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THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

THE IDEALIST TO THE REALIST¹

THIS paper attempts to consider briefly both the contemporary criticisms on idealism and the constructive theories advanced by the neo-realists.

I

The recent criticisms of idealism may be grouped under three main heads: first, those which oppose idealism on the ground that it is subversive of some important system of beliefs; second, those which charge idealism with fundamental inconsistency; and, third, those which claim that idealism is based on unjustifiable assumptions.

1. The charge that idealism flies in the face of common sense, of science, and of logic reappears in the writings of many realists. In the words of Professor Woodbridge, idealism "forces upon one a view of things which is not an extension and a refinement of [the] natural, instinctive view, but a radical transformation of it."² And Professor Spaulding introduces his summary of realistic doctrine with the statement that realism "agrees with common sense and with science."³ In answer to this charge that idealism does not agree with "common sense" it may first be pointed out that final judgment on a technical system can not be passed on the basis of its agreement with popular beliefs. It would go hard with the scientists were ultimate physical theories thus rated; and constructive realism, as will later be argued, would fare no better.⁴ But the idealist need not content himself with this protest. There is much to favor the view that primitive philosophizing is rather spiritistic than materialistic. All children personify the stubborn walls and

¹ Paper, with slight changes, read before the American Philosophical Association in Princeton, New Jersey, December 27, 1910.

² "The Problem of Consciousness," in *Studies by Former Students of Charles Edward Garman*, p. 146.

³ "The Program and First Platform of Six Realists" (after this cited as "Program"), this JOURNAL, 1910, Vol. VII., p. 400. Cf. W. B. Pitkin, *ibid.*, p. 398.

⁴ Cf. page 456, below.

doors with which they come in contact; and the facts of magic, of fetichism, and of nature-worship indicate that realities which every day dualistic philosophy conceives as non-ideal were regarded by primitive men as spiritual beings. In other words, the argument from instinctive belief, were it admitted, would not tell unambiguously for the non-idealists.

With even greater vigor, since the days of Berkeley,⁵ it has been urged that idealism is opposed to the results of scientific investigation. Woodbridge speaks of "the contrast which the content of natural science presents to idealistic philosophy,"⁶ and Pitkin claims for realism that "it is logically demanded by all the observations and hypotheses of the natural sciences including psychology."⁷ I shall, however, postpone a consideration of these claims to the second part of this paper, where I shall seek to show that all actual scientific constructions may be, and should be, idealistically conceived.

A third argument, precisely parallel with those now under discussion, claims for logic an axiomatic value, and argues against idealism as violating sundry rules of logic or as unconformable to certain logical procedures. A large part of the "Program and Platform" recently published by "six realists" is taken up with this argument from the incompatibility of idealism with logic. Thus Professor Marvin says: "There are certain principles of logic which are logically prior to all . . . metaphysical systems."⁸ The idealist accepts this statement, but insists that the fundamental principles of logic, to which only it applies, can not by any chance be essentially opposed to idealism, since logic is no more nor less than a systematic formulation of the laws of consistent thinking. Thus the idealist finds, in the assertion just quoted, an implicit opposition to materialism and no argument whatever against idealism of any type. The alleged oppositions of logic to idealism consist, in fact, in the selection of some empirical and subsidiary logical principle and in the demonstration of its incompatibility with idealism. Perry's "ego-centric predicament" is the cleverest and most unblushing instance which I know.⁹ Admitting that the *I* is a peculiarly ubiquitous fact which "can not be eliminated from one's field of study," he insists that this "mere fact" must not be allowed to weigh in our calculations, since it can not be investigated by the "method of agreement and difference." This is a startling instance

⁵ "Principles of Human Knowledge," paragraphs 50, 58.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 150.

⁷ "Program," p. 398.

⁸ "Program," p. 395 (3).

⁹ This JOURNAL, 1910, Vol. VII., pp. 5 ff.

of readiness to sacrifice empirical fact—admittedly universal—to methodological theory. The method of agreement and difference is a way of studying the relations of such phenomena as are difficult of observation because they are not always present. And yet we are called upon to eliminate from our philosophy an ever-present fact, the ego, because just this, its ubiquity, prevents our studying it by a logical method invented as an aid in the investigation of inconstant phenomena. Thus, to sum up our reply to this criticism: idealism can not be contradictory to the fundamental laws of logic, for these are laws of mental self-consistency. And subsidiary logical “laws” and “methods” are neither sacrosanct nor axiomatic.

2. We turn now to consider the alleged inconsistency of the idealistic position. It is urged by contemporary realists, as by those of Berkeley’s day, that the distinction actually made by idealists between subject and object, percept and image, is possible only on the supposition that non-mental reality exists.¹⁰ The idealist admits that he makes this distinction. He, like other men, recognizes a difference between present and external, and merely imagined, objects. But he distinguishes the two kinds of things, not as extra-mental and mental, but as objects respectively of his shared and of his unshared consciousness, or as objects of one self and of many selves. His desk is an external thing because it is actual or possible object of many selves’ consciousness; the scene which he is now *imaging* and *not describing* is not external because it is the object of his private, unshared consciousness.¹¹

This idealistic theory of perception, presupposing as it does the existence of many selves, has, however, to take account of a second and more important charge of inconsistency. Idealism, it is urged, is necessarily solipsistic. The basal tenet of idealism, the critics insist, is the peculiar or unique certainty of the existence of myself, a single conscious self. But the idealist (so the realists point out) who refuses to argue from this certainty of his own existence to the existence of extra-mental objects is equally debarred from arguing to the existence of selves external to him. This objection has been urged by Moore,¹² by H. W. Carr,¹³ by Perry,¹⁴ and by others.

I shall not pause to criticize any details in the different state-

¹⁰ For elaborations of this argument, *cf.*, among others, Fullerton, “A System of Metaphysics,” pp. 99 ff., 117 ff., 367–368; and G. E. Moore, *Mind*, 1903, N. S., XII., pp. 433 ff.

¹¹ At least one realist, W. P. Montague, makes this distinction among others, between perception and imagination. *Cf.* “Consciousness as Energy,” in “Essays in Honor of William James,” pp. 108–109.

¹² Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1905–1906.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1907–1908.

¹⁴ “The Hiddenness of Mind,” this JOURNAL, 1909, Vol. VI., pp. 29 ff.

ments of this argument because I am, for myself, prepared to accept its main conclusion. I believe, in a word, that solipsism is a sharp horn of the pluralistic idealist's dilemma. To the monistic idealist, on the other hand, it presents no unavoidable difficulty. For the monistic idealist's position is, in brief, the following: In being conscious of myself I know myself as limited, thwarted, circumscribed. But one can not know oneself as bounded without knowing the existence of a boundary; and to be aware of a boundary *as boundary* one must be aware of a something beyond. That is to say, in the experience of my narrow, single self, I experience also a somewhat-beyond-myself. And when I reflect on the nature of this somewhat-beyond, I must conclude that the distinction between it and me is partial, or relative, since between ultimately separate realities there can be no relation and consequently not the relation of knowing.¹⁵ This something-beyond-myself, therefore, which I directly experience in being conscious of my self-limitation, must be like me, must—in other words—be other-self.

But it is high time to come to closer issue with our antagonists. Their most fundamental criticisms have yet to be stated. They argue that idealism is based on unjustified assumptions, of which the first is the assumption that an object, because known, is therefore mental in nature. The realistic position is curtly stated by Holt:¹⁶ "The entities (objects, facts, *et caet.*) under study in logic, mathematics, and the physical sciences are not mental in any usual or proper meaning of the word 'mental.' The being and nature of these entities are in no sense conditioned by their being known."

This is an accurate and an uncompromising statement of the difference between the two parties. For the idealist does hold as fundamental just this doctrine which the realist attributes to him, that is to say, he believes that objects, as known, are mental. But he does not regard this belief as an assumption. He holds, on the contrary, that a close examination of the objects of logic, of mathematics, and of the physical sciences discloses their ideal character. The following, in brief, is the result of the idealist's empirical study of the known object: An object of physical science contains one or all of the following characters: (1) sensible qualities, as extension, motion, weight, color, sound, fragrance, etc.; and (2) relations, as spatial and temporal positions, permanence or impermanence, likeness and difference, degree, singleness or multiplicity or totality. Objects of logic and of mathematics differ from every-day "physical

¹⁵ The realist denies precisely this statement. I am not here attempting to argue the point, but merely to outline the teaching of a form of idealism which is not solipsistic.

¹⁶ "Program," p. 394, I, 1. Cf. Marvin, *ibid.*, p. 395, 8.

objects" in that they consist exclusively in relations. The idealist *discovers* by examination of objects—he does not (as the realist accuses) *assume*—that both sense qualities and relations are mental. The following paragraphs will amplify this brief account from the idealist's standpoint of the known object.

The idealistic view of sense qualities must first be considered. It is of utmost importance to state clearly that the contemporary idealist abandons some of the traditional arguments for his doctrine. He realizes that Berkeley's objection to distinguishing primary from secondary qualities may as well be turned to favor materialism as to favor idealism. And he admits (as indeed Berkeley admitted) that the argument based merely on the variability of qualities—according as the percipient is sick or well, warm or cold, distant or near, and the like—does not prove, even though it suggests, the ideality of objects.¹⁷ But the idealist rests his case not on reasoning of this sort, but on the *results of direct observation* coupled with *the inability of any observer to make an unchallengeable assertion about sense qualities save in the terms of idealism*. To be more explicit: the idealist demands that his opponent describe any immediately perceived sense object in such wise that his description can not be disputed. The realist describes an object as, let us say, yellow, rough, and cold. But somebody may deny the yellowness, the roughness, or the coldness; and this throws the realist back on what he directly observes, what he knows with incontrovertible and undeniable certainty, namely that *he is at this moment having a complex experience* described by the terms yellowness, coldness, and the like (an experience which he does not give himself). This statement, and only this, nobody can challenge. And this statement embodies the result of immediate experience.

The idealist next subjects the relation to an analysis parallel to that of the sense quality. The realist, when challenged to describe his object-as-related, has said (we will suppose) that it is a sphere three inches in diameter, the fruit of a tree whose seed he saw planted two years ago. But what, asks the idealist, are "spherical form," "two years," "the relation of fruit to seed"? Once more, all that the realist is immediately sure of—all that he can maintain in case his assertions are disputed—is that he has certain experiences indicated by the words he has used.

And if the realist seek to escape this conclusion by arguing that the real object is the object as *inferred*, and that (though the char-

¹⁷ "Principles," paragraph 15. For an "effective presentment of the case for realism" which spends its whole force in criticism of this argument from the variability of qualities, cf. T. P. Nunn, "Are Secondary Qualities Independent of Perception?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, N. S., X., 1909-10.

acters of the object as immediately known are mental) yet the characters known through inference are, or may be, extra-mental—the answer will be plain: Qualities and relations are the only discovered factors of objects as known. The inferred object itself must, therefore, consist in relations, in sense qualities, or in a combination of the two; or else it is an object of unknown nature.¹⁸ The immediately following paragraphs will consider the possibility of the existence of unknown objects, but the present discussion concerns objects as known. And these objects, analyzed into their constituents, have been found—not assumed—to be forms of experience.

A final charge remains. The second of the alleged assumptions of idealism is to be refuted. All that precedes has concerned objects-as-known. The realist now insists that the idealist has in any case no right to assert the non-existence of unknown objects. To quote Professor Montague: The intuitional argument of the idealists “consists of a confused identification of a truism and an absurdity. The truism: *We can only know that objects exist when they are known.* The absurdity: *We know that objects can only exist when they are known.* . . . It is to the failure to perceive [this fallacy] . . . that idealism owes its supposedly axiomatic character.”¹⁹ In other words, the fact that the objects of our knowledge are, as such, *known* is no reason for asserting that objects can not exist unknown. I propose to deal with this argument very simply by admitting its contention, but, at the same time, pointing out that, kept within its proper limits, it is utterly insignificant. As an idealist, I agree to check myself in every exuberant denial of the possibility that unknown extra-mental objects exist. But I do not hereby recant my idealism. For the truth is that the hypothetical unknown, extra-mental reality is utterly negligible. Such an *x*, an utterly unknown extra-mental object, is not the object of physical science, of logic, or of mathematics; it does not consist in sense qualities—that is, it is not extended or in motion, colored or sounding; it is not a relation—that is, it is not a substance, or a thing, or a cause, or a reality, or an entity, or a term, or a function. In a word, it is more than negligible, it is necessarily left out of account by men with only ordinary human endowment. Such an extra-mental reality is indeed unknowable, since it is by nature unknown. Therefore the thinker can have no concern with it and, of all people, the realist of to-day, whose fetish is logic, should eschew illicit commerce with the inconceivable and the indefinable.

¹⁸ Cf. Fullerton, *op. cit.*, pp. 52 ff., 117, 147, *et al.*

¹⁹ “Program,” p. 396.

II

We have so far been concerned with the criticisms of the realists on idealism. It is fair now to ask for their positive doctrine. And it must be confessed that the realists are more lavish of polemic than of constructive formulation. It is hard, for example, to understand why the six realists call their program a "platform"; for it clearly sets forth what they avoid, but gives no hint where they stand. And, to take another example, that subtle realist G. E. Moore is far more concerned to demonstrate that *esse* is not *percipi* than to tell what *esse* is. Other realists offer definitions so tautological or so self-contradictory that it is hard to take them seriously. Fullerton, for example, the dualist who takes the short-cut to realism just before reaching the end of the road to idealism, defines non-external reality in two ways. He says, most often, that the external thing is the phenomenon "in the objective order"²⁰—as much a truism as if he should say that the external thing is external. But he earlier describes the external world as made up of sensations "abstracting from the relation of knowledge"²¹—which is as inherently incredible as if one should speak of ether vibrations abstracting from motion.

The implication of most neo-realistic writers is, however, that all reality is describable in terms of the physical sciences. When, for example, Woodbridge conceives of the universe as a complex of terms and relations, and counts consciousness among these relations as coordinate with space and time,²² he is properly interpreted by Montague as assuming that the terms to which the relations are subordinate are physical, not psychical. More specific is Montague's conception:²³ Following Ostwald, he describes the universe in terms of energy and conceives the distinction between physical and psychical as identical with that between kinetic and potential energy.

Before entering on a discussion, necessarily condensed, of the "real" conceived as physical, a preliminary remark should be made: It should be pointed out that the realist has no right to the implication that in rejecting idealism and adopting a physical form of realism he finds ready-to-hand a compact system of ultimate physical doctrine. On the contrary, the physicists of one group, headed by Pearson and Mach, are frankly idealistic, reduce facts of science to contents of the mind, describe physical realities as made up of sense impressions, and define scientific law as "mental short-

²⁰ "A System of Metaphysics," pp. 372 ff.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²² "The Problem of Consciousness," in "Garman Studies," p. 159.

²³ "Consciousness a Form of Energy," in "Essays in Honor of William James," pp. 105-134.

hand.”²⁴ Still other scientific conceptions, whether realistically or idealistically interpreted, turn out to be mere tautologies. Such are Clerk Maxwell’s definitions of matter as that which may have energy communicated to it, and of energy as that which passes from matter to matter.²⁵ This is to the full as illuminating as Oliver Herford’s “Alphabet of Celebrities”:

Q is the Queen, so noble and free;
 For further particulars look under V.

 V is Victoria noble and true;
 For further particulars, look under Q.

It is not fair, of course, to dwell on so palpable a slip in the provisional definitions of a book no longer new. But Whetham, writing only a few years ago, finds in recent theories the same tendency to circular definitions and to explanations which are not ultimate. “The success of such theories,” he says, “does but shift the mystery of the unknown. Matter is a persistent strain-form flitting through a universal sea of ether: we have explained matter in terms of ether. Ether in its turn is described as a fairly closely packed conglomerate of minute grains in continual oscillation. We have explained the properties of the ether. . . . But what of the grains of which the ether is composed? . . . Has a new ether more subtle than the first to be invoked to explain our properties, and a third ether to explain the second? . . . An ultimate explanation of the simplest fact remains, apparently forever, unattainable.”²⁶

This reminder that no realist may find refuge from the tempest of conflicting metaphysical views in a sanctuary of fixed and satisfying physical doctrine, is, however, preliminary only to the opposition of idealist to realist. The idealist, in fact, maintains that so-called physical reality, however conceived, reduces to sensible quality, to relation, or to a combination of the two; or else reduces to utterly unknown reality. Quality and relation, he has already argued, are ideal; and neither the every-day man, the scientist, nor the philosopher is concerned with that whose nature it is to be unknown. This idealistic teaching should be restated in its application to specific realistic conceptions.

1. The physical universe may be regarded as made up of molecules and atoms. Now the molecule and atom are often conceived as extended things. “The atom,” to quote Fullerton, “is not directly perceivable by sense, but it is conceived as though it and its motions

²⁴ “The Grammar of Science,” Ch. VII., Sec. 3.

²⁵ “Matter and Motion,” quoted by Pearson, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

²⁶ W. C. D. Whetham, “The Recent Development of Physical Science,” 1904, p. 294.

were thus perceivable."²⁷ The underlying character here is the spatialness, and the argument, already outlined, concerning concrete sense objects, shows equally that atoms and molecules, as spatial, are ideal. The modern conception of the atom as a complex of sub-atoms, centers of negative electricity in a sphere of positive electrification, reduce to the conceptions of spatial position, of motion, and of force.²⁸

2. A second view of the universe as ultimately physical conceives it as ether. By ether is meant a continuous and incompressible medium. But continuity is obviously spatial, and incompressibility is tangible. Moreover the ether is regarded either as (*a*) containing or as made up of moving particles—in other words, of spatial and tangible realities—or else as (*b*) pervaded by strain-forms. In either case the conception of ether includes that of motion—and motion is succession of positions, that is, a complex of spatial quality and temporal relation. In the whole conception there is, for the scientist, much difficulty in meeting the rival requirements of the groups of facts which ether is hypothesized to explain; but no description of the ether in other than terms of sensible quality and relation has ever been put forward.

3. We turn finally to the conception of the universe as a complex of different sorts of energy. Here, too, we find the physicists at odds among themselves. Energy is usually defined as capacity for work. Narrowly scrutinized, this statement means simply that energy is conceived as the further undefined cause of phenomena; and energy is thus reduced to a relation, causality, already claimed by the idealist as ideal. Many of those who conceive of reality as energy, seem, however, to mean by energy force. But force is defined in one of three ways: either as resistance, a quality directly revealed through muscular sensation; or as cause of motion; or as no more nor less than a mathematical ratio, a measure of motion—the force of *B* on *A* being defined as “the product of the mass of *A* into the acceleration of *A* due to the presence of *B*.”²⁹ But each one of these is a conception of ideal, not of non-ideal, reality. A mathematical relation is a mental conception; the resistance or stress which (to quote Montague) is immediately felt when a man places “his hand between a fixed spring and a body moving uniformly into collision with it,” is a sensible quality; and motion, as has appeared, is made up of spatial quality and of temporal relation.³⁰ All this is virtually admitted by many phys-

²⁷ “An Introduction to Philosophy,” p. 22. Cf. p. 66; and cf., also, “A System of Metaphysics,” pp. 143 ff.

²⁸ Cf. the two following paragraphs.

²⁹ Pearson, *op. cit.*, Ch. VIII., Sec. 9, p. 304.

³⁰ “Consciousness as Energy,” *op. cit.*, p. 125.

icists.³¹ "Energy is an ideal quantity," says Newcomb.³² "To gain an idea," Ostwald declares, "of the content of the concept of energy, we will start from the fact that we are able . . . through our will, to call forth occurrences in the external world."³³

From considerations such as these the idealist refuses the lure of the realist's pretension to the authority of science. For the hypothesized realities of the physical scientists are one and all reducible to the negligible unknown or else to a complex of sensible quality and relation. "Descend, then," says the idealist to the realist, "from hypothesis to fact. Do not talk about vortex-ring, and electron, and ether, and energy, until you have first discussed the terms to which these reduce: the sensible qualities and complexes—extensity, resistance, motion—and the relations—cause, multiplicity, oneness, and the rest. You can give no unchallenged account of these qualities and relations, except as distinctive ways of experiencing, that is, of being conscious."

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DISCUSSION

PROFESSOR DEWEY'S "ACTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS"

IN a footnote on page 69 of "Essays Philosophical and Psychological in Honor of William James," Professor Dewey says: "Of course on the theory I am interested in expounding, the so-called action of 'consciousness' means simply the organic releases in the way of behavior which are the conditions of awareness, and which also modify its content." If this is all that Professor Dewey means by the action of consciousness upon the existences which are the direct subject-matter of knowledge, there are several questions that I should like to have answered; for they have been bothering me ever since I have read the very interesting paper on "Reality as Practical."

First. How does such a theory bring about the evaporation of "the metaphysical puzzles regarding 'parallelism,' 'interaction,' 'automatism,' the relation of 'consciousness' to 'body'?" (p. 65, footnote). The organic releases in the way of behavior, we are told, are the conditions of awareness. Although elsewhere in this paper Professor Dewey defines awareness as attention, I presume that in

³¹ Cf. S. Newcomb, in the Baldwin "Dictionary of Philosophy": "Motion is change of place." And cf. Hobbes, "Concerning Body," Ch. VIII., XV.

³² "Dictionary of Philosophy."

³³ "Vorlesungen über Naturphilosophie," p. 153. I am not claiming Ostwald and Newcomb as idealists, but merely pointing out the idealistic implication of their statements.