

## III.—SELF-INTROSPECTION.

By W. R. BOYCE GIBSON.

“Cogito, ergo sum.”—DESCARTES.

“This principle of experience carries with it the unspeakably important condition that, in order to accept and believe any fact, we must be in contact with it ; or, in more exact terms, that we must find the fact united and combined with the certainty of our own selves. We must be in touch with our subject-matter, whether it be by means of our external senses, or, else, by our profounder mind and our intimate self-consciousness.”—HEGEL, *Logic* (Tr. Wallace, 2nd ed.) p. 12.

“For Kant, the moral consciousness . . . is a consciousness of ourselves as universal subjects, and not as particular objects.”—E. CAIRD, *Hegel*, p. 118.

AMONG psychological problems none is more fundamental than the problem of Introspection. Observation is the beginning of knowledge, and the character of the latter will be essentially determined by the character of the former. It is, therefore, of supreme importance that we should keep clearly distinct in our mind three radically different ways of observing, and endeavour to realise for ourselves the true significance of each. We may, firstly, observe objects in their relations with each other ; this is the form of observation characteristic of all the natural sciences. This form of observation we might suitably term sense-perception. It is our habitual mode of observing the world in which we live and move. Secondly, we may observe objects in their relation to ourselves as observers. This form of observation we may call Sensory Introspection. In Sensory Introspection I am interested not in the object perceived, and its objective behaviour, but in the object *as* perceived. This point of view is habitual with the Artist, for instance, and with the Psychologist as analyst of his own sensations. From the point of view of sense-perception, our friend when he stands at the door is the same in every respect as

when, in the same attitude still, he stands at our side. From the point of view of sensory introspection of the visual kind, he is enormously increased in size, and this perspective effect the artist would of course recognise and do justice to in any picture that he drew.

In sensory introspection we observe not only sensation-qualities but images as well. But in both cases what we observe is something which is by its very nature the object of a subjective activity of attention, so that we are able to study it naturally as an object presented to our perception.

We have now to ask ourselves the further question: How are we to observe our subjective activities, the attention, the interest, the felt pleasure, the will to know and to do, our desires and strivings; in a word, the Self as knower, the Self as experient? That there is a difficulty here is generally felt and recognised in Psychological manuals. But the essence of the difficulty is ignored, whilst paramount importance is attached to the subsidiary though related question as to whether such introspection is immediate or retrospective. Can we seize an act of attention and observe it as it is actually in operation? And the answer given is usually to the following effect:—That this is impossible, for to observe the act of attention we must of course observe it as an object, the object of another and a different act of attention; but the original act of attention as experienced was a subjective activity having an object of its own: it was not experienced as an object. Hence we cannot observe the act of attention in the form in which it was experienced; its very nature as a subjective activity prohibits us from ever observing it whilst it is actually active. We can only observe it (let alone study it) in retrospect, through memory, and as an object of a further act of attention.

Now, if we grant that to "observe" and to "observe objects" means precisely the same, that, in fact, there is no form of observation other than the observation of objects, whether in sense-perception or in introspection, we must

perforce acquiesce in what to Psychological Science appears the one inevitable conclusion: we must observe and study our mental activities as best we can in retrospect and as objects, for there is no other way of studying them.

Accepting this position provisionally, let us see what it is precisely that thus presents itself for observation. What are we to understand by "the mental activity as object"? What are we to understand, for instance, by "an emotion as object," or by the "self," or "the knower" as object? The true consistent answer is, in effect, given by Professor James. I call it consistent in reference to the assumption that "observing" and "observing objects" means precisely the same thing. "To the Psychologist, then, the minds he studies are *objects*, in a world of other objects. Even when he introspectively analyses his own mind, and tells what he finds there, he talks about it in an objective way . . . and if this is true of him when he reflects on his own conscious states, how much truer is it when he treats of those of others?" (*Principles*, i, p. 183.) James, therefore, accepts the postulate in question as fundamental and final for Psychology.

We have now to consider the logical consequences of accepting this postulate as final. "It is difficult for me," says James,\* "to detect in the activity (*i.e.*, in the feeling-consciousness I have of my own central active self) any purely spiritual element at all. Whenever my introspective glance succeeds in turning round quickly enough to catch one of these manifestations of spontaneity in the act, all it can ever feel distinctly is some bodily process, for the most part taking place within the head." . . . "In a sense," he adds, "it may be truly said that, in one person at least, the 'Self of selves,' when carefully examined, is found to consist mainly of the collection of these peculiar motions in the head or between the head and throat." †

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\* *Principles*, i, p. 300.

† *Ibid.*, p. 301.

“ I do not for a moment say,” he goes on, “ that this is *all* it consists of, for I fully realise how desperately hard is introspection in this field. But I feel quite sure that these cephalic motions are the portions of my innermost activity of which I am most distinctly aware. If the dim portions which I cannot yet define should prove to be like unto these distinct portions in me, and I like other men, it would follow that our entire feeling of spiritual activity, or what commonly passes by that name, is really a feeling of bodily activities whose exact nature is by most men overlooked.”

What Professor James thus tentatively urges as his own conviction might have been absolutely laid down as the necessary result of the postulate he starts from. The “ self of selves,” to be psychologically observed, must be observed as an object, as an object of some subjective activity of attention. As such it cannot, therefore, be a subjective activity. Hence since, by hypothesis, our whole knowledge is logically restricted to a knowledge of objects, we can have no psychology of the Self except as an object among other objects.

It may be argued that it is surely not necessary to apprehend the self-object as a complex of sensations, though this may seem the natural thing to do ; that we may have an innate feeling-consciousness of thought-universals, for instance, as well as of sense-particulars, and that sensory Introspection is only the more obvious form that Presentational Introspection, as we may more generally call it, takes. There is no reason, it is said, why this immediacy of direct contact with an object should be restricted to a sense-immediacy. Professor Bailie himself asks the question, “ Why should not an ideal be immediate as well as a feeling ” ? But even if we grant this and admit, in addition to sensory Introspection, this other form of the introspective observation of psychical objects, we have really gained nothing, so long as we insist that awareness of anything must be awareness of it as an object. For the thought-universal as an object is not a living thought. It is

examined *post mortem* for the very reason that it is examined as an object, and for the very same reason we can study it only from the outside. Hence if the self as object does not reduce itself to a complex of sensory experiences, it must be reducible to a complex of thought-abstractions, which is rather the worse fate of the two. But how a thought-abstraction can be recognised as a subjective activity, and so represent it in any way, remains a blank mystery to me. I do not, of course, say that this is the way in which we actually *do* represent ourselves to our own reflective observation. For our observation is habitually of ourselves *as* subjective activities and not as objects. I shall return to this point presently in connection with the problem of self-retrospection. My contention is simply this, that if we lay it down as a canon of observation that we can observe nothing except as an object, then we are logically cut off from self-knowledge in any true sense of the term. Self can logically mean to us nothing more than a complex of sensations or abstractions, *i.e.*, a not-self. That the self *does* mean something more than this is the sure indication that the assumption we started from is unsound, and our result may be regarded as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Psychology of Self-consciousness founded upon it. Nor can the intrinsic limitations of a psychological enquiry be urged in defence. No experience that is personal in its nature can, *quâ* personal experience, be altogether ignored by Psychology, least of all when the experience in question is the most central and vital of all. Psychology is the science of personal experience and not a mere *method* or *point of view*, destined to perish with the inadequacy of its method or the instability of its standpoint. Personal experience, *quâ* experience, is its subject-matter, and if one method is not enough for its purposes, it must try another, and not faint helplessly away into the arms of Metaphysics.

This unnatural abdication on the part of Psychology appears quite peculiarly ridiculous when the Metaphysics that usurps its office proceeds upon the very same assumption.

The Kantian philosophy, for instance, labours under this very disability. When consciousness of objects through the Categories ceases, no further knowledge is possible. Such is the conclusion of the Critique of Pure Reason. And the Self or Knower for Kant, is knowable only as a logical pre-supposition, as the logically indispensable unifying centre of experience.

Indeed, the logical answer to the question whether mental activities can as such be known at all, is, on the assumption in question that to be known at all they must be known as objects, simply this: They are unknowable. Here, again, we find Professor James, with admirable consistency, endorsing the inevitable result of his own postulate. "It seems as if consciousness as an inner activity were rather a postulate than a sensibly given fact, the postulate, namely, of a knower as correlative to all this known" (*Elementary Text-Book of Psychology*, p. 467). A recent writer and apologist of the assumption, himself a member of this Society, has most effectively stated this same conviction in the following terms:—"In knowing we never know our mental states, as mental states, any more than in seeing we see the organ of sight . . . . Mental states are not facts of which we are aware, but ways or modes in and through which we become aware." This view we may briefly sum up as follows:—"Knowledge of a world is possible. Knowledge of self is not possible." But how in that case we can know that the world is presented to a self, as we habitually suppose, remains an enigma. The very statement appears to me to be self-contradictory: the "we" should surely be cut out, and mental states described as ways or modes in and through which awareness, as an objective fact, takes place.

An attempt has been made to abide doggedly by the assumption in question and to elude at the same time its inevitable consequences. We cannot *know* our mental activities, it is still argued, but, it is added, they are not therefore inexperienceable, for we can experience what we cannot possibly know at all.

With this ingenious evasion short work can be made. It is quite true that experience is more than knowledge: it is also feeling and action, but it is equally true that there can be no *experience* without at least some rudimentary knowledge or awareness. Hence we cannot experience what is intrinsically unknowable, and this is what we are asked to do.

There is, therefore, no choice but to accept Mr. Bradley's contention that we may and do experience our subjective activities *quâ* subjective activities.

As Mr. Bradley properly insists, this view simply endorses the obvious facts of Self-Knowledge as an introspective process. "In desire and conation," he says, "the felt presence of a self, which is not experienced wholly as an object (at any rate), seems, really, when we reflect, to stare us in the face."

And yet there seems an ingrained objection, on the part of most people, to bow down to the inevitable. The prejudice, fostered so long by the non-introspective character of our ordinary observation, that the observed must be an object, is so deep-rooted that the plainest facts seem unable to overthrow it. Not only is the whole method of the sciences of observation based upon it, but the whole practice of our ordinary consciousness as well.

We must, therefore, make an effort to present this fact of self-consciousness to ourselves in as simple a light as possible.

The thesis I desire briefly to maintain is, that there can be no true Psychology of Self-Consciousness unless the point of view of the experient himself is frankly and fully adopted. The essential differentia of this point of view is that it observes subjective activities in their own true nature as subjective activities; and the form of observation characteristic of this point of view is simply Self-Consciousness in its immediacy. Such Self-Consciousness is the consciousness of self as self. It is Self-Immediacy in the only true sense in which that word "Immediacy" can be used when consciousness of subjective activities is in question. Such self-immediacy is referred to

both by Aristotle and by Hegel as the thought of thought, in that sense of the expression in which thought is its own object. The real meaning of these masters of mind is clear enough, but the expression is unfortunate. For we saw that when such reflection upon itself in objective form was attempted the thought observed was no longer a real living thought, but, logically, a dead abstraction or else the mere sensory husk of itself; the thought of thought must be conceived as a form of self-realisation. And this is, I think, practically admitted by Mr. G. E. Moore when he says that to be aware of the sensation of blue is "to be aware of an awareness of blue; awareness being used in both cases in *exactly* the same sense." (*Mind*, "Refutation of Idealism," p. 449.)

Self-consciousness, then, as the true and ultimate form of psychical observation, is the self's observation of itself as such. Such observation may very well be retrospective. It is incontestable that we may profitably study an emotion *quâ* subjective emotion, or an interest-process as conative, by reviving it in memory. And the true significance of this Self-Retrospection is not easy to grasp. Still, I am very strongly inclined to think that the one simple and right solution here is that just as Self-Introspection is realisation, so Self-Retrospection is—with diminished "warmth and intimacy" perhaps—a re-realisation, a re-realisation, of course, under new conditions. In other words, not even in self-retrospection do we as a matter of fact set the self before us as an object—view it as a sensory complex, *i.e.*, or as an abstract activity that is neither us nor ours—but must re-realise our past self in order to introspect it. Sensory Retrospection, as a process, is undoubtedly, as Dr. Maher pertinently insists in his *Psychology*, always a present act of introspection; it is only the time-label of the content studied that is the differentia between Intro- and Retrospection. And it seems to me that as regards the distinction between Self-Introspection and Self-Retrospection, this again, as in Sensory Introspection, is the only differentia.



In both cases the mode of Observation through *Realisation* remains the same. For to re-realise is still to realise.

The statement that I *am* my own mental activities and am, therefore, immediately aware of them, not as an object, but as myself, may not appear at first sight to be very illuminating. And yet it expresses the fundamental truth of the oneness of thought and being in its most radical, vital, concentrated, though least developed form. For in the dictum of self-consciousness as above enunciated we have an awareness that is not the awareness of anything that stands in any external relation whatsoever to itself. It is an awareness which is at the same time a realisation—a consciousness in which one is conscious not of, nor yet through, merely, but in and through, in intimate company with, one's own existing self. Self-consciousness, in fact, or consciousness of one's own mental activity in any form, is not a relation between subject and object, but the existential oneness of the subject that knows and the subject that is. It is self-realisation in its immediacy. Or, to put it in a slightly different form, whereas in sensory Introspection the sensory content, be it sensation or image, is *presented* to the introspecting subject, in self-consciousness the spiritual or active content is *present* to the introspecting subject, present to it as itself. This spiritual or active content may be very suitably referred to as "subject-matter." That the term "subject," as in "subject of discourse," should have become so interchangeably confused with "object" both in philosophical and in popular language is, I fancy, significant testimony that contents of consciousness may be either subjective or objective.

The bearing of this central distinction on the meaning of "experience" may here be briefly referred to. When experience is conceived as consisting essentially in a relation between Subject and Object, we can have in view only that experience which is limited to a consciousness of objects, including the so-called "self" known as an object. This we may call

Conscious Experience, and define it as consisting essentially in a relationship between subject experiencing and object experienced. Self-conscious experience, on the other hand, is from the point of view of the introspecting experient, primarily and radically a relationship between subject and subject. As such it resembles the experience which consists in a consciousness of objects in this, that it is a relation between thought and being, but it is not a relation between Subject and Object, "Thought and Being" is, therefore, a relationship which includes that between Subject and Object as a special case or stage in its development.

Finally, it may be worth while reminding ourselves that the mutual relations between experienced objects are not for us who observe them a form of experience at all. In studying these relations, as science does, we are not studying experience, but nature.

#### BEARING OF THE FOREGOING ANALYSIS ON THE STARTING-POINTS OF DESCARTES AND OF HEGEL.

Descartes' own detailed account, on the lines of an auto-genetical method, of the way in which he won the central truth of his philosophy, and of the significance which that truth had for him, may be familiar enough. I believe, however, that it is only when we clearly realise that self-consciousness means awareness of subject as subject, the immediate oneness of the self that knows and the self that is, that we can claim to have realised afresh for ourselves what was so vividly present to Descartes when he wrote the *Discours* and the *Meditations*.

Descartes' first pre-occupation, through the whole course of that methodical doubt whereby he eliminated from his belief whatever could even be fancied or imagined as untrue, was to reach an *inconcussum*, an unshakeable certainty which should lie beyond the possibility of doubt. We know how, when doubt could doubt no longer because it had nothing more to doubt, Descartes drew forth the certainty he was seeking from the

very activity of scepticism itself. All objects we can possibly think or imagine—so his argument substantially runs—may be illusion; but, he adds,\* “from the very fact that I am conscious of doubting everything, it follows with the greatest evidence and certainty that I exist,” *i.e.*, my consciousness of myself as doubting is my consciousness of myself as existing. So again,† “so long as I am conscious of being something, no amount of deception can rob me of my being,” *i.e.*, “I am,” and “I am conscious that I am,” mean the same thing.

It is important to notice that neither in the *Discours*, nor in the *Meditations*, nor in the *Principles* does Descartes base his insight on the principle of Contradiction. He does not argue that the very denial of reality is in itself an affirmation of it *quâ* act of denial, and that to deny this is to stultify the original denial that anything was real; seeing that we then deny reality to everything and yet admit that this denial may be itself illusory, and therefore that real to which we have already denied reality. Nothing is real in short, yet all may be real, and this is self-contradictory. This is the modern consistency-logic which threatens to reinstate on its old pedestal, though in other guise, the formal logic of Scholasticism. I am personally convinced that, when taken as our sole guide, it cannot lead us beyond the dreary conclusion—which cannot be gainsaid, but produces scant conviction—that appearance and reality are correlative terms, or that illusion pre-supposes reality in one sense or another. It has a subordinate negative function of great value. But it cannot justify our direct intuitions. Experience and positive knowledge based upon experience can alone do this. Criticism cannot take the place of philosophical construction.

Descartes, the mathematical rationalist, realises this quite clearly, for he avoids any pretence of basing his conclusions on the principle of self-contradiction. He appeals to the intuition

\* *Œuvres de Descartes* (ed. Jules Simon), *Discours*, p. 22.

† *Meditations*, p. 72.

of self-consciousness.\* “After having thought long on the subject and carefully tested everything, I find that I am bound to affirm that the proposition, “I am, I exist,” is true whenever I conceive it in thought or express it in words.” To think of my existence, *i.e.*, is *eo ipso* to exist. So again, † “We are unable to suppose whilst we doubt the truth of everything that we are non-existent, for we feel such repugnance in conceiving that that which thinks does not truly exist whilst it thinks that we cannot help believing that this conclusion, ‘I think, therefore I am,’ is valid.”

With Descartes then the proof that his own Thought and Being were identical was a matter not of argument but of immediate experience, and the only guarantee he can offer of its certainty is the clearness and distinctness with which he intuitively apprehends the fact.

Now this immediate realisation of the oneness of his thinking and his being is certainly conceived by Descartes as a unity of subject thinking and subject existing, and not as a unity of subject and object. Let us carefully consider this point. When Descartes says, “I think, therefore I am,” he is using the word “think” in its most general sense, as equivalent to “I am actively conscious. (*Cf. Principles*, section 9, where he defines “thought” as the immediate experience of self-activity in any of its forms.) Now it has been objected to Descartes’ statement here that it is elliptic and should have read, “I am actively conscious of an object, therefore I exist.” I cannot see the justice of this criticism, for in so far as we are actively conscious of objects, we are absorbed in the object and do not realise our existence as thinkers with any particular explicitness. I should rather fulfil Descartes’ dictum as follows:—“I am actively self-conscious, therefore I really exist.” In order to see more clearly that Descartes’ *cogito, ergo sum* means for him the founding of Philosophy on the rock of Self-

\* *Meditations*, p. 72.

† *Principles*, p. 53 (ed. Brochard).

consciousness, let us suppose that it simply meant for him that it was in clearly setting his thinking self before him as an object of reflection that he became aware at last of something that he could not doubt. The suggestion is absurd. This object, like all other objects, might well be an illusion, and would be swept away as untrustworthy, together with all objects or possible objects. Moreover, Descartes' discovery is of the nature of a realisation, of a spiritual intuition; his appeal is to what is inmost in experience. His whole contention is that in and through this intuition he sees clearly revealed to him the true nature of spirit, and this contention would be meaningless if the consciousness he were considering were being considered *against* nature, as an object.

We seem bound to conclude that through his *cogito, ergo sum* Descartes took the great step of identifying modern philosophy with a philosophy of self-consciousness, rooted in the felt immediacy of thought and being, leading men to knowledge in all its fulness through the gates of Self-Introspection.

Of the many limitations and inadequacies of Descartes' own development of this point of view it is not our business here to speak. Hegel's own criticism of Descartes in the fifth chapter of the *Encyclopædia-Logic* goes essentially to the root of the distinction between the standpoints of Descartes and himself. The discussion which deals with Immediate or Intuitive knowledge is levelled primarily at Jacobi's *Philosophy of Faith*, but to Hegel Jacobi was only a weak reflection of Descartes.

"The language of Descartes," \* writes Hegel, on the maxim that the "I" which *thinks* must also at the same time *be*, "his saying that this connection is given and implied in the simple perception of consciousness—that this connection is the absolute first, the principle, the most certain and evident of all things, so that no scepticism can be conceived so monstrous as not to admit it—all this language is so vivid and distinct

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\* *Logic*, p. 128.

that the modern statements of Jacobi and others on this immediate connection can only pass for needless repetitions."

It might seem misleading to assert that the Cartesian and Hegelian philosophies spring from one and the same common root, and yet I believe that this is the strict truth of the matter. Both are philosophies of self-consciousness. The essential difference between them is that what to Descartes is an *inconcussum*, having vast value in itself, and leading at once to a dualistic doctrine of substance, is to Hegel the first suggestion of a dialectical movement whose whole value consists in its systematic articulation. Admitting with Descartes that the immediacy of self-consciousness is the great fundamental of philosophy, he would go on to define a fundamental as that the whole value of which lay in the nature of the superstructure it found itself adequate to support. Or to change the metaphor somewhat, the convictions of immediacy, he would hold, must be tested through their power of self-development. Not that this dialectic removes us in any way from the immediacies of self-consciousness. Hegel contends vigorously that the immediacies of developed self-knowledge are far more vitally immediate for thought than are the blank immediacies of self-consciousness. Indeed if self-consciousness does not proceed to self-knowledge through self-alienation and self-return it can do no more than idly reiterate its own satisfaction with itself. In a word—for method is the key to principle—Descartes' method is mathematical with axiomatic starting-points; Hegel's method is dialectical, and its starting-point is never more than the first germ of which the whole developed system is the fruit and established truth.\* "The apprehended idea of the whole is no more the whole itself than a structure can be said to be complete when only its foundations have been laid. When we want to see an oak tree with its mighty trunk, its spreading branches and its thick foliage, we are not satisfied when in its

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\* *Phenomenology*, p. 10.

stead we are shown an acorn. In the same way, the completion of science (*Wissenschaft*), the crowning achievement of mind, cannot be found in its first beginnings." Each stage of the growth, each movement as it were away from the first inspiring vision, reveals truth, not less, but more completely.\* "The bud vanishes when the flowers break forth, and one might say that the former was negated by the latter, just in the same way as the fruit declares the flower to have been a false existence and steps into its place as the truth. These forms are not only distinguished from each other, they crowd each other out as mutually incompatible; yet their fluent nature determines them at the same time as moments or stages of the organic unity in which, so far from contradicting each other, they are one as necessary as the other; and it is in and through the equally necessary character of all the stages that the life of the whole is first constituted."

Waiving, however, this essential difference in method, we return to the essential similarity in starting-point which characterises the two philosophies. Hegel's conclusion as to the essential nature of that perfect experience with which the *Logic* starts, † and of which it is the systematic articulation is identical both with that of Descartes' *Cogito, ergo sum* and with that which we reach through a psychological analysis of self-consciousness. It is, as Hegel repeatedly puts it, that form of experience in which thought is at home with itself, since its object is felt to be unreservedly one with itself. And surely only one meaning can be given to this unreserved absolute oneness of subject and object. It is that unity in which the so-called object of thought is really no object at all, a content *present* indeed to the experiencing self but not presented *to* it. It is that immediate oneness of thought and being in which self-realisation consists.

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\* *Phenomenology*, p. 4.

† This oneness of thought and being is, as we have said, presupposed (not asserted of course), in the very first page of the *Logic*.