

VI.—DISCUSSIONS.

EXISTENCE AND CONTENT.

BOTH in the *Principles of Logic* and in *Appearance and Reality*, Mr. F. H. Bradley has demonstrated the fundamental importance for Logic and Metaphysics of the problem involved in the relation of "existence" to "content". In it the keynote to his own system of thought is to be found: with it T. H. Green, in his treatment of "feeling" and "relation" vainly strove: Kant, himself, under the caption of "Sensibility" and "Understanding" found there the pivotal points of the theory of knowledge.

In continuing the investigation of this problem we shall assume several positions advanced by Idealistic philosophy. (1) Reality can be stated, and consequently has meaning, only in terms of Experience. (2) By Experience is meant not the mere private and limited Experience of any finite individual but the absolute medium to which investigation of the final structure of Reality leads us. (3) Knowledge is the instrument by which Reality is definitely determined for us.

As Mr. Bradley's formulation of the problem is recent and most exact, we shall use his treatment as the starting-point of our own investigation. His difficulty may be stated thus. The recognition that Reality and Experience are identical leaves us entirely in the sphere of indeterminate existence. We know that Reality is found in every aspect of experience, but its *determinate* characteristics are not thus revealed to us. Reflexion upon "existence" is required before its indeterminateness is reduced to the definiteness and coherency of "content". But "content," however determinate, is constructive. Its meaning is embodied in abstract universal ideas. Knowledge therefore is essentially a process of substituting *general symbols* for the concreteness and fulness of immediate experience. Furthermore "content" is always fragmentary and is developed piecemeal. Accordingly, to Mr. Bradley's mind Knowledge appears to mutilate the given Real. Were it even thinkable that Knowledge could overcome its fragmentary nature, the difficulty would remain that "content" is altogether abstract and general. Knowledge is hopelessly infected, constitutionally diseased. The difficulty is fundamental, involving every aspect of meaning from the simplest to the most complex. No

category, even that which involves the barest determinations of Being implicated in the distinction of a "this" from a "that," can escape. Mr. Bradley is driven to the conclusion that Knowledge is a perversion of experience: "content" conceals instead of exhibiting Reality.

And it is not to the point to maintain, as do certain members of the Idealistic school, that the reflective transformation, which "existence" undergoes in thought exposes a more complete and inclusive Reality. Such argument errs in mistaking determinate, conceptual meaning for concrete individuality. The source of the error is found in an unconscious equivocation in the use of the terms *determinate* and *inclusive*. Looking toward the desired outcome of their thought, these Idealists use the terms as meaning something more concrete and individual than what was previously had in mind. For them, indeed, to be determinate and inclusive is equivalent to being concrete. The single, determinate, all-inclusive Reality of Green, Bosanquet and Caird is intended to be quite concrete. In fact, however, it is a highly organised concept, and is therefore essentially abstract. The original Totality was concrete but indeterminate: the reflective Whole is determinate but symbolic. In the process of transformation the individuality of the *given* has escaped. This result is veiled from the above-named writers in several ways. First, by the dialectical conviction that to determine experience ideally is equivalent to revealing its concreteness. Second, by the device of including the particular as well as the universal within the movement of the dialectical transformation. We are reminded that if percepts without concepts are blind, it is equally true that concepts without percepts are empty: particular and universal are essentially correlative and equally valid. Now this may be quite true, and yet the difficulty raised by Bradley remains unanswered. For when we look more closely into the arguments of the writers above mentioned we find that the second leads back to the first and the first to the defect indicated by Bradley. It may be admitted that percept and concept, particular and universal, are correlative. We may go so far as to insist that the *meaning* is identical in both, and that the distinction rests upon the use to which it is put. Meaning used freely and apart from its original embodiment is conceptual: meaning embodied in some individual aspect of experience is perceptual. The more definitely we set ourselves to the determination of meaning, the more do we overlook the individual embodiments of ideas and tend to set up the organised symbol of reflexion as ultimate Reality. For this reason it is correct to say that the all-inclusive Reality of Green and others is no more than an all-inclusive Concept. No doubt these Idealists desire to retain concreteness. Although Green's thought is somewhat elusive upon this point, still one can find an indication in his writings that the Absolute somehow includes the immediacy of feeling with the mediacy of thought. But to such a result his method

does not entitle him. For if the Real is to be constituted by meaning, if the indeterminateness of felt experience inevitably resolves itself into the determinateness of relational experience, this Ideal Whole must be taken as the final Reality. Of this necessity Green appears to have been conscious to a certain degree. Throughout his work he endeavours consistently to reduce feeling to relation, while, at the same time, he appreciates instinctively that immediacy must be *included* and not *reduced*¹ within the Absolute.

This unsolved problem of Green forms the starting-point of Bradley's contribution to English speculative thought. While admitting the value of Green's work, he insists upon its limitations. He recognises that if meaning *constitutes* Reality, thought inevitable falls into contradictions. In the first part of *Appearance and Reality* he has applied this insight in detail, and has shown specifically that the fallacy of substituting the abstract for the concrete leads universally to the dialectical illusion which causes us to take regulative principles for metaphysical entities. Substantive and Adjective, Relation and Quality, etc., when set up as absolute, contradict themselves and turn out to be mere Appearance. Meaning is relative; it is Appearance and not Reality. This is the burden both of *Appearance and Reality* and of the *Logic*. Meaning cannot constitute Reality; for every endeavour to substantiate it lands us in hopeless contradictions. For this reason Bradley recognises a distinction between "existence" and "content". "Existence" is direct and immediate experience, experience felt and not reflected upon, the inexhaustible storehouse of reflective construction. "Content" embodies the results of reflective activity. In its completeness it is determinate and inclusive but abstract. Meaning realises itself in symbols. It sacrifices colouring to definiteness. As matters stand, therefore, we must admit the point of Bradley's contention. Reflexion is essentially a transforming of the immediate and given. It is also a substituting of a fragmentary though definite experience for that which was more complete though quite indefinite. It may be that a reason for such high-handed procedure on the part of Reflexion can be given, but it must be admitted that such a reason is required. To grant the contention, however, is to admit that meaning cannot *constitute* Reality. This raises a further question: "Has meaning a legitimate function?" At first it might appear as though Reflexion were essentially destructive. If we take the position that Reality resolves itself into meaning, then we must admit that thought involves itself in hopeless contradictions. If again we measure meaning in terms of the immediately given, we shall be forced to accept Bradley's contention that thought mutilates Reality. If still further we recognise that the difficulties and contradictions of thought are brought to light through the operation of thought, we shall be led to think that some solution of the difficulty is possible. But this solution

¹ Cf. *Prolegomena to Ethics*, p. 51, § 50.

may be sought in various ways. We may postulate with Bradley an inclusive immediate Experience in which the contradictions and discrepancies of reflective thinking are overcome and shown to be somehow real contributions to the active life of the Whole. Such a standpoint, however, can never lead us beyond the conviction that somehow or other the diremption effected by thought *must* be made good. To Bradley's mind the solution can never be given properly until the content of the Whole is grasped in an immediate perfect way: knowledge in other words is validated only in the Absolute. For us it must remain hopelessly infected, constitutionally diseased. If the nature of each factor is valid only when its position in an absolute synthesis is found, it is evident that we are left without any working criterion whatever. And no matter what else is true, this must be granted, that thought and knowledge appear to have meaning for the finite and the human. It is evident, therefore, that although we grant to Bradley a distinct contribution in forcing upon us a reconsideration of the problem of Knowledge, his own contentions do not lead us to any positive outcome. The true solution of the difficulty is to be found in a closer examination into the function of thought. Meaning is constituted through the development of ideas. What is true, therefore, of ideas must also be true of thought and of knowledge. Now ideas are symbols, and their function is regulative, not constitutive. Instead of supposing that ideas serve the purpose of setting a limit to reflexion, we must regard them as instruments of control in mediating exchanges between different aspects of experience or in transforming one into the other. So surely as ideas are set up as limits to the process of Reflexion, so surely must we sacrifice the immediate to the mediate without thought, or on the other hand regard the process as impossible or illegitimate. In either case difficulty awaits us. If, however, ideas are no longer set up as limits to reflexion, but are regarded as instruments of control, we avoid the old contradictions by removing the source of difficulty and at least place the problem upon a different plane. And what is demanded at this point is that we carry through the analysis of ideation and meaning. When we do so, it becomes evident that our contention is well founded. It has been recognised by logicians that ideas are symbols, and still full use has not been made of the information thus gained. As symbols, ideas have a double value. They project in our minds (a) the anticipations of certain definite experiences; (b) the conditions under which these experiences may be realised. Meaning, therefore, is essentially regulative. As an anticipation, it flashes before us the determinate experiences which we may expect in a given set of circumstances: as a condition, it calls our attention to the means by which the experiences may be realised. Knowledge rests, generally, upon the recognition that new experiences can be realised through the operation of appropriate conditions, and specifically upon the determination of the exact conditions which

at any given moment control the realisation of just the experiences which we desire or anticipate. The criterion, as will be seen, lies in the transformation of anticipation into direct experience. Knowledge in its essence is thus essentially concrete. With Bradley we may agree that the development of ideas is a substitution of the abstract for the concrete, of the partial for the more complete, of the cold and bloodless for the warm and vital. But in addition we recognise that, as symbols, ideas constantly and as part of their inherent purpose carry us back to the concrete and the individual. That they succeed in their purpose (as is evidenced by every moment's experience and by science) is the justification of their existence. Knowledge is thus set upon an entirely new plane. When we ask concerning truth and falsity, we are no longer referred to an all-inclusive Whole, be it concrete or abstract, but to the relation of anticipations and conditions. Meaning no longer sets up on its own account, but performs the more modest function of regulating activity and of mediating determinate experiences. When it has shown exactly what experiences may be legitimately anticipated through the operation of such or such conditions, it has done its work. That new puzzles are constantly appearing in no way invalidates the general principle, and therefore the question of the ultimate content of Reality becomes of no moment whatever. That Knowledge has developed means that in the process of time mankind has become increasingly aware of possible experiences and of their conditions. That Knowledge will develop, means that mankind will continue to extend the range of legitimate anticipation and to develop more precisely the connexions between conditions and their outcomes. That mankind can thus determine its sense of Reality is the proof of the real value and nature of Knowledge. The search for an impossible all-inclusive Whole becomes uninteresting and useless: the development of Knowledge resolves itself into the differentiation of effective instruments of experiential control: their organisation into systems means increase of power, ease of movement, enrichment of individual experience. Meaning is inherently regulative: Reality is revealed to us ever in new forms. To search for a final statement is to change regulative principles into constitutive entities, and thus to destroy their significance. "Content" must therefore remain as a dynamically developing instrument of mediation between the terms of equally developing "existences". Reality is found in both terms, but is made determinate in the process.

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