, and not to any one else. Whose fault is that? Not always the fault of the assertor. A given audience may fail to see a meaning through stupidity, insincerity, indifference, just as much as because no meaning is really there. Nor, again, is it always the fault of the audience. We agree most fully with Mr. Bradley that many 'assertions' have been made in the name of metaphysics—and even by the gravest, most learned philosophers—which are only "preposterous inconsistencies," "hopeless confusions," "meaningless nonsense," and so on. It is possible, too, that "psychological monsters," "strange scandalous hybrids," "imported chimeras," and other ridiculous entities have sometimes, in the service of metaphysics, been taken for real.

Of verbal answers to the question when does an 'assertion' really assert, there are plenty that may be given. Let us adopt Mr. Bradley's own phrase that "judgment, in the strict sense, does not exist where there exists no knowledge of truth and falsehood".<sup>1</sup> Judgment (or assertion) implies a choice, an act of the mind, an adoption of one alternative where another alternative is in theory possible. We do not really judge, then, unless our judgment is conceivably disputable,—is accepted where it might conceivably have been rejected as untrue. And, though this answer, by itself, is only verbal,—that is to say, does not enable us to make certain, in practice, which 'assertions' are assertions—it has one interesting consequence. If such be the nature of assertion (or judgment) then it follows that the *claim* to be making an absolutely indisputable assertion is a *confession* of using words without a meaning. The claim must be made, however, in a particular manner, if it is to have this effect; merely to call our assertion indisputable may mean no more than that we do not at present see how it can be fairly disputed, or that we fully expect it will survive opposition,—an expectation which every truthful assertor feels of necessity. But the claim which destroys a meaning is made in a more undeniable way, namely, by so limiting the meaning itself as to guard it against all possible risk of being proved untrue. If we were to say, for instance, "The Universe exists," and then to define 'The Universe' as 'All that exists,' we might as well declare at once that "A is A".

The process of limiting a meaning so as to guard it against irrelevant opposition is a very familiar one. It is, of course, the business of every assertor to declare, when necessary,

<sup>1</sup> *Principles of Logic*, p. 2.

the meaning of his own assertions, and especially to guard against their being misconceived by his audience. He is constantly saying, in effect, "I *don't* mean this, and I don't mean that, as you might hastily suppose; such and such a question, however natural or interesting, is irrelevant to the assertion I am trying to make". There are nearly always some questions which may be wrongly supposed to be relevant tests of the truth of an assertion, and to explain that these are irrelevant is to declare and to limit our meaning. Thus, for instance, Mr. Bradley, when he says that "the pleasant is generally good"<sup>1</sup> quite legitimately explains that he does not mean the pleasant "as such"; and so explains that the question, whether anything pleasant is evil, is irrelevant to the assertion he is intending to make.

Now, whatever may be the case with other metaphysicians, Mr. Bradley at any rate, as it seems to us, carries this legitimate process of limiting his meaning, beyond the point at which its value ceases. In attempting to clear the light of his candle, he snuffs it out. He claims to be making an absolutely indisputable assertion about Reality,<sup>2</sup> and it is only by the manner in which Mr. Bradley chooses to limit his meaning that the sceptic is prevented from asking whether the assertion is true. I will not do an injustice to the new Athanasian Creed, given at p. 511 and elsewhere, by taking any one of its various 'assertions' apart from the rest, and attempting to accuse Mr. Bradley of meaning it as opposed to its own contradictory. It is enough for our purpose that *some* assertion, no matter what, is supposed to be made about Reality, and that the meaning of this 'assertion' is declared by its maker to be such that it cannot in any way be doubted. It is somehow meant so as to include all possibilities, since "outside our main result there is nothing except the wholly unmeaning, or else something which on scrutiny is seen really not to fall outside" (p. 519). That is to say, he tells us that A is B, and adds that whatever we may rashly suppose to be the meaning of B, *he* means by it simply A and nothing else,—“the supposed Other will, in short, turn out to be actually the same”. If assertions, undeniably true, could really be made in this manner, how simple the process of reaching undeniable truth would be!

<sup>1</sup> *Appearance and Reality*, p. 404.

<sup>2</sup> *E.g.*, p. 518: "We hold that our conclusion is certain, and that to doubt it logically is impossible. There is no other view, there is no other idea, beyond the view here put forward. It is impossible rationally even to entertain the question of another possibility."

Reality, I might assert, is of a perfectly general shape. Have you the hardihood to doubt whether this is a valuable piece of knowledge? You cannot do so "rationally," since I mean to include under the predicate term *all* possibilities of shape. Your doubt is therefore a "monstrous pretence, a mad presumption under the guise of modesty" (p. 514).

Our quarrel, such as it is, with those who claim to possess unconditional knowledge of Reality is not so desperate as they sometimes try to make it, and is entirely of their making. Except for their indiscriminate attack upon scepticism, the sceptic has no grievance against them. Nor is he in any way interested in misunderstanding them, but is anxious to get from them all the meaning they can give him, and is grateful for so much of it as he can interpret. The position he desires to take is that of the believer in Free Trade; if the interchange of ideas can be reciprocal, so much the better for both parties, but in any case there would be no sense in his excluding theirs. Philosophy, like other things, may be none the worse for being 'made in Germany'. Still, before accepting a philosophical doctrine, we naturally wish to know what it means to assert; and we naturally distrust the uneasy teacher who tries to prevent our putting this simple question.

If I interpret correctly Mr. Bradley's meaning in the passage quoted a few pages back from his *Principles of Logic*, p. 131, he there agrees with us as to the principle—that an assertion made absolutely indisputable by definition is no assertion at all,—though he would doubtless somehow claim for his own doctrines that they do not come under it. That would be interesting, if the claim could be substantiated. But let us be clear about the principle itself,—for this is the only 'positive' element in our whole contention.

We contend that it does not matter whether we use the words 'A is A' or the words 'A is B,' so long as in either case we so define the meaning we give to the second term that it shall not have a chance of being in any way different from the first. In either case we are then using a sentence empty of every trace of meaning. The supposed choice of the answer 'yes' in preference to the answer 'no' is then a mere pretence or illusion; we have not had the two alternatives before us. As Mr. Bradley in one passage<sup>1</sup> remarks: "If the Subject is the same as the Predicate why trouble oneself to judge?"

<sup>1</sup> *Appearance and Reality*, p. 168.

There are other passages, however, in both Mr. Bradley's books, which seem more or less directly to conflict with those I have quoted. For instance, there is the chapter in the *Principles of Logic* on the Validity of Inference (§ 22), where a "direct refutation" of a certain sceptical doubt is attempted. The sceptic is there supposed to be asking the reason for a belief, and the believer to be answering that the belief is forced upon him because really no alternative is open. The true sceptic in this situation is, of course, a very different person from the man of straw whom Mr. Bradley demolishes. We do not say, "I know that some alternative is open," but, "What have you done to make sure that every alternative is closed?" We take care not to say the former because we do not yet know whether there is a meaning at all. We do say the latter because, in the course of our experience, we have met not only with utterers of platitudes but with assertors who catch at the first alternative that presents itself, or who blindly follow a leader, or who through timidity, idleness, violent partisanship, or what not, deal hastily or insincerely with the question what alternatives are open; and sometimes when we ourselves have taken what seemed to us a good deal of trouble to face all possible alternatives, some have been overlooked. Hence we have become distrustful; an assessor's mere conviction leaves us cold; we desire to go behind it and see how it arose. Is it likely that we shall leave off this cautious practice, because we meet with an assessor who perversely misunderstands its object and insists that we *must* be making an assertion on our own account? We assert nothing but our desire to know what he means, and what he has done to guard against error.

To ask what an assessor has done to exclude other alternatives involves, of course, the prior question whether the existence of other alternatives, has occurred to him as a possibility. If he answers, "Well, to tell the truth, I had not even supposed another alternative possible," he shakes our confidence in his result. Still, it is never too late to mend. But if he answers, "I am not merely 'unable,' but I am 'prevented';" I have really made a genuine effort,

<sup>1</sup> P. 537. An attempt is here made to imagine a difference between inability "directly based on our impotence," and inability based on positive knowledge. Ideally, no doubt, the distinction holds good, but how are we to apply it in actual cases? On the next page Mr. Bradley confesses that our positive knowledge "is finite or fallible . . . on account of our inability and impotence". This we also believe to be the case, but then what becomes of the distinction? It remains ideal, and in the clouds.

and so the inability is no fault of mine," then one can hardly imagine that he knows what he is saying. How does a man set about a deliberate laboured search for something which he, at the same time, holds to be inconceivable,—something the very existence of which he forbids himself to recognise? Mr. Bradley informs us on the one hand that the question whether his doctrine is false is an unmeaning question, and on the other hand that he himself has answered it intelligently in the negative. We are open to believe *either* of these statements, but to believe them both is really beyond our powers.

Such being our difficulty, can any one be surprised that Mr. Bradley's pretence of dealing generally with sceptical doubts should seem to us strangely unsatisfactory? The question as to the standing-ground of the sceptic is raised at intervals<sup>1</sup> throughout the volume, and always on the assumption that the only possible sceptic disputes the *truth* of the doctrine (not its *meaning*) and so is "a brother metaphysician with a rival theory of first principles". But it is our own difficulty that we wish to have removed, not merely a caricature of it; there is nothing interesting in seeing destructible men of straw created and destroyed. Our contention is that from a doctrine that cannot in any way be tested, no consequences, other than merely verbal ones, can be deduced. Acceptance or rejection of it, therefore, makes no difference other than verbal. In accepting it, or rejecting it, the sounds we make are different, but the sense (if there were any sense) would be the same. It seems simpler to call such 'assertions' plainly nonsense.

Perhaps Mr. Bradley believes that his doctrine does admit of a test. As we are not in the secret of its meaning, we do not dispute that it may be so; but we complain that all he offers us is, first, a proof that some other metaphysical assertions are self-contradictory, and, secondly (in favourable cases), some evidence that his own assertions are not so. The criticism of the other assertions is often valuable enough; philosophers have, before now, put forward self-contradictory assertions as true. But the mere fact that a given doctrine is not self-contradictory does not establish its truth, —does not even establish its right to be called an assertion, since an empty tautology (like 'Absolute Reality is Absolute Reality') avoids self-contradiction. To put forward consistency as itself sufficient evidence of truth seems to us to rest on a double error,—the supposition that a self-con-

<sup>1</sup> *E.g.*, pp. 1-5, 186-9, 185. and chap. xxvii.

tradictory 'assertion' is false, and that if an 'assertion' avoids self-contradiction there is nothing else for it to be but true. Our view is that a self-contradictory 'assertion' is, while a consistent one may be, no assertion at all.

We do not suppose, of course, that a man writes a metaphysical essay, to prove that the Real is So-and-so, without having a genuine purpose and meaning. One purpose a metaphysician always evidently has, is to contradict some opposite metaphysicians. Any one, for instance, who carefully shows up the inconsistencies of Materialism is very likely doing good work when he keeps to this. It is tempting to add that it is only when the anti-materialistic doctrine "loses its head, and, becoming blatant, steps forward as a theory of first principles, that it is really not respectable. The best that can then be said of its pretensions is that they are ridiculous".<sup>1</sup> But what good can this kind of talk be likely to do? Are Mr. Bradley's party to be frightened by a volley of abusive epithets airily delivered on mere suspicion? May we not rather give them credit for having outgrown these idols of the nursery? Perhaps, after all, they have something intelligible to say. We prefer, therefore, to ask whether they can give us any information about Reality.

Probably Materialism itself has, before now, done some good destructive work. But at any rate we agree with Mr. Bradley that Materialism is a catching illusion—perhaps more so than any other in Metaphysics—and that the failure of its pretensions deserves to be shown whenever they are really put forward. Our complaint is only that no good can be done by pretending not to hear this admission of ours, and so confounding cheap positive metaphysics with our sceptical logical doctrine that unless there is risk of falsity there is no assertion. What are we to think of a man who finds fault with our "pretensions" and at the same time will not allow us to withdraw them? That is surely too artificial a way of picking a quarrel. Is there not something almost fatuous in the supposition that the person questioned is in a position to explain to the questioner what his question means,—can translate the question into a hidden theory of the Universe, and, when that theory is freely disclaimed by the questioner, refuse to listen? It is a way of ending discussion, no doubt; but the same result can be reached by stopping the ears in a simpler manner. How is the questioner to be satisfied by having a question answered which he does not ask? We do not ask whether faults can be found with

<sup>1</sup> *Appearance and Reality*, p. 126.

certain metaphysical illusions; we admit, or rather insist, that they can. Our question is, What test of the truth of your doctrine will you allow to be relevant? If none, that is what we complain of. If you merely say that we cannot disprove it, that is perfectly true,—at least till we know what it means to assert; and we cannot disprove the ‘assertion’ that Reality is Reality, nor even that it is Appearance or Unreality. We are not doubting your doctrine, but inquiring into your claim to possess any doctrine at all. We admit that your phrase may mean something true, but we want to discover what that is. Surely you can give us some hint as to how acceptance of it differs from rejection. Or would you prefer that we should “accept” it without discovering this, and merely because you say it, or because it has a pleasant or lofty sound? Well, if we wanted an oracle, there seems to be no immediate dearth of them, and each one announces himself as the only genuine kind. Pleasanter, loftier sounds are to be heard at a Popular Concert; indeed, music is perhaps a better means of expression than language, for the mind that wishes “to wander aimlessly and to love it knows not what”.<sup>1</sup>

I am, of course, far from wishing to suggest that the question, what we know of Reality, is itself a worthless one. As we view the matter, even our negative knowledge of Reality—our knowledge that such and such an account of it is either nonsense or misleading—has a value. And on the details of this knowledge we find ourselves greatly in agreement with Mr. Bradley. That the Real “sits apart . . . and does not descend into phenomena,” or that “everything is so worthless on one hand, so divine on the other, that nothing can be viler or can be more sublime than anything else,” are phrases whose only possible meaning appears to us, as to Mr. Bradley, absurd and mischievous. The fact that appearances possess true differences of value is accepted by common-sense and by science, and we see no philosophical reason for finding fault with it; if any one likes to add that this “is because the Absolute itself is positively present in all appearance,”<sup>2</sup> that seems to us (when not interpreted as contradicting what has just been said) a perfectly harmless ‘soporific’ way of stating the same fact over again. It involves, too, the corollary that “the more we know of anything, the more in one way is Reality present within us”. We may describe the fact in any way we please, but the

<sup>1</sup> *Appearance and Reality*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ib.*, p. 551.

fact itself remains that we distinguish between (what seem at a given time) true appearances and false ones, and that in that distinction the function of judgment consists. On the other hand, instead of saying that "Reality is our criterion . . . of real and unreal"<sup>1</sup> it seems truer to say that the gradual filling out of our abstract distinction between real and unreal gives us all we know of Reality,—a knowledge progressive in character, and therefore conditional on the stage of progress. It is not through using names, but through using facts, to get behind facts, that we improve our first crude notion of the distinction between the real and the unreal. The abstract distinction itself we cannot destroy till our mental powers disappear in the night of death, or are lulled to sleep in the charming twilight of mystical speculation content with wordy substitutes for knowledge. As soon as we define the Real in such a sense that it includes the whole of that which appears unreal, we are either talking nonsense when we call this 'knowledge,' or else falling into that "shallow Pantheism" which we have just agreed with Mr. Bradley to discard, and which is one of the two errors against which his "pages may be called one sustained polemic". Our desire is that this polemic should be in future even more consistently sustained.

The chief question on which appeal is here made to the reader, is whether Mr. Bradley's indiscriminate attack upon scepticism is justified; whether an assertor is to be allowed to profess knowledge, and then to run away from the question what the value of his professed knowledge is, under cover of a general theory that 'scepticism' is necessarily suicidal. It is only suicidal when it ceases to be sceptical,—when it tries to play the "game" of assertive theory, and so breaks the rules under which the game is played. No human being can force you to play that game, nor make you submit to those rules while you decline to play it. Nor can any one alter the facts of the case by reiterating, with any amount of violence or verbal ingenuity, his disbelief in your disclaimer,—a disbelief which is barely excusable even when it is most sincere. What deceives him is doubtless the fact that none of us can remain sceptics always,—a fact which we admit quite freely. We may even go further, and admit the possibility that at no (appreciable) moment is any one in a purely sceptical frame of mind. But how does this affect the question? It merely allows an irrelevant *tu quoque* to be made: "You doubt my assertion, but are your own

<sup>1</sup> *Appearance and Reality*, p. 552.

assertions indisputable?" The answer is: "I do not say they are, I am not at present concerned with the personal question, which of us knows most about things in general; my beliefs can, if you like, be examined afterwards. Meanwhile the question is, whether a particular assertion of yours has any meaning. Don't let us shift that question until we have got an answer."

There is no way of escaping the genuine sceptical attack made by any one who is determined not to be led away by personalities or side-issues. Of existing attempts to escape, one of the most ingenious is perhaps that which we have here discussed,—the assumption that a self-contradictory sentence is false, and that a tautology can be true. Only an assertion can be false or true, and neither of these kinds of sentence expresses an assertion. The excuse, such as it is, for the false assumption lies probably in the fact that *assertions* (when single) must from their nature, be either false or true; but this is not the case with the actual sentences which profess to make assertions. Some of these evidently express complex assertions, and so say 'yes' and 'no' at once; others appear to be asserting until we inquire exactly what they mean, and then we find their meaning limited away till "you have but one idea" (p. 514). When this point is reached, the meaning vanishes, and we are left with a solemn declaration that Reality is Reality. Mr. Bradley, in one of his sceptical moods, finds a case (p. 117.) where "either the oracle is so confused that its signification is not discoverable, or, upon the other hand, if it can be pinned down to any definite statement, then that statement will be false". That is exactly the complaint we bring against him. When his doctrine is pinned down to any definite statement, it does not seem to satisfy its author's critical mind; and that is the reason, we suspect, that he is led faithfully to keep its meaning undiscovered. The sceptic also is led in the same direction, by the same difficulty,—only he describes the result in a different way.