The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object

A Discussion of the Nature of Transcendental Consciousness

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PART III

Introceptualism

CHAPTER 5

Pragmatism
(continued)

The relative human consciousness manifests through three fundamental modes which we may designate thinking, feeling, and doing, or, more technically, cognition, affection, and conation. In the history of human philosophic thought each one of these modes has, at one time or another, been given the primary valuation, and not only in the sense of a peculiarity of individual psychology, but even in the ontological sense. Thus, with the main body of Greek thinkers, the Western Rationalists and the rationalistic wing of Idealism, cognition has been given a prime and even ontological status, with respect to which the other modes stand in either derivative relationship or at least are subordinate. Likewise, with the voluntaristic Idealists and the Vitalists conation generally occupies the position of primacy, and even, as is the case of Schopenhauer, is viewed as ontologically identical with original Being. It would appear that there should be room for a school of thought which we might call Affectionism, where the primacy in importance would be assigned to the affections. Such a school does not appear in the main stream of Western philosophic thought, but it is to be found in India. Wherever the hedonic tone of a state of consciousness is given prime valuation, the philosophic formulation proper to such a valuation would be some form of Affectionism. In the exceptionally comprehensive and able philosophy of Sri Aurobindo Ghose we find precisely this kind of evaluation. To bring out in clear relief this orientation, which is unknown or virtually unknown in Western philosophy, the following lengthy quotation is taken from Sri Aurobindo's essay on Heraclitus:

> But there is one great gap and defect whether in his [Heraclitus'] knowledge of things or his knowledge of the self of man. We see in how many directions the deep divining eye of Heraclitus anticipated the largest and profoundest generalizations of Science and Philosophy and how even his more superficial thoughts indicate later powerful tendencies of the occidental mind, how too some of his ideas influenced such profound and fruitful thinkers as Plato, the Stoics, the Neo-Platonists. But in his defect also he is a forerunner; it illustrates the great deficiency of later European thought, such of it at least as has not been

> profoundly influenced by Asiatic religions or Asiatic mysticism. I have tried to show how often his thought touches and is almost identical with the Vedic and Vedantic. But his knowledge of the truth of things stopped with the vision of the universal reason and the universal force; he seems to have summed up the principle of things in these two first terms, the aspect of consciousness, the aspect of power, a supreme intelligence and a supreme energy. The eye of Indian thought saw a third aspect of the Self and of [the] Brahman; besides the universal consciousness active in divine knowledge, besides the universal force active in [the] divine will, it saw the universal *delight* active in divine love and joy. European thought, following the line of Heraclitus' thinking, has fixed itself on reason and on force and made them the principles towards whose perfection our being has to aspire. Force is the first aspect of the world, war, the clash of energies; the second aspect, reason, emerges out of the appearance of force in which it is at first hidden and reveals itself as a certain justice, a certain harmony, a certain determining intelligence and reason in things; the third aspect is a *deeper* secret behind these two, universal delight, love, beauty which taking up the other two can establish something higher than justice, better than harmony, truer than reason,—unity and bliss, the ecstasy of our fulfilled existence. Of this last secret power Western thought has only seen two lower aspects, pleasure and aesthetic beauty; it has missed the spiritual beauty and the spiritual delight. For that reason Europe has never been able to develop a powerful religion of its own; it has been obliged to turn to Asia. Science takes possession of the measures and utilities of Force; rational philosophy pursues reason to its last subtleties, but inspired philosophy and religion can seize hold of the highest secret, *uttamam rahasyam*.[1]

It is thus a fact that corresponding to the three primary modes of relative human consciousness there have been systems of philosophy which have given primacy of accentuation to one or another of these modes. The two schools heretofore discussed, namely, Naturalism and the New Realism, quite clearly give the primacy to cognition, either perceptual or conceptual. But Pragmatism clearly subordinates conceptual cognition to empiric or perceptual cognition, and, by accentuating practice and conduct, gives the primacy to the conative mode of consciousness. Perhaps affection is here valued above cognition, but on this point I am unable to arrive at a definite decision. At any rate, conation receives the ascendant evaluation.

Pragmatism, then, may be classed as an *empiric* Voluntarism, in contrast to transcendental Voluntarism, such as that of Schopenhauer. But, being a form of Voluntarism, the general implications of a voluntaristic attitude, both positive and negative, follow. There is a definite support and strengthening of those tendencies in man which express themselves in performance, such as conquest of nature, missionary zeal, meliorative activities and movements, progressive education, promulgation of propaganda of all sorts, selling, promotion, building, and so forth, and so forth. We may well agree that much of this is all to the good, but there is another side to a Voluntarism

[1] Quoted from Aurobindo's, essay on *Heraclitus*, p. 58. (Italics mine [except last].)

which is its own ultimate law. The will may and has successfully sought to impose its idea upon the other fellow, group, or nation, either for, or not for, his own good. It is of the very nature of Voluntarism to deny that there is any moral maxim, conceptual law, or transcendental order which can serve as a supreme court for the review of its volitions. Whatever willed objective is successfully effectuated is, by reason of that success, morally and otherwise justified. Thus a successful National Socialism would be righteous simply because it was successful. It stands today repudiated, but on pure voluntaristic grounds; that repudiation does not rest upon moral, religious, or intellectual considerations; it rests simply upon the fact that in the trial by willed force National Socialism was overthrown. Had the Nazis been strong enough to succeed, they would have been justified.

It is quite understandable and in conformity with expectation that, given the premises of Pragmatism, there should follow the doctrine of the Will to Believe as a justified form of cognition. But the will to believe, which, in the hands of a William James, a cultured gentleman of superior tastes and ethical values, could eventuate in a statement with which we can feel much sympathy, is subject to no guiding modulus and both could and would mean something very different when developed by a man of quite different character and tastes, such as Joseph Stalin. Here the successfully effectuated will becomes the final authority. The good is that which the will actually accomplishes, and only that. This is the great dilemma of the Voluntarist. On one side, a completely free will, not subject to the review of any higher authority—at the price of chaos; on the other, a moral and rational governing modulus—at the price of a curtailed freedom. Howard H. Brinton, in his *The Mystic Will*, has shown how that greatest of voluntaristic mystics, Jacob Boehme, becoming conscious of the dilemma, was troubled, and therefore at times wrote like a rationalist. Jacob Boehme, although in his soul incarnating the spirit of non-violence in such degree as to be the very fountainhead of the non-violent tendency in the West, nonetheless was likewise the fountainhead of that voluntarism which is the ultimate base and justification of all violence!

The difficulties involved when Pragmatism is understood as an orientation to pure activism has not escaped the attention of one of the leading Pragmatists and has caused him to feel some doubts. This self-criticism comes form C.S. Peirce, who, at least in the temporal sense, was the first of the modern Pragmatists, and since his statement is trenchant and comes from the ranks of the Pragmatists, it will be quoted at length.

> This maxim [the Pragmatist maxim above quoted][2] was first proposed by C.S. Peirce in the *Popular Science Monthly* for January, 1878 (xii. 287); and he explained how it was to be applied to the doctrine of reality. The writer was led to the maxim by reflection upon Kant's *Critic of the Pure Reason*. Substantially the same way of dealing with ontology seems to have been practiced by the Stoics. The writer subsequently saw that the principle might easily be misapplied, so as to sweep away the whole

[2] See the audio recording "The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object," part 17:

> Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the *whole* of our conception of the object. (Italics mine.)

> doctrine of incommensurables, and, in fact, the whole Weierstrassian way of regarding the calculus. In 1896 William James published his *Will to Believe*, and later his *Philos. Conceptions and Pract. Results*, which pushed this method to such extremes as must tend to give us pause. The doctrine appears to assume that the end of man is action—a stoical axiom which, *to the present writer at the age of sixty, does not recommend itself so forcibly as it did at thirty*. If it be admitted, on the contrary, that action wants an end, and that that end must be something of a general description, then the spirit of the maxim itself, *which is that we must look to the upshot of our concepts in order rightly to apprehend them*, would direct us toward something different from practical facts, namely, to general ideas, as the true interpreters of our thought. Nevertheless, the maxim has approved itself to the writer, after many years of trial, *as of great utility in leading to a relatively high grade [degree] of clearness of thought*. He would venture to suggest that it should always be put into practice with conscientious thoroughness, but that, when that has been done, and not before, a still higher grade of clearness of thought can be attained by remembering that the only ultimate good which the practical facts to which it directs attention can subserve is to further the development of concrete reasonableness; so that the meaning of the concept does not lie in any individual reactions at all, but in the manner in which those reactions contribute to that development. Indeed, in the article of 1878, above referred to, the writer practiced better than he preached; for he applied the stoical maxim most unstoically, in such a sense as to *insist upon the reality of the objects of general ideas in their generality*.[3]

Certain striking modifications of the original conception of Pragmatism are revealed in the italicized portion of the above quotation. First, since activism appeals more to the man of thirty than to the man of sixty, it appears that the activistic emphasis is no more than a matter of individual psychology and thus may not be validly extrapolated into an ontological principle. Second, it appears that the essential meaning of the maxim is not necessarily activistic but consists in the evaluation of the given conception by its upshot—a view which contrasts with evaluation by the source. (This would appear to be the most fundamental feature of the Pragmatist method which remains.) Third, it appears that the maxim is merely useful in guiding empiric thought, but not, therefore, necessarily an absolute criterion of truth. It is thus reduced to a mundane heuristic principle. Fourth, it appears that there is insistence upon the reality of general ideas in their generality. This would seem to bring us back to the standpoint of the Conceptualists, and with that the distinctive *quale* of Pragmatism *qua* Pragmatism very largely vanishes.

With Pragmatism modified as above, it would seem that we have left merely a useful method of heuristic or pragmatic value only, and in that case the idea that the *whole* meaning or truth of a conception is necessarily found in consequences in terms of conduct, the practical, and the empiric, would have to be abandoned. But in that case

[3] Quoted from the article on *Pragmatism* in Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*. (Italics mine.)

Pragmatism would hardly have any reason for existence as a philosophic school. With Pragmatism reduced to the status of a useful modulus of procedure in the movements of mundane consciousness, there does not appear any reason why a protagonist of any school of philosophic thought could not and should not also be a Pragmatist in some phases of his thinking. Standard Pragmatism, by reason of the privativity implied by the word 'whole' in the maxim, narrows the office of conception not only in the sense already discussed, but, even more seriously, excludes the use of conception in relation to a transcendental meaning, and this is a matter of particular importance to us here.

In conformity with Pragmatic epistemology, *if there is a consciousness which is not conceptual, or merely conceptual, which is not in time, which is not an immediate presentation of phenomena and is not related to conduct as action, then the relationship of conception to such a consciousness cannot be classed as truth or meaning*. Since the immediate content of at least some mystical or Gnostic states of consciousness has such an immediate non-temporal and non-sensuous character, or at least purports to have such, it follows that the Pragmatist's epistemological theory either (1) implies denial of the actuality of such a mystical content, or (2) granting that such a content exists, then affirms that the relationship of a conception to it may not be classed as "meaning" or "truth." This constitutes the second zone in which truth and meaning are denied to a conceptual relationship—the first, it will be recalled, being the zone of the relationship of concept to concept in an exclusively conceptual system, such as that of pure mathematics. Now it is true, as a matter of fact, that historically, as well as currently, the notion of "truth" has been important, and even very important, in both zones. The Pragmatist's theory, therefore, must imply that both these uses of the notion of "truth" are without validity, and, therefore, that both of these types of conceptuality are without meaning—a conclusion which is not very likely to be acceptable to either the philosophic mathematician or the philosophic mystic.

It is not here suggested that Pragmatism, as such, or that all Pragmatistic thinkers, necessarily deny the actuality of mystical experience. Indeed, William James has treated the subject very sympathetically in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and has affirmed that it deserves much more serious study. But the mystical consciousness appears under two aspects, in that, in one sense it is an experience, and, in another, it is an immediate content. As an experience, it is an event happening to some subject or self in time, and, as such, falls within the range of psychological, physiological, and even physical observation. Further, the event may produce changes in the conduct of the individual involved, and this may be noted and in some measure evaluated objectively. In this sense, the mystical consciousness is a somewhat which may fall within the range of evaluation in the pragmatic sense. But the matter is quite different when we come to consider the inward or immediate content—the psychical, as distinguished from the psychological—of the mystical state. This lies beyond the range of external observation, as is also true of the immediate psychical value of any experience, such as the immediate *quale* of the experience blue, for instance, and can be known only by those who have realized the state. It is certainly true that historically such inward or psychical content has constituted the meaningful reference of philosophies, especially in the case of oriental philosophies. But this sort of truth-reference is ruled out by the Pragmatist's epistemological theory.

Anyone who granted the validity of the mystical or Gnostic content and of a truth-relation or of a meaning-relation on the part of a conception to such a content, but who at the same time accepted as valid the Pragmatist's definition of truth and meaning in other relations, would not be a Pragmatist in the sense of the definitions quoted above. For them the *whole* meaning of a conception, or of conception as such, would not be manifested in practical consequences in terms of conduct and experience. At least *some* of the meaning would be of a different sort. Superficially, one might imagine that the removal of the word 'whole' from the definitions would resolve the difficulty, but this is not so, since the independence and existence of Pragmatism as a school actually hangs upon that word. As an example, we can easily conceive of an Absolute Idealist who would say, provided the word 'whole' were removed from the definition: I also accept the Pragmatist's epistemology as an adequate description of conceptual cognition in its relation to the relative realities of appearance, but not in its relation to Ultimate Reality. In such a way Absolute Idealism could assimilate the Pragmatist's epistemological theory as a part truth, and there would be no room left for Pragmatism as an independent school. However, the historic fact is that epistemological Pragmatism came to birth as the result of a polemic directed against Absolutism. Thus its possibility as an independent existence lies in its emphasis of the word 'whole' in the definitions. It appears somewhat ironical that Pragmatism, in order to establish a place opposed to Absolute Idealism, had to invoke a sort of left-handed absolutism of its own!

The argument in support of Absolute Idealism, as against that of Pragmatism, has opened a door within the defenses of the latter whereby the former may possibly once again establish itself, if it can show in any degree, however small, that the use of the word 'whole' in the Pragmatist's definition is not valid. This is the analogue of William James' own thesis that Pluralism is established if it can be shown, in even the smallest degree, that there is something not contained in the Absolute One. Thus, if a conception can mean a mystical content—as is indeed implied throughout the philosophical Buddhist Sutras, to name one instance—and this content is neither a time-conditioned consciousness nor a perceptual experience, in the sense of the raw immediacy of sensual presentation, then a breach is established in the walls of Pragmatist epistemological theory. To be sure, this does not necessarily imply the negation of the instrumental theory with respect to the office of the concept. But if the instrumental theory is retained, or insofar as it is retained, the concept would have at least a twofold instrumental office. One would be that so well developed by Pragmatism, wherein the conceptual idea is instrumental to an experience, or practice, that always includes some degree of the perceptual *quale*, and the second instrumentality would be oriented to an immediate content which is non-experiential—in the sense of the definition given above—and non-conceptual. This latter content we may call the Transcendental or Spiritual, in the Indian sense of the term. The polemic of Pragmatism as against Absolutism would have proved effective to the extent that it has established that the thesis of the latter cannot be maintained on the ground of pure conception alone. Conception would have to be differentiated from the transcendental content as well as from the perceptual. The intellectualistic thesis that the fundamental and ultimate principle of the universe is some form of thought might well have to be abandoned, and, whether or not the intellectualistic psychology, which places cognition above affection and conation, would be retained, still the intellectual and conceptual would stand below the Transcendental. In any case, the Pragmatist's thesis that conception is derived from perception could be maintained no

longer as exclusively valid. For, it is at least possible that the concept has a hidden Father in the transcendental as well as a revealed Mother in the perceptual or experiential, and, on *a priori* grounds, it cannot be maintained that the nature of the concept is necessarily in closer affinity to the Mother than to the Father. Recognition of the actuality of the Father, and further, the realization that his nature is not less native to the Son-concept than is the Mother-percept is all that the Transcendental Idealist needs.

The instrumental interpretation of intellectual thought or conception, as developed by Pragmatism, is based, in considerable measure, upon the thesis that the concept is derived from the percept and serves as an office for the latter exclusively. In this connection the percept is not to be construed as derived exclusively from sensation, but, rather, something sufficiently comprehensive to include a complex of feeling and intuition as well as sensation.[4] Perception thus comprehends the material given by all the psychological functions except conceptual thinking, as these functions are listed by Dr. C.G. Jung. This perception is conceived as prior to conception, both in the sense of time and of epistemological value. With respect to the notion of priority in time, the study of biology, under the assumption of organic evolution, does build a very strong presumption in support of the thesis. Investigation of the psychical life of animals, particularly in the case of the higher animals, gives convincing evidence that they do have a perceptual consciousness in which there is some form of sensation, feeling, and intuition. But there is little or no reason to suppose that animals think in the conceptual sense. Thus, in bio-psychology, the qualitative differentiation of man from all other animals inheres in the development or presence of the function or faculty of conceptual thinking. Man is distinctively man because, and to the extent, he thinks conceptually. From the standpoint which regards the theory of organic evolution as an all-sufficient basis of interpretation, man and conceptual thinking are simply the latest terms in the natural evolutionary series. If, then, we view man as solely a biological entity, it is clear that on the whole he has achieved the most comprehensive adjustment to environment, when compared to that of any other animal. He commands the stage of life as does no other creature. He can survive under far greater diversity of conditions, and, in spite of the relative atrophy of functional capacities that are strong in the animals, he is lord over the whole animal world, and has advanced far in the conquest of the inorganic. Despite his many remaining and new problems, man constitutes an advance over the purely animal kingdom in the art of adjusting life to environment. But the key to this unique achievement of man clearly lies in the possession of the faculty of conceptual thinking. Therefore, there can be no doubt but that the concept does serve an office for life.

Does it therefore follow that the total significance of the concept is that of an office for life? Even though we grant that the given outline of the bio-historic genesis of the concept is substantially correct, we may still ask this question. Here it is quite germane to point out that the bio-history we refer to is itself a conceptual construct, and not a pure perceptual fact. The history known is a history for thought, whatever else it may be. As a consequence, the reference to biologic evolution does not supply us with a pure pre-conceptual root from which the concept is supposed to be derived. The material with which we are working is so compounded that the concept is inextricably a part of it, and the problem of the inherent nature of the concept simply reappears in a new form.

[4] See William James' *Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 48 footnote.

The thesis that historic genesis supplies the key to significance is, itself, no more than a conceptual hypothesis, a theory of interpretation. History can be interpreted in such a way that it loses all ontological value. Thus it is possible to view all events as merely supplying occasions which arouse recognition of truth without being their source. In such a case the bio-historical process would have only the value of a sort of phantasmagoria having only catalytic significance. A consistent interpretation of history along this line is only a question of skill. As a result, we could quite easily conclude that the primacy of perception in time casts no effective light upon the fundamental nature of conception. So, the facts of biology do not prove that the total significance of conception is that of an instrumental aid to life or experience, nor that its principal significance is such. All that we can positively say here is that conception does facilitate the adjustment of a living organism, though it may have quite other and even much more important relations.