

THE GENESIS OF THE IMAGE

BY CURT ROSENOW

University of Chicago

In this year of grace, the doctrine that imagery arises at times when other more habitual psycho-physical processes are unable to deal with a problematic situation is scarcely in need of defense. Nor is it my purpose, in the present article, to rush to the aid of the victor, at any rate not without endeavoring to show that he is in need of assistance. For I wish to point out that a doctrine which is capable of being expressed only in terms as vague as the above is an article of faith rather than a scientific explanation. Unless we wish to call a day dream a problematic situation we must admit that, as a matter of fact, imagery arises in profusion at other times also, so that the appeal of the doctrine seems to be based less on factual verification than upon the way in which it fits in with the developmental, genetic point of view. If so, it would seem incumbent upon the defenders of the faith to state their case in intelligible fashion. If the doctrine does not describe the facts of adult life correctly, it should at least give us, as precisely and concretely as possible, the hypothetical conditions which would tend to make the genesis of the image appear if not the necessary result, at least a plausible and intelligible consequence of such conditions. And yet, when I let my mental gaze wander over the relevant literature of the past two decades, I am unable to find anything like such a description.

Take for example the way Angell states the case: "In seeking to detect the appearance—of imagery we must remember that from the outset of life organic activities are in progress and the sensory motor activities in particular are in full swing. Each sensory stimulus is producing movements, which in turn are productive of fresh sensations. It is out

from such a cycle of onward-moving coördinations as these that the image emerges; and—it must be that the image is called forth by some need of the organism which the processes that we have already described are incompetent to satisfy.”¹ But the existence of *some need of the organism* is not, alas, a guarantee of its satisfaction. If I feel the desire to fly, that does not imply that I will at once proceed to sprout wings.²

Nor can it be said that Baldwin’s account of the matter is any more successful. In attempting to account for the origin of memory he says, referring to the neural associative machinery: “Such a process thus started gives to consciousness the picture or image of the object which we call a memory.”³ But that is assuming the very fact we are endeavoring to explain. If association were all that is needed to account for the image, how is it that the sensory material which it brings sometimes fuses into the percept and sometimes results in an idea?

Furthermore, the theory that the image should arise, genetically, at the very point where it is needed, is foreign to the evolutionary point of view (save to those who understand teleology). The image, to be sure, has come to be the tool of human purpose. But it was not fashioned in response to purpose. It happened. And we shall shortly have reason to believe that the situation which gives it birth is more closely akin to the day dream than to the typical problematic situation.

How then did its genesis come about? Before attempting a reply to this question, let us first make sure that we understand its meaning. We are *not* attempting to account for the presence of indirectly aroused sensory material in consciousness. Indirect arousal is not the differentia of the image.⁴ From the structural point of view, we are trying to account for the presence in consciousness of sensory material which

¹ ‘Psychology,’ p. 215.

² The quotation serves my purposes so well that I could not resist temptation, even though it misrepresents the real views of the author. Professor Angell evidently does not intend the above for a detailed explanation.

³ ‘Mental Development in Child and Race,’ p. 286.

⁴ See almost any chapter on perception.

does *not* blend into the perceptual situation, but maintains, so to speak, a semi-independent existence of its own, and which constitutes an *object* not only to the 'artificial' introspection of the psychologist, but also the spontaneous attention of the individual. For if we believe that there ever was a conscious organism incapable of forming images, we *must* believe that *all* indirectly aroused sensory material fused with the only other form of consciousness which we know, the perceptual. What we are trying to explain is the freedom of the image.

But the facts of structure will not lead us very far in explaining other facts of structure. The significance of the image is not to be sought in the sensory clothes in which it is garbed, but in the reaction of which it is an integral part. We may hope, therefore, to shed light on our problem by studying the type of reaction peculiar to the image. Let me say at once that I share the view of those who hold that the ideational response is an indirect, nascent motor response leading, typically, to a delayed overt response. The indirect reaction is the means, the delayed reaction the end. If that view be true we may hope to solve our problem by studying the indirect reactions of the growing, developing child. And our problem is that of bringing an indirect reaction to the focus of consciousness.

Suppose now that the six-months-old infant is hungry and that the food object is not 'present to sense.' In the milder initial stages it is conceivable that the tendency will discharge into more or less overt feeding movements. With or without the aid of centrally aroused sensations that form of behavior may serve to satisfy the hunger for the time being. The satisfaction, however, will be transient, and that mode of behavior is incapable of developing into an efficient method of control. The nascent movement is, in the first instance, a direct action. It is not likely to develop into indirect behavior. Very soon the infant will express its dissatisfaction with the present status of the universe by means of entirely overt vocalization, a mode of behavior far more likely to be attended by success, but not a promising beginning for the development of thought.

Again, let us take the development of the direct movement of reaching for an object, which proves to be out of reach, into the indirect pointing gesture. That is, the child learns that reaching for an object in the presence of others is a means of having its desire satisfied. Such a response is indirect, objectively, from the physical, and direct from the social point of view. That is, the gesture does not directly effect a change in the physical object, the doll, to which it is directed, nor does the child intend that it should. It does affect directly the individual to whom it is addressed. Does this type of indirect response lend itself to the production of free imagery? I think not. I need not argue, I think, that in the presence of the perceptual object any relevant sensory material which association may bring will fuse into the percept. On the other hand, I see no reason why nascent gestures of this character should not occur in the absence of the object and constitute an integral part of the psychophysical need of that object. Those whose ideal of perfection is the logical circle may argue that the child *cannot* react to an absent object until after he has the power of creating imagery to represent that object. But whatever may follow from the logic of definition, it is a fact that much of the efficient thinking of people constituted as I am takes place in just that way. The gesture *means* the object. It does not re-present it.

Now, confining ourselves for the moment to adult consciousness, is not the nascent pointing gesture then the free image which we seek? It is capable of becoming an independent object to trained introspection. To be sure, it is not discriminated as a movement or as an image in the direct (non-introspective) situation in which it occurs. But then that is true of most of the sensory stuff usually classed as imagery. At best the degree to which such stuff is attended to, apart from its meaning, depends very largely on the training of the individual and on the temporary direction of attention. Again, I might object to classing the nascent gesture as an image on the ground that we have here kinæsthetic *sensation* rather than imagery. But such a distinction would depend upon an unproven theory. It is by no means

certain that imagery of all kinds is not due to the indirect arousal of the sense-organ. It is a matter of purely verbal definition whether we call a nascent movement an image, and it is not for reasons such as these that I am interested in the *free* image. So, as a matter of definition, and in order to make my point, I shall define the free image as the 'copy' image which not only means the object but which also resembles it.

Now it is obvious that the nascent pointing gesture does not resemble the object which it means and indicates. It may be urged, however, that it is associated with other, *e. g.*, visual imagery which can and does resemble the object. In adult consciousness such is the case with individuals of the visual type. I must admit this for the case of the adult, but I would contend that it is exceedingly improbable that the first copy image of the child arises in this way. For the nascent gesture, as such, is not at the focus of attention. Therefore imagery associated with it would not find a substantive nucleus upon which to crystallize into an ideal object. It is not the shape or color of the doll which the child desires. It wants to play. Accordingly visual imagery, if it comes at all, will find its place in the dim fringe of consciousness and will fuse into the perceptual situation of the moment.

Let us now consider another type of indirect reaction, speech. Overt speech, which most of us believe to be gestural in its genesis, is like all gesture indirect physically and direct socially. The fact that it carries meaning is quite analogous to the fact that the pointing gesture carries meaning. It differs, for our purposes, from other gestures in that it is an activity which, as a matter of fact, is carried on for its own sake. The child, an hour at a time, will prattle away contentedly, and it is safe to assume that his attention is on the activity. If now this activity is inhibited, say by direct command of authority, the conditions are just ripe, I think, for the genesis of free imagery. For the activity, being pleasurable, will tend to be continued for its own sake, will tend to express itself nascently, and will tend to reinstate the sensory material with which it has been associated, in this

case auditory. The association of this auditory imagery with the gesture is more compelling, more compact, than the sensory material brought by the pointing gesture on account of the practical immediacy of the association. That is, it is separated from the gesture with which it is associated by the briefest interval of time. Furthermore, and this is of greater importance, it serves to continue the ongoing pleasurable activity of the moment. It is successful. It is efficient. It *re-presents* the object because it almost reproduces it.

It will occupy the focus of attention because it is almost a replica not only of the object, but also of the activity which *tends* to occupy it. Indeed it really is a matter of indifference whether auditory imagery accompanies the nascent gesture provided it means to the child what the overt gesture meant. Auditory imagery may help toward this end, but it does not seem to be necessary. The problem of the genesis of the free image is really that of getting an act which is indirect *physically and socially* to the focus of consciousness. My entire point is that it is not likely to get there on account of its future usefulness as a means, but is exceedingly likely to do so if it is worth while for its own sake in the present. The free image at the moment of its genesis is a direct, though nascent act. It becomes indirect later as it becomes a means and is built into our hierarchy of habits.

From the time that the image has gained its freedom and is able to occupy the focus of consciousness as an object, its development scarcely needs sketching. Given a substantive nucleus, associated imagery will fuse into it and will enrich the direct awareness of the meaning and the sensory qualities of our ideas. It may come to pass that visual imagery associated with the nascent vocal gesture, probably along with eye movements, will come to displace it entirely. And, to the extent that our ideas become habitual means rather than ends, their richness will fade and vanish and become schematic.

It is, I think, significant to note that from the very moment of its birth the image bears the stamp of individuality and freedom. Not only does it enable the child to continue a satisfying activity, but it frees it to some extent from the

irksome bonds of external authority. The child who has learned the use and control of imagery has reached the point, for the first time in his life, where he can call his soul his own. For the nascent vocal gesture is indirect physically and *socially*.

SUMMARY

Summing up, our argument is as follows: On the structural side, the peculiarity of the image is that it occupies—or can occupy—the focus of consciousness as an object which, somehow, belongs to a realm distinct from the perceptual. On the functional side we find that the image is the sensory aspect of a nascent activity which, as purposive activity, is indirect with reference to this perceptual realm. In the formation of habits we see that such indirect reactions are not attended to after the habit is well formed. But our habits of thought are never quite so automatic that this can take place. Accordingly we *might* classify all non-habitual purposive activity as thought. But such a classification neglects the structural differentia, the non-perceptual texture, of the idea. The suggestion of the present article is that this structural difference is correlated with the fact that thought is indirect socially, and is a development of the direct social gesture. This suggestion gains additional weight (to my mind) from the fact that, without slighting the old distinction between the objective and the subjective, it brings it nearer to common sense. The ‘objective’ is open to the observation of all; the subjective is experienced by the individual alone. The genesis of thought sketches the coming to consciousness of this distinction. Accordingly it will come to consciousness at a time when privacy of conscious activity *in the presence of others* is of value to the individual.

In conclusion I wish to say that it is not the contention of this paper that the mode of genesis so briefly suggested is the only one possible. I have not aimed to lay down ‘the necessary conditions’ for the birth of imagery. I do hope that the suggestion will be found plausible and intelligible.

After the above had been written¹ the attention of the

¹ The summary was added later.

writer was called to Miss Washburn's treatment of the 'conditions favoring the development of memory ideas.'¹ Although the similarity of Professor Washburn's account to mine is slight, it may be advisable to discuss it briefly. Professor Washburn does not confine herself to copy images as I do, but deals with ideas in general. Nevertheless she feels that attention to the movement is a necessary condition of its becoming an idea. "Thirdly, one of the conditions of the anticipation of a movement appears to be attention to it when it is originally performed. In order to remember a movement, we must have paid attention to the sensations which its performance occasions."² Now whatever may be true of the memory of movements as such, Miss Washburn's statement does not appear to hold of the movements which play an important part in effective thinking. So far as I can see, the eye movements which serve such a function in my own thinking need never have been at the focus of attention until my introspection discovers them. Thus if a certain book is usually to the right of my desk, my attention in actually looking for it will be on the book and on other external objects. The reaction, however, may recur in other surroundings and will *mean* the book. Are such nascent movements ideas? It was for the purpose of avoiding the fruitless discussion of this issue that I confined myself to the copy image. Again, Miss Washburn seems to think that she has solved her problem if she shows that attention has been on the movement when it was originally performed. But it is necessary also to show that attention will be on the movement—I should prefer to say 'on the activity'—as it develops into an idea. That this condition is fulfilled in the case of nascent speech is too obvious for elaboration. Miss Washburn does not mention any specific movements, though her account suggests the wiggling of the toes, the sucking of the thumb, and other infantile behavior.³ It is far from obvious how movements such as these can develop into effective mental tools.

¹ 'Animal Mind,' second ed., pp. 302-307.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 305.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 306.