

# **The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object**

A Discussion of the Nature of Transcendental Consciousness

by Franklin Merrell-Wolff

Part 16 of 25

## **PART III**

### **Introceptualism**

#### **CHAPTER 4**

##### **The New Realism**

In a history of modern philosophy in which the systems and schools were arranged in chronological order, the New Realism would be the last of the four schools discussed since it arose, in a large measure, out of a polemic directed against the other three. But if the treatment of the subject is based upon classification by similarity of content, evaluation, and orientation, it seems quite evident that the New Realism would have to be placed in a position intermediate between Naturalism and Pragmatism, for, like the former and one wing of the latter, it is quite naturally realistic in its orientation. This defines a general attitude toward the office of consciousness which, for the present purpose, is the feature of most importance. To be sure, there are important differences in the form and nature of the reality as conceived by the different schools, but all agree in viewing the object as transcending the subject, and both Naturalism and the New Realism alike affirm the transcendence of the thing or the existent, with respect to consciousness in any sense.

For Realism, in the modern sense, there is no such thing as a physical or metaphysical self-existent substance, and thus it defines position of greater similarity to Positivism than to the other forms of Naturalism. Representatives of this school seem generally to have an acute feeling for the limitations in the empiric knowing process, and so have clearly perceived that in its ordinary manifestations at least, cognition does not supply us with an immediate knowledge of substance in any sense, but only with relations connecting various terms. Much of its destructive analysis parallels that of the Pragmatists, but it differs from Pragmatism in not granting to activism the status of immediate authority. Like Naturalism, it very largely discredits intuitive insight, but, unlike Naturalism, its primary orientation is not to a sensual datum. As compared to Naturalism, the thinkers of this school reveal a far superior philosophic acuity, and as a result the claims of logic and of ethics are given a recognition that is hardly, if any, inferior to that given to those of physics and biology. In the relative importance attached to logical entities and processes this school occupies an outstanding position. On the whole, as a line of thought, both critical and constructive, it offers much of interest and value.

The New Realism, like all modern and self-conscious philosophy, begins with a consideration of the problem of knowledge. Since the time of Immanuel Kant, it has been realized that it is impossible justly to evaluate the meaning of knowledge unless the thinker has first become familiar with the nature and limits of knowledge. In other words, knowledge as such, together with the knowing process, must themselves be objects of study before a valid evaluation of the cognitive content can be achieved. Otherwise, one may fall into the error of projecting the meaning of the content beyond valid limits. Clearly, no part of the philosophic discipline is more important than this since obviously it is useless to define Reality in terms of knowledge if we do not know the nature of knowledge *qua* knowledge. Further, the problem presented is not one of interest exclusively for technical philosophy but has ramifications bearing upon the office of knowledge in all domains, including the scientific, the religious, and the pragmatic utilitarian. Thus, for example, in the case of the special sciences, even though great critical care has been employed in technical observation and in theoretical construction, the question remains as to the essential meaningfulness of the knowledge produced. Does it give a substantial truth? Is it, perhaps, merely a useful symbol? Or, is it an essentially meaningless formalism that is not true knowledge at all? Since a great mathematician like Hilbert has affirmed the last view concerning the constructions of that most rigorous of all sciences, namely, mathematics, we cannot, offhand, exclude the possibility that all scientific constructions are no more than such meaningless formulations. In support of such a general view it might be well to recall that the Zen Buddhists seem to hold a view relative to all conceptual knowledge which is essentially of this sort. It is not my purpose here to suggest that Hilbert and the Zen Buddhists are necessarily correct in their evaluation, but simply to point out how vitally important the epistemological problem is. Thus, although the great driving motive of all philosophical effort is the determination, and even the realization, of ultimate Reality, yet before such a search can hope to attain dependable results there must be a critical evaluation and examination of the instruments employed in the search. It is, consequently, very much to the credit of the New Realism that it recognizes the methodological primacy of the epistemological problem. Whether or not the solutions offered are adequate is quite another matter.

For an intelligent understanding of the New Realism it is absolutely essential to comprehend the theory of external relations since this plays a vital part in the Neo-Realistic conception of knowledge and reality. The peculiar feature of this theory of external relations is the doctrine that the elements or terms which enter into various relations with each other are *not* altered in their intrinsic nature by reason of entering into the relationship. Thus, if an object *a* enters into a relationship of effect with respect to another object *b*, in one instance, and into a relationship of consciousness with respect to another object *c*, then, in both cases *a* remains precisely the same in its own essential nature. This gives to terms, of which *a* is a general sign meaning any entity whatsoever, a fixed definitive character which remains forever unaltered. The opposed view is that terms cannot be completely separated from their relations since the meaning and even the content of the term is in part determined by the relations into which it enters. This is the viewpoint which is known as the theory of internal relations and when it is consistently developed results in an absolute Monism, whereas the theory of external relations results in a worldview that is pluralistic, since the multitude of terms really form independent self-existent entities. The theory of external relations is characteristic of the New

Realism, while the theory of internal relations plays a notable part in the development of absolute Idealism.

In large degree, the theory of external relations is intimately related to the analysis of the logic of pure mathematics, and in this field it does appear to have at least a large degree of validity. Whether or not from the standpoint of the profoundest understanding of the nature of pure mathematics this theory will remain as the final true truth, still it has some measure of truth. Thus a numerical entity, such as the number 2, for instance, may well seem to be identically itself and unaltered whether it stands as an element in relational complexes which define various infinite series, either cardinal or ordinal, or is the designation of the class of classes in which all members possess the characteristic of consisting of two terms. It would seem that in all the relational complexes of which 2 is an element, 2 remains unalterably 2, namely, unaffected in its intrinsic character by differences in the complexes. But is not this, perhaps, only a surface appearance? Let us see. Of the class of classes whose number is 2 let us take two members, one of which consists of two atoms of a monatomic gas, such as helium, and the other of two animals of the same species but of opposite sex. Can we say that the total significance of 2 is precisely the same in the two cases? In the one case 2 remains 2 indefinitely but in the other 2 is a dynamic potential tending toward numerical increase. Again, consider 2 as the limiting value of the geometrical series  $1 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \dots + \frac{1}{2^n} + \dots$ , and as the second member of the series of natural numbers  $1, 2, 3, 4, 5, \dots, n, \dots \infty$ , and in each case 2 gives or reveals a meaning which is not identical with that of the other instances. Now, in addition, in all these cases 2 and the relational complexes in which it is a member stand in relation to consciousness, at least in the sense of the consciousness of the writer and the reader. It does not appear that the Neo-Realistic theory would deny that there are differences in the above complexes, but would assert that the meaning in each case would reduce to a combination of 2 and a relation, with 2 remaining intrinsically the same—as is also true of any other term to which it is related—and with nothing being added over and above the unchanging meaning of the relationship.

Criticism of a theory like this is difficult since there appears to be a reference to immediate experience which is not explicit. If the theory were in the nature of a formal mathematical exercise the critique would consist merely of an examination of the logical development with respect to terms that are explicitly defined and without immediate experiential content. But Neo-Realism is supposed to be a philosophy dealing with empiric actuality, and thus the terms and relations are supposed to be real and not solely ideal. It is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid the feeling here that there is something in the thinking that is arbitrary and artificial. Something in the immediately given, before analysis, is lost—something which is like vision that is not completely reducible to analysis and formulation. Can we say, for instance that the total meaning of water is reducible to the chemical addition of oxygen and hydrogen? No doubt the theory has a partial validity and utility, but only as an abstraction from the concrete actual for certain purposes; hence when the Neo-Realist goes further and claims comprehensive validity, it is not easy to avoid the feeling that the theorist suffers from a partial blindness.

As a correlate of the theory of external relations, the New Realism affirms the complete validity of analysis. Analysis serves the office of breaking down given complexes of experience into their ultimate elements or terms, which are conceived as

forming the wholes of experience by entering into various relationships. But, since relationships are external, the wholes of experience consist of the sum of the terms and relations and no more than that. Thus, the whole is not more than the sum of its parts. Sheer wholeness does not add any new qualitative character which vanishes in the process of analysis. Therefore, analysis is competent to find all that reality is, and, consequently, there is no need for a mystical immediacy to know the final reality.

The ultimate nature of terms and relations is conceived as essentially logical. In their intrinsic nature they belong to a neutral region which is neither mind nor body, neither consciousness nor matter. But the terms may enter into relation with consciousness or with the world of physical things, in either case remaining unaltered in their essential nature. A conscious being must come into adjustment with the terms and relations since they are real and not merely the creative projections of a consciousness.

This theory of the New Realists is largely true with respect to a fundamental experience of any mathematician, namely, that the material with which he works is, in some sense, highly compulsive. Although the fundamental assumptions of a mathematician may be free creations—even fantasy constructions—yet, as soon as he begins to deduce consequences he is not at all free to think as he pleases. The consequences have the inevitability of an absolute necessity. The thinker must conform to this necessity; he cannot make it other than what it is. So while some element of invention no doubt enters into a mathematical system, such as the conventions of mathematical language and the formulations of the fundamental assumptions, yet the effect of constraint by an absolute necessity is a most significant part of mathematical experience. Perhaps more than in any other field of human effort mathematics carries the thinker on a voyage of discovery, with the creative element occupying a subordinate position. The resistance of the rocks of the earth or of the unconscious factors of the collective psyche are less ineluctable, or, at least, are [not] more insistently conditioning. It is not the will that determines what mathematics shall be, once the fundamental postulates are given, but it is mathematics that sets the limits to the path which the will must follow if it is to orient itself to something more than a fantastic illusion. But while it is no doubt true that the determinations of mathematics are objective with respect to the private wishful consciousness of the individual, it does not follow that these determinations are existences outside consciousness in every sense. We can conceive—and there are realizations very strongly confirming the conception—of a primary and universal consciousness which conditions the merely private personal consciousness, and so we may view the essence of mathematics as being of the nature of this primary consciousness without the mathematical determination losing one whit of its authority and objective power.

As one studies the philosophy of the New Realism he is impressed with a certain congruence with Naturalism. As was noted in the preceding chapter, Naturalism grew out of an orientation to natural science, and particularly that part of science which we commonly think of as physical. Neo-Realism has a similar orientation to mathematics and logic, and so we may say that what Naturalism is with respect to physical—as distinct from biological—science, this Realism is with respect to the normative sciences. Thus we may say that the Neo-Realists are oriented to a much more profound necessity than that envisaged by the Naturalists. Both these schools recognize a valid fact of

experience, namely, the experience of dealing with a compulsive necessity, a somewhat which is more determining than any wishfulness. It is precisely with respect to this experience that the Vitalists give the least satisfactory answers in their philosophies. Whether it is Vitalism or Realism which has in this respect the more fundamental vision may be a question that cannot be answered in terms which transcend the relativity of individual temperament. For my own part, I find myself in closer agreement with the Realistic view with respect to this issue. In any case, the strength of the New Realism appears to consist mainly in its treatment of logical necessitarianism, while its principal weakness is to be found in its depreciation of another fundamental of no less importance, namely, the fundamental of consciousness.

For the New Realist, consciousness is only a relation, and, like other relations, it is external in the sense that the terms which enter into consciousness do not acquire their intrinsic character or being by that relation. Consonant with a conception developed by David Hume, the Realists maintain that the actual entities themselves enter consciousness and leave consciousness remaining essentially the same. When in consciousness we call them “ideas,” and when outside, “things,” but these words are merely different names for the same persistent and unaltered realities. A fundamental implication is that consciousness does not creatively determine its contents; it has only a selective relationship to them. Some entities may be selected and others neglected, but they always remain just what they were in either case. The selection of consciousness may build compounds of elements through the selection of various relations, but the compounds are conceived as completely reducible to the various terms and relations, with nothing left over as characteristic of the compound, which is lost as a result of the analysis. Thus the experience of an immediate affective or noetic value in the compound—which is lost in the analysis—is simply denied by this theory. But does this denial have greater significance than that of a psychological confession? The question as to whether the compound or complex of experience has what we may call an “overvalue” which is lost in the analysis is really extra-logical. Our judgment must rest upon the testimony of immediate experience. If there are those who do not find this overvalue in their experience, then they are justified in reporting that so far as their personal consciousness goes it does not exist. But this would be a fact of importance mainly for psychology. The testimony of others who said that they found the overvalue lost in the analysis would have no less validity. The issue between these two testimonies cannot possibly be resolved by a logical theory.

Since consciousness is conceived as a non-substantial and non-determinative relation, it is quite natural for the New Realist to develop a psychology and philosophical view in which consciousness is quite irrelevant. Thus we get the behavioristic psychology in which the determination of psychical fact is conceived as fully available for objective research without the use of introspective methods. The mind is conceived to be simply what it appears to be in objective behavior. Although it may be possible to proceed by this method and build a schema which is logically self-consistent, yet that is not enough to render it comprehensively true. The immediacy of inner consciousness does not cease being a fact simply because some methodological theory has no place for it. Again we have an issue which cannot be resolved without reference to testimony grounded upon immediate experience.

A particularly fundamental feature of the Neo-Realist's polemic against the Idealist is the contention that the latter has not proved that there can be no being wholly outside and independent of consciousness. No doubt the Idealist cannot prove this, for it is essential to the very nature of proof that in the act of proving it carries its material into the field of consciousness. But the Idealist may very properly reverse the charge and challenge the Realist to prove the independent being of a supposed *that* which is not knowable in any sense, or of a supposed *thatness* existing at any time outside consciousness in every sense. He may also quite reasonably contend that the burden of the proof rests with the Realist since the latter is affirming a *thatness* beyond the range of direct epistemological determination and thus involving hypostatization beyond all possible experience. In the attempt to show that it is possible to know beyond the range of consciousness, the Neo-Realist has given an illustration which at first seems quite impressive. We know, for instance, the general solution of the algebraic equation of the second degree because we have proved its correctness by rigorous logic. Therefore, we know that this solution provides a formula which will give a correct solution of every specific equation of the second degree by making the appropriate numerical substitutions for the letters representing constants in the general formula, and we *know this even in the case of those equations of which no man has ever thought*. Hence we know the actuality of an existence which has never been thought or experienced. But here two lines of possible criticism arise. First, a radical empiricism [empiricist] might well question whether such supposed knowledge is authentic knowledge at all. He might say that though the formula was found invariably valid in all the thousands of specific instances to which it has been applied, this gives no real knowledge concerning the infinity of cases to which the formula has not been applied, but in these cases our conviction of the validity of the formula is only grounded upon belief. Second, granting that the assurance of validity given by the general proof for the infinity of equations not actually solved is authentic and justified, yet this does not imply knowledge of an actuality lying outside consciousness, but only of one lying beyond consciousness in the form of specific thought and experience. In a word, the whole meaning of consciousness as such is not restricted to consciousness in the form of thought and experience.

The discussion of the preceding paragraph leads to a question of general epistemological interest which extends beyond the field of Neo-Realistic theory, and is one of considerable importance. It is a fundamental characteristic of the mathematical use of logic to develop proofs in general terms, which are completed within the limits of a finite apprehension, but which, nevertheless, are conceived as giving an infinitely extended knowledge since the specific cases included in the general proofs are, more often than not, infinite in number. It is unquestionably true that the typical mathematician feels an assurance of validity extending over the whole infinity of special cases, and it would appear that the Neo-Realistic philosophers as a class also share this assurance. Is this assurance justified? It is clear that this question is not one which can be resolved by logical proof since it is essentially a query relative to the validity of proof itself. It introduces a problem which requires for its resolution an examination of the very roots of cognition and an evaluation of conceptual cognition. This leads us into the sea of epistemological theory with all the variants characteristic of different philosophical schools, not to mention the vaster variations introduced by individual philosophies. This task will not be attempted here, but a little will be offered by way of suggestion.

There are at least three possible forms which proposed answers to the question may have. These we may call the empiric, the formalistic, and the gnostic. None of these forms of the answer can be dialectically justified in the complete sense, which would finally dispose of the question, since the differences in the forms are grounded in differences of point of view or perspective, which in turn are reducible to a matter of individual psychology or of insight. In the end, it appears that we are faced with the fact of philosophically significant psychological differences which are irreducible within the limits of present understanding. But we may with profit make a brief survey of the three views suggested.

1. The thoroughgoing empiricist typically denies that the authority of logic extends beyond the possibility of experiential verification. Logic may well be a valuable aid in the process of thought which leads on to a fuller experience, but its value is essentially conditional or heuristic. It does not wield an original or primary authority in its own right, but only one derived from experience ultimately. Hence, a finite logical process cannot give an infinitely extended knowledge, and, consequently, the real justification and proof of a general mathematical formula is the fact that it is effective in the specific instance. In a word, mathematics does not give us true knowledge of the infinite. The great difficulty with this point of view is that it fails to give us any adequate explanation of the success of mathematical thought in even the empiric field. The vast bulk of mathematical creation has been quite unrelated to empiric application; it has been a pure development for its own sake alone. But again and again, these pure constructions have supplied subsequently—sometimes after the lapse of considerable time—the theoretical framework which organizes the data from experience. This fact has led no less a person than Albert Einstein to ask the question: “How can it be that mathematics, being after all a product of human thought independent of experience, is so admirably adapted to the objects of reality?” It is certainly difficult, if not impossible, to see how such a pure thought could reach ahead of experience if it is no more than a derivative from experience.
2. The formalistic view maintains that mathematical entities, processes, and conceptions are essentially meaningless, and thus the whole mathematical development is merely a formal structure. Of course, this would imply that mathematical thought does not really give knowledge at all, not even as much as the empiricist would grant. This view is not in conformity with the Realistic conception since the mathematical entities would not be real. It does not cast any light upon the question asked by Einstein. On the whole, this theory does not appear to be fruitful, but it is worthy of note since no less a mathematician than David Hilbert subscribed to it.
3. The third view, which is here called the “gnostic,” maintains that mathematical, and therefore logical, knowledge is essentially *a priori*, by which is meant that it exists independent of experience. However true it may be that this knowledge does not arise in the relative consciousness, in point of time, before experience, yet it is not derived from experience, however much it may employ a language which is derived from experience. It is thus in its essential nature akin to mystical cognition—and hence gnostic in character—rather than similar to empiric

knowledge. This view would explain how it is possible for the pure mathematical thinker to have prevision of the future in formal terms which subsequently become empirically concrete as experience gradually advances with its slower tread. It also explains the strong feeling of assurance extending over infinite implication which follows upon the recognition of mathematical proof. Finally, it implies that mathematical knowledge is authentic knowledge, grounded upon an original authority. The full conception maintains that the root of mathematical knowledge is identical with the root of empiric knowledge but that neither is derived from the other. It thus is the identity at the root source that explains how pure mathematical thought can be relevant to the material given by experience.

These three views are barely sketched here, and therefore are given primarily as suggestions. However, the third view is the one held by the writer, and its justification will be more fully developed in general terms in what follows. Inasmuch as the Neo-Realistic philosophers seem typically to accept the assurance of logical demonstration, the writer stands in agreement with them in this respect, but he does not find that the Neo-Realistic theory supplies adequate justification for the acceptance of the assurance.

The outstanding peculiarity of the New Realism does not lie in its affirmation of the independence of things with respect to consciousness, for this doctrine is a characteristic part of all realism in the modern sense. The differentiating contribution of the New Realism is to be found in the doctrine of *immanence*. This is the theory that the actual things or terms enter into consciousness without being made over by consciousness. Thus the idea of a thing is the thing itself, when in the relationship of consciousness, and, consequently, the idea and the thing are not two entities but one. In this way, it is believed, the duality between mind and body is overcome, and, likewise, the duality between knowledge and things. But all the while the thing remains independent. Thus we may isolate as the cardinal principle of the New Realism the idea of *the independence of the immanent*.

Part of this conception suggests a similarity to the identity of the knowledge and the known, which is a characteristic part of mystical states of consciousness, but the theory of the independence of the immanent marks a radical divergence. The mystical state leads to a doctrine of interdependence, not only of the knowledge and the known, but of the knower as well.

In order to bring the more fundamental teachings of the New Realism into clear relief, they are listed in brief form below:

1. The subject to consciousness can become in other connections the object of consciousness.
2. Mental action is a property of the nervous organism.
3. Mental contents consist of portions of the surrounding environment, illumined by the action of the organism.
4. The content of the mind is that portion of the environment taken account of by the organism in the serving of its interests.
5. Ideas are only things in a certain relation.



6. In the case of immediate knowledge, the thing and the knowledge are identical.
7. In other connections than those of immediate knowledge, the thing is the thing in itself.
8. In mediate knowledge the thing thought about and the thought are both experienced, but the thing transcends the thought.
9. The thing is independent of experiencing as well as of thought.

The last thesis marks an important point of departure between Neo-Realism and the more realistic wing of Pragmatism. In both these schools, the conceptions of the office of thought and of mediate knowledge do not diverge radically, but Pragmatism tends to identify the real with experiencing. It is also true that the Neo-Realistic and the Pragmatic tests of truth and error are not so far apart. The former simply attaches less importance to the subjective factor. For both, truth is a harmony between thought and things, in the one case the things being independent of experience, while in the other their nature is determined through the experiencing. Further, the test of truth is practical, namely, is relative to a grouping of interest and circumstances for the purposes of action. In neither case is truth an internal coherence of ideas or things. Thus, in both cases, truth may be thought of as a function or relation of a thinking consciousness, or organism, with respect to something other, be it immediate experience or independent things.

The fact which stands out with especial force in connection with the New Realism is its enormous depreciation of the significance of consciousness. An examination of the numbered items above gives the impression that consciousness is a sort of by-product of the effort of organisms to attain adjustment in a pre-existent unconscious environment. To be sure, consciousness is not so unimportant as to be a mere epiphenomenon which accidentally happened in a mechanistic universe, for it serves the function of adjustment for organisms. It, therefore, makes some difference in the world of living creatures. But it is the lesser fact in the midst of an all-surrounding and compelling necessity.

Particularly notable in the New Realism, as in Naturalism, is the depreciation of the subjective component of consciousness. The subject is even viewed as potentially capable of becoming an object of consciousness in certain relations. Now, in conformity with the epistemology of Neo-Realism, the subject that has become an object is not merely a symbol representing the subject but is the actual subject itself. Here we have exemplified a very common error of the extraverted orientation in the individual psychology. For whatever it is that has become an object, its status as object implies a relation to a subject which is not the supposed subject that has become object. To be sure, something subtle associated with the true subject may become an object, but the subject proper remains the witness in a relationship of witnessing with respect to this subtle object, and thus does not itself become an object. We may project the conception of a subject-object relationship, but the subject itself has not been projected in the conception, remaining still the hidden witness of the conception. This point is of extremely vital importance and must be understood by him who would himself attain self-realization, or would seek to comprehend the philosophical developments based upon self-realization.

In contrast to its relative superiority in the interpretation of mathematics and logic, the New Realism seems somewhat less than satisfactory in its treatment of ethics

and religion. Here we find much the same inadequacy which was so notable in Naturalism. The reader at times has the feeling that these subjects enter into the total philosophical picture as more or less troublesome addenda. One in whom the ethical and religious motives are strong tends to feel frustrated or belittled. The impression is produced that the real order of being is aloof and unresponsive to human purpose and aspiration. While, no doubt, there is a dimension of being which has this character, or, rather, appears to have this character, yet there is far too much immediate insight which gives the real a quite opposite character to permit the Neo-Realistic view an exclusive validity. After all, the assurance of logic and of sense impression is not such as to deny other forms of assurance equal right to recognition. So we must conclude that the New Realism has offered an interpretation which is partly true but no more than that. It has not succeeded in evolving a conception competent to circumscribe the whole of the real and possible. Important dimensions of awareness are not recognized at all, and at least some of these dimensions embrace that which large portions of mankind value above all else. Philosophy, if it is to fulfill its full office, must recognize and do justice to these dimensions of being as well as those upon which the New Realism is focused.

[The end of Chapter 4 of the third part of *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object.*]