

## DR. PIKLER ON THE COGNITION OF PHYSICAL REALITY.

By G. F. STOUT.

Dr. Pikler has published in *MIND* No. 59, and also in a postscript to his book *The Psychology of the Belief in Objective Existence*, a hostile criticism of my article on "The Genesis of the Cognition of Physical Reality," which appeared in *MIND* No. 57. His leading motive in attacking me is to defend Mill's theory of permanent possibilities against my objections. Unfortunately, he does not seem to take account of the exact point in dispute. He appears to assume that I have called in question the correctness of the doctrine of "Possible Presentations," considered as an analysis of the nature of matter from the point of view of metaphysical reflexion. This I have not done, because I had no occasion to do so. My sole aim was to trace the genesis of the presentation of physical reality as it appears to the ordinary consciousness: not as it may be modified, and perhaps rectified, by the reflective criticism of this or that philosopher. Now, what I have to urge against Mill is simply and solely, that he has confounded his own philosophical view of physical reality with the view which men ordinarily take when they are not in a philosophical mood. His error is analogous to that of an astronomer who should suppose that to the ordinary observer the sun appears to remain unmoved while the earth moves, because this appearance would be in keeping with astronomical truth. I have indicated in my article—though, perhaps, not with adequate emphasis—that my criticism of Mill had reference to this special question, and to this only. If I had raised any other, I should merely have involved myself in a useless digression. Dr. Pikler's misapprehension of my meaning has led him to require from me a proof that the theory of "Possible Presentations" is internally inconsistent or otherwise untenable as a metaphysical account of the nature of matter. Now, I never had occasion to show that Mill's theory was inconsistent with itself. My whole aim was to exhibit its disagreement with the uncritical view of common sense. I have indicated what I take to be the points of disagreement. Whether they are so or not, must, in the last appeal, be decided by the general consensus of those who have sufficient philosophic training to understand the question.

Let us now turn to the special objections urged against me by Dr. Pikler. I have turned against Mill the saying of Leibniz that a "naked possibility is nothing," taking care to show that physical things are, according to Mill's account of them, in the strictest sense "naked possibilities". Dr. Pikler replies that possible presentations belong to a "certain class of actualities". They are, he says, actual possibilities. It seems needless to

point out that to reason in this way is merely to juggle with words. The mental representation of a possibility is an actual existence, just as the mental representation of a fiction is. But the possibility itself is not on that account an actuality any more than the fiction is a fact. The possibility may, by a strained use of language, be said to be actual, if certain actual conditions exist which only need to be supplemented by certain others in order to produce its realisation. Thus, it would not be altogether nonsense to say that an acorn is the actual possibility of an oak. But Mill's possibilities are not actual in this sense. Are they so in any sense? I can think of one only, and this borders closely on nonsense. We may, perhaps, say that a possibility is actual, because it actually is a possibility, just as we may say that an untruth is a true untruth, because it is truly untrue. If this be the kind of actuality which Dr. Pikler would vindicate for the "permanent possibilities of sensation," I certainly have no wish to gainsay the claim. I claim for myself, however, a similar licence in the use of words. He says that physical things are, according to Mill, actual possibilities, *i.e.*, actually possibilities. I say that they are, according to Mill, actual nothings, *i.e.*, actually nothing. In saying so I am not contradicting Dr. Pikler: I am asserting precisely the same thing.

So far, I have endeavoured to meet Dr. Pikler on his own ground. I must now point out that the issue raised by him has no decided bearing on the only question which I had in view when I wrote my article. Dr. Pikler may, if he so chooses, call possibilities actualities. He has still to show that the kind of actual existence which alone can be attributed to a naked possibility is also the kind of actual existence which common sense ascribes to physical things. Now, the utmost that he or I can do in this matter is to state what we find to be our own experience, and to appeal for corroboration to the experience of others. So far as I myself am concerned, I can only say that when I am directly thinking of physical things, and not merely of metaphysical theories concerning them, I represent them as possessing, independently of me and of other finite minds, the same kind of actual existence which belongs to a thought while I am thinking it, or to a sensation while I am experiencing it. Dr. Pikler gives evidence apparently opposed to mine. But there seems to be a flaw in his method of self-observation. He takes notice of his mental attitude in considering metaphysical theories of matter, rather than in considering material things themselves. He says: "I, for my part, find nothing in my consciousness diametrically opposed to Mill's account. On the contrary, when, ignorant still of philosophy, I first heard these doctrines, they appeared to me as irresistibly true." I can readily believe Dr. Pikler. My own experience on first reading Mill was precisely the same. But would Dr. Pikler conclude, because he was easily and irresistibly convinced by the first treatise on Astronomy which he read, that,

therefore, he naturally thinks of the earth as moving and of the sun as motionless? By parity of reasoning, he ought to do so.

Turning now from Dr. Pikler and myself to other witnesses, I shall adduce two whom he evidently respects, Berkeley and Hume. Berkeley regarded his own doctrine as an assertion of the view of common sense in opposition to the figments of philosophers. But according to him the actual existence of material things by no means consists in the mere possibility of their being presented. It consists in his opinion in their actual presentation, (1) to finite minds, (2) to the Divine Mind. Hume's well-known deliverance concerning the belief of the ploughboy as to the continued existence of his plough, is all the more impressive, because Hume held the ploughboy to be under an illusion. In my article I referred to certain phrases used by Mill, which seemed to me to show that he himself did not always think of physical things as mere possibilities. I now again appeal to the reader to consider this point. Is it likely that any one should speak of a possibility as changing or as occasioning change in other possibilities, unless he for the moment regarded it as more than a naked possibility? Dr. Pikler substitutes other words for those of Mill, more consonant with the general tenor of his doctrine. He fails to see that my contention is entirely based on the particular form of expression which Mill has permitted himself to employ. I explicitly say in my article:—"This criticism applies rather to Mill's terminology than to the real import of his doctrine. The essence of his theory is that physical reality can be shown by analysis to consist in the fixity of the order in which actual sensations occur, and in which possible sensations would occur if we actually experienced them." This explanation is identical with Dr. Pikler's. Against Mill's theory, thus formulated, I bring forward the Kantian distinction between "objective judgments" and "judgments of perception," and I quote the following familiar passage:—"The apprehension of the manifold in the phenomenal appearance of a house, that stands before us, is successive. The question then arises whether the manifold of the house itself be successive, which, of course, no one would admit." Dr. Pikler observes: "This objection can be easily disposed of. That the different parts of the house are co-existent does not mean, according to Mill's theory, that there is a possibility of perceiving them simultaneously, but it means that there are a number of different simultaneous possibilities of presentations from amongst which the individual may select any at will." I agree with Dr. Pikler that this is what Mill meant. I never supposed him to mean anything else. The point of my objection will be best elucidated by an illustration. I can at this moment utter aloud any letter of the alphabet I choose. The sounds of the several letters are for me "simultaneous possibilities of presentations from amongst which I can select any at will". Why, then, do I not regard these sounds as co-existing with each other?

Why does the possibility of series of successive sensations which may at will be experienced in this or that order give rise in the one case to the presentation of physical co-existence and not in the other?

I have now fully dealt with that part of Dr. Pikler's postscript which bears on my treatment of Mill's theory. Something must next be said in reply to his criticism of my own. I am here compelled to be brief. But I hope, at no very distant date, to have an opportunity of considering more at length Dr. Pikler's strictures on myself, and also his own positive contribution to the "Psychology of the Belief in Objective Existence," which I value highly.

I am greatly surprised by my critic's remarks on that section of my paper which is entitled "Antithesis of Mental Activity and Passivity". Why does he say that I regard it as the most essential part of my theory? In the first draft of my paper, which was read before the Aristotelian Society, I dismissed the point with a brief and incidental notice. I did so because I judged it needless to dwell on a topic with which every psychologist might be supposed to be familiar. I afterwards inserted § 5 in my article because I thought that I could state the common doctrine in a somewhat more comprehensive and accurate form than the ordinary one. But, in substance, there is nothing in § 5 which is not very old and very well known. Yet, according to Dr. Pikler, the contrast of mental activity and mental passivity is the discovery only of a "few more modern psychologists". It is, on the contrary, to be found in the works of psychologists of all ages from Plato to H. Spencer. It is at bottom identical with Spencer's antithesis between the "vivid order" and the "faint". It was in Plato's thoughts when he described the vehement influx of sensations disturbing the harmonious motion of the circles of the Same and of the Other. It is more or less clearly expressed in Descartes, Locke, Berkeley and, I believe, in Hume. I must here content myself with a single quotation from Locke: "When my eyes are shut or windows fast I can at pleasure recall to my mind the ideas of light or the sun, . . . so I can at pleasure lay by that idea and take into my view that of the smell of a rose or taste of sugar. But if I turn my eyes at noon towards the sun, I cannot avoid the ideas which the light or sun then produces in me. So that there is a manifest difference between the ideas laid up in my memory . . . and those which force themselves upon me and I cannot avoid having. And, therefore, it must be some exterior cause . . . that produces these ideas in my mind whether I will or no." We may, I think, safely affirm that the antithesis of mental activity and passivity is neither obscure in itself nor neglected by psychologists. So much for the first two facts which, according to Dr. Pikler, are sufficient to refute my view on this particular point. Dr. Pikler's third fact really is a fact—or, rather, it

is two facts. The first of these is that interruption of the flow of ideas is caused by organic sensations and by sudden flashes of thought, as well as by sense-impressions arising from objects external to the body. As regards sudden flashes of thought, I reply that when a thought emerges which is disconnected with the immediately precedent train of ideas there is commonly a felt continuity between its appearance and some previous mental process. If, for example, after I have endeavoured unsuccessfully to recollect a name, the name occurs to me of itself while I am thinking of something else, I then mentally connect the emergence of the name into consciousness with my previous effort to recollect it. It must, however, be admitted that some cases do not admit of this explanation. But these cases are really in my favour. When there is no felt continuity between the emergence of ideas into consciousness and previous mental process, there is a disposition to refer them to the operation of some kind of external agency, *e.g.*, spirits, demons or divine inspiration. This statement is abundantly borne out by pathological evidence. Interruptions of the flow of ideas arising from organic sensations are also in general referred to an agency external to the mind affected. Ordinary variations of the *cœnæsthesis* are attributed to ordinary organic changes, *e.g.*, in the state of the stomach, liver, &c. Extraordinary variations, such as occur in certain pathological cases, are attributed to extraordinary causes, and so give rise to many of the illusions and delusions of the insane. The other division of Dr. Pikler's twofold fact is simply that the order of impressions has a certain regularity as well as the order of ideas. What of that? The beating of a drum may occasion a very regular series of sensations. But it may nevertheless grievously interrupt the inward flow of ideas.

Finally, I have to notice an alleged flaw, which according to Dr. Pikler pervades my whole treatment of the genesis of the presentation of physical reality. The general nature of the objection will appear from the following quotation. "According to Mr. Stout, the child at that age (as soon as it begins to employ coherent sentences) must have got beyond this observation, generalisation and inference;—'An agency operates within me in orderly and normal fashion. It is sometimes interrupted. When this happens, it is the effect of an external agency.' . . . This cannot be correct. In point of fact such observation and generalisation cannot really be performed by the child." The same argument, *mutatis mutandis*, is urged by Dr. Pikler, against every part of my work which he has thought good to notice. In reply, I quote a passage from Brown who long ago anticipated and answered the objection:—"I am aware that the application to an infant of a process of reasoning expressed in terms of such grave and formal philosophic nomenclature has some chance of appearing ridiculous. But the reasoning itself is

very different from the terms employed to express it, and is truly as simple and natural as the terms which our language obliges us to employ in expressing it are abstract and artificial. The infant has the reasoning, but not the terms. He does not form the proposition as universal and applicable to cases which have not yet existed; but he feels it in every particular case as it occurs." Brown's teaching on this point is illustrated and corroborated by the results of modern psychology. Dr. Pikler must surely know how complex are the processes involved in the visual perception of space-relations, as they are analysed and formulated in such books as Wundt's *Physiologische Psychologie*. Yet these processes take place in the minds of children. From this point of view, the workings of a child's mind are very complicated.

I conclude with a personal remonstrance. Why does Dr. Pikler call me a realist? In general, I dislike being labelled, and I have a special aversion to this particular label. It has no meaning so far as I can discover. Bishop Berkeley is commonly said to be an idealist, but he is a realist if I am one.