

The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object

A Discussion of the Nature of Transcendental Consciousness

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Part 19 of 25

PART III

Introceptualism

CHAPTER 5

Pragmatism

(continued)

As far as I can see, the Vitalists have not established their thesis for the derivation of the concept, though, if they had, the conception of the exclusively instrumental value of the concept with respect to life might well follow. But although the vitalistic attempt at proof may have failed, this does not imply that the instrumentalistic theory may not otherwise be established. There is another line of approach to substantially the same conclusion, which, in my opinion, carries much more weight. This we may call the psychological approach and shall proceed to its consideration.

The introspective observation and analysis of the actual *quale* and functioning within consciousness can lead to a philosophic statement, and this seems to be the most distinctive approach to Pragmatism as exemplified by William James. While one is immersed in a state of consciousness or engaged in a psychical process, it is possible to shift one's attention from the immediate enjoyment or content to the observation of the state or process itself. This step is sometimes quite difficult as the shift of attention may, very easily, destroy the state or erase the content, but with care it can be done. In this kind of effort William James was undoubtedly endowed with exceptional skill, and has unquestionably made highly valuable discoveries. But not only did this sort of research contribute an important part of his psychological theory, it also formed a significant part of his philosophical base. His theory concerning the nature and functioning of perception and conception appears to be very largely grounded on such research, and that is the phase which concerns us most particularly here.

James' root finding is probably best given by a direct quotation of his own words. In his *Some Problems of Philosophy* he has said:

If my reader can succeed in abstracting from all conceptual interpretation and lapse back into his immediate sensible life at this very moment, he will find it to be what someone has called a big blooming buzzing confusion, as free from contradiction in its 'much-at-onceness' as it is all alive and evidently there.

Out of this aboriginal sensible muchness attention carves out objects, which conception then names and identifies forever—in the sky ‘constellations,’ on the earth ‘beach,’ ‘sea,’ ‘cliff,’ ‘bushes,’ ‘grass.’ Out of time we cut ‘days’ and ‘nights,’ ‘summers’ and ‘winters.’ We say *what* each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstracted *whats* are *concepts*.

*The intellectual life of man consists almost wholly in his substituting [substitution of] a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which his experience originally comes.*⁵

In a footnote James acknowledges the obvious fact that this account of the “aboriginal sensible flux” directly contradicts that which Kant gave. As this contrast is historically of prime philosophic importance and implies quite diverse interpretations of the function of conceptuality or understanding, I quote the relevant statement from the *Critique of Pure Reason* as follows:

But the conjunction (*conjunctio*) of a manifold in [the] intuition never can be given us by the senses; it cannot therefore be contained in the pure form of sensuous intuition, for it is a spontaneous act of the faculty of representation. And as we must, to distinguish it from sensibility, entitle this faculty *understanding*; so all conjunction—whether conscious or unconscious, be it of the manifold in intuition, sensuous or non-sensuous, or of several conceptions—is an act of understanding. To this act we shall give the general appellation of *synthesis*, thereby to indicate, at the same time, that we cannot represent any thing as conjoined in the object without having previously conjoined it ourselves.⁶

James goes on to say, not quite consistently but I think correctly: “The reader must decide which account agrees best with his own actual experience.”

But despite James’ virtual acknowledgment in the last quotation that there may be a relativity of individual psychology involved in the differences in the formulations of the sensibly [sensibility] given, as between himself and Immanuel Kant, he proceeds in his subsequent philosophic development as though his own finding were universally established fact and thus would seem to be guilty of the “psychologist’s fallacy”—his own designation—which he, himself, has defined as “the confusion of his own [the psychologist’s] standpoint with that of the mental fact about which he is making his report.” It may, quite possibly, be admitted that, given the perceptual base which James found through the examination of his own psychical processes, much, if not all, of his epistemological theory concerning the office of percepts and concepts follows reasonably enough. But can an epistemology of universal validity be established in this way? Have we perhaps a statement which is valid for an individual or a psychological type but not valid as a general truth? Both Hume and Kant most certainly found the given of sensibility in quite other form, and this fact cannot be casually swept aside. The contrast

⁵ See pp.50-51 of *Some Problems of Philosophy*.

⁶ Page 129, Meiklejohn translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

is radical; for James a *continuum* of “much-at-onceness” in which manyness is given, fused in an original unity of a perceptual flux into which the conceptual power casts “cuts” which are extracted as discreet entities, both static and timeless; for Hume and Kant, a manifold of atomic elements which, for Kant, are conjoined into unified wholes by the conceptual understanding and the transcendental unity of apperception of the Self. For James, the conceptual function introduces separation into discrete elements by abstraction from an original unified totality, while, for Kant, the conceptual understanding conjoins into the object from an originally given manifold, and thus is a synthesizing function. From such contrasted bases quite different epistemologies must follow and correspondingly different metaphysical conceptions.

Neither the descriptive picture of Immanuel Kant nor that of William James stands unsupported by other testimony. It is a historical fact that Kant’s view was largely accepted by Western philosophy since his day, but the experience of the pure perceptual as given by William James appears highly consonant with the view which holds the predominant place in the Orient. We are indebted to Dr. F. S. C. Northrop for bringing this characteristic of oriental thought and valuation into clear relief in his *The Meeting of East and West*. Indeed, Dr. Northrop builds a convincing case for the thesis that just in this valuation of the pure perceptually given we find the prime differentiation in the psychical outlook of oriental and occidental man. Therefore, we cannot in a quick or offhand manner decide that either view is exclusively true, for here we do not have a conceptually deduced conclusion available for objective logical analysis nor an objective datum checkable by scientific method, since the given datum is psychic in the sense of a conscious process apprehended by itself, rather than psychological in the sense of being apprehended by another. The self-observing consciousness gives a material which is mostly beyond the reach of criticism because it is subjective, and so, at least provisionally, we must accept it as valid for the individual reporting what he finds. Unquestionably, we must recognize a difference in the competency in the self-examination, yet, regardless of whether the competency is limited or large, the finding must be determinant for the individual himself. As a consequence, the epistemology and general philosophy founded upon the psychic material may possess a substantial validity for the individual and for those of similar psychological type, and yet fail to authenticate an extrapolated general epistemology. We must assume that other self-determination of the psychic character of the pure perceptual supplies an equally valid ground for a quite different theory of knowledge and philosophical development.

In my own finding with respect to the perceptually given, prior to the experience of the transformation process reported in Chapter 2 of PART I, the material seemed of identical nature with that described by Kant. Subsequently, when reading James’ report, I made a re-examination and found the perceptual material to be consonant with his statement. But repeated examinations since then have given me either the continuum or the manifold, and I do not find myself able to determine that the one view is more profound or truer than the other. This fact has forced the provisional view that the finding is conditioned by individual psychology and that the ultimate or objective nature of the pure perceptual is such that it possesses both characters at the same time. This seems like a contradiction and probably is a paradox, but it is scarcely more difficult to accept than the physicist’s experience of the phenomena of light which requires a description in terms of both corpuscles and undulating waves.

We derive from Kant and James two radically contrasting theories of the origin, office, and nature of the conceptual understanding. For James, the concept is derived from the percept, is at all times dependent upon the percept for its ultimate meaning, and, in the end, fulfills itself by eventuating in a perceptual state of consciousness or experience; but for Kant the conceptual order is *a priori*, that is, not derived from perceptual experience, and though not known by the relative consciousness prior to experience in time, is, nonetheless, transcendental in its nature and thus prior in its essence; it integrates the raw perceptual material, depends upon the latter for the predication of actuality, but not for the determination of the form of understanding. There is a considerable area of agreement between Kant and the Pragmatists in that they both view the office of the concept as related to the perceptual material. Indeed, it will be remembered that the first statement of the Pragmatic theory grew out of Peirce's meditation upon the implications of certain portions of the Kantian thesis. But we can hardly conclude that this interpretation is true to the whole meaning of the Kantian philosophy, since modern Idealism is derived from this source, both in its Rationalistic and Voluntaristic forms. Truly, Kant conceived a puissant and pregnant philosophy! It is true that the Kantian treatment of the concept is moderately pejorative when compared to the view of the older Rationalists, but it is much less pejorative than James' treatment, since the latter views the concept as no more than a dependent attachment to the perceptual order. For Kant, the concept had a transcendental genesis, and, therefore, a degree of authority which was independent of the perceptual order.

James does concede that the concept possesses a great practical utility in its operation in connection with percepts, since it possesses powers lacking to the latter but which are valuable for the empiric consciousness and life. He acknowledges that the concept may operate for considerable stretches in conceptual terms exclusively as is particularly demonstrated in mathematics, but he insists that the ultimate reference must be to the perceptual. Otherwise many unsolvable conceptual problems arise, such as those that have become famous and perennial in technical philosophy. James even recognizes that concepts have a substantive as well as a functional value, though he seems to view the substantive value in essentially perceptual terms, and regards the functional value as definitely the more important. But the concept has a character so different from the percept that when it builds a portrait of the world it produces a falsification of the reality which is supposed to be of the nature of the perceptual. It serves a valid office as a pointer to the latter, but is not a representation of truth when developed in conformity with its own law in abstraction from the perceptual order.

Conceptual thought can develop a system in its own terms, employing concepts liberated from all perceptual reference, as is done in the most formal and most pure form of mathematics. In this case, the terms have been viewed as "meaningless," and certainly appear as meaningless if "meaning" is restricted to a perceptual referent. In terms of James' view, the pure perceptual continuum forms an order in itself which has no need of the intromission of any conceptual element in order that it may have existence. This order, according to James, has no meaning but is simply itself, or its own meaning, if we may so speak. "Meaning," in James' sense of the word, is an attribute or quality of the concept when it serves the office of pointing to the perceptual order, or some portion of it, and the terminal value of the concept lies in the perceptual experience to which it points. Now, in James' view, there are two interconnections between the conceptual and

the perceptual, (1) the birth of the concept out of the perceptual matrix, and, (2) the relationship of pointer on the part of the concept to the perceptual in relatively or ultimately terminal phases. That the concept can and does serve the office of pointer to a perceptual experience is not questioned here, so long as this "meaning" of the concept is not taken in the privative sense. But can we truly say that the concept is born out of the perceptual matrix? If it is in some sense born out of that matrix, can we derive its complete character and nature from the perceptual source? These questions we shall proceed to examine.

If the conceptual were something exclusively derived from the perceptual and dependent upon the latter for its possibility, as the tail of a dog is dependent upon the dog, then self-contained conceptual systems would not be possible. But we do have such conceptual systems. Further, when we consider the inner form or organization of the conceptual systems and of the perceptual order, we find radical discrepancies. One is not the duplication of the other, as James himself has shown at some length. Attempts to build a conceptualistic philosophy which shall embrace the totality of the perceptual have failed, broken by the dilemmas of many apparently unsolvable problems. This we shall illustrate by one instance, namely, that of the characters of the conceptual and perceptual continua. The conceptual continuum consists of an infinity of terms, no two of which may be selected in such a way that there will not be an infinity of other terms between them, yet each term is static and completely determinate. There are no gaps in the continuum but also no flow or flux and no becoming. In contrast, the perceptual continuum consists of no completely determinate terms, but only of parts which stand out in the sense of more or less, and all interconnected by a stream of becoming, such that no term is identical with any other, or even with itself, and stands in no fixed unchanging relationship to any other. Clearly, these two continua are radically different. We cannot set up a two-term relationship between the elements or parts of one and those of the other. We cannot do this, as suggested by Dr. Northrop, even though the two-term relationship is conceived as freely in the form of one-one, one-many, and many-one. If the perceptually given were in the form of a manifold, as Kant found it to be, such a two-term relationship might be quite conceivable, but we are at present viewing the perceptually given in the form which James gave it. In this form it is a flow or flux, and thus not consisting of determinate terms with which a two-term correlation is possible. So we must conclude that the inner form or organization of the conceptual systems and perceptual order are qualitatively different, and not merely different in degree but diverse in the sense of being incommensurable.

But while the conceptual and the perceptual are orders or systems incommensurable to each other, so that the one is ineffable with respect to the other, they unquestionably do interact. Something in the conceptual system is derived from the perceptual order. Of this there can be no doubt. However, this fact of something contained in the conceptual, which is derived from the perceptual, does not imply that the conceptual in its total or its essential nature is derived from the perceptual. What we have, rather, is the meeting of two powers or modes of the total consciousness that are in their surface manifestation alien to each other, however much they may be fused in their root source. What is being suggested here is a fusion or identity in a common root combined with parallelity in manifestation, rather than a causal connection on the surface. Because of the commonality of the root, interaction is possible, but because of

independence in essential development, each according to its own law—or *swadharma*—there is an ineluctable incommensurability in the inherent character of conception and perception. We can illustrate the interaction combined with essential incommensurability by the figure of conceiving of the perceptual flux as stream or a sea of flowing currents into which the conceptual enters as a determinate vessel and brings forth a portion of the perceptual water. The concept in its impure or mixed form consists of both the water and the vessel. The water is derived from the perceptual, while the vessel is not. Pure conceptuality is a development in terms of the vessel alone, without the water.

When Kant said, “. . . but, though all our knowledge begins with experience, it by no means follows that all arises out of experience,” he made one of the most profound observations in the whole history of philosophy. (“Knowledge” here is to be understood in the sense of *conceptual* knowledge.) The implication is that in the conceptual and perceptual we have two orders, neither of which is derived from the other. As a result, each is capable of independent or autonomous development in accordance with its own nature. The perceptual does not need the conceptual in order that empiric life may survive, as is abundantly demonstrated by the lower forms of organism. Likewise, however much it may be true that within our ordinary experience the conceptual order does not manifest until brought into contact with experience, yet the conceptual is capable of operating in its own terms and in accordance with its own law, in high disregard of all perceptual elements. It does not even need the Kantian transcendental forms of perception, namely, space and time, as is demonstrated in the development of formal mathematical systems. We do not need to decide that one order gives truth while the other does not, or that truth attaches exclusively to a relationship between the two; nor do we face the necessity of concluding that one is real while the other is unreal. Perhaps we are not yet able to answer questions of this sort in the ontological sense, but we can recognize that, relative to individual psychology, the one or the other order carries the greater, or even exclusive, reality-value and truth-value, and thus opens the door to a larger mutuality of understanding and consideration.

Conceding that the perceptual and conceptual orders are, as they stand manifested to our relative consciousness, of distinct nature, neither, in its essential character, being derived from the other, then we may well inquire as to the innate character of each. Is one substantive while the other is only functional, or is each both functional and substantive, and so forth? For James, it is clear that the primary substantiality attached to the perceptual, as being both the source and the terminal of the conceptual, while the conceptual entered into the picture preponderantly as a function or active agent which is valuable mainly as it leads to something beyond itself—a something which is always perceptual. Nonetheless, the conceptual is granted a degree of substantive value, apparently in the form of vague images which are associated with some—but not all—concepts, and can be objects of contemplation. But clearly a “vague image” is not itself of conceptual character, but a form of percept, and so we are forced to conclude that James did not grant to the conceptual order a conceptual substantiality *qua* conceptual. Thus the conceptual *qua* conceptual appears as functional only. But it is quite otherwise with the perceptual. It would appear that James viewed the perceptual as primarily, if not wholly, substantive, as is indicated by the following quotation: “The perceptual flux as

such . . . *means* nothing, and is [but] what it immediately is”⁷ Yet there are interpretations of the perceptual that vary radically from this view, as in the case of all those views wherein the percept is regarded as merely the occasion which arouses the conceptual understanding into waking consciousness. Clearly, on such a view the perceptual serves a functional office, either as a part or the whole of its significance. Likewise, there are interpretations of the conceptual which give it a substantive value, even in the sense of prime or exclusive substantive value, as for example is the case in the philosophy of Spinoza. Clearly there are important differences here, of interpretation or of insight, which require our further consideration.

What do we mean by function and substance? Of these two, the meaning of function is reasonably clear. As used in this discussion, we may understand *function* as an activity, process, or constituent, which is dependent for its value, significance, and so forth, upon something else. *Substance* or the *substantive* is that which is to be understood as in some measure the self-existent and the substrate of properties or processes, thus terminal or relatively terminal with respect to values, significance, and so forth. There are philosophies which abandon the notion of *substance* entirely, as in the case of David Hume, much of Positivism, and a large part, if not the whole, of Buddhist philosophy, but we shall not discuss this actualistic theory at this time as it does not appear to be [the] meaning affirmed by William James. Practically, from the psychological or psychic standpoint, we may view the distinction between the substantive and the functional as being such that the substantive may be an object of contemplation for its own sake, more or less completely, and thus relatively or absolutely terminal, whereas the functional is not such a contemplative or terminal object, but is only a means for reaching such.

In the history of thought it is Rationalism or Intellectualism that has affirmed Substantialism and the state of contemplation as the final state of blessedness, as is notable in the philosophies of Spinoza and of Leibniz. Or, again, as brought out by Sri Aurobindo in the following quotation:

For it is asserted to us by the *pure reason* and [it] seems to be asserted to us by Vedanta that as we are subordinate and an aspect of this Movement, so the movement is subordinate and an aspect of something other than itself, of a great timeless, spaceless Stability, *sthanu*, which is immutable, inexhaustible and unexpended, not acting though containing all this action, not energy, but pure existence.⁸

In contrast, it is empiric insight which has led to the non-substantialistic or nihilistic view that there is nothing but the movement, inhering in nothing else, as exemplified by David Hume and the Buddhists.

But though the vast rationalistic tradition affirms a substantive Existent, which is not revealed by sensuous experience, however profoundly empiric insight may be developed, the question arises as to whether this existent is real, something more than a speculative construct, and, if it is real, is its nature conceptual? That there is a real

⁷ See *Some Problems of Philosophy*, p. 49.

⁸ See *The Life Divine*, p.70 (Italics mine except last.)

Existent, which is not given to the sensuous consciousness, however acutely developed, is affirmed by more than the pure reason. Thus, quoting again from Aurobindo:

But there is a supreme experience⁹ and supreme intuition by which we go back behind our surface self and find that this becoming, change, succession are only a mode of our being and that there is that in us which is not involved at all in the becoming. Not only can we have the intuition of this that is stable and eternal in us, not only can we have the [a] glimpse of it in experience behind the veil of continually fleeting becomings, but we can draw back into it and live in it entirely, so effecting an entire change in our external life, and in our attitude, and in our action upon the movement of the world. And this stability in which we can so live is precisely that which the pure Reason has already given us, although it can be arrived at without reasoning at all, without knowing previously what it is,—it is pure existence, eternal, infinite, indefinable, not affected by the succession of Time, not involved in the extension of Space, beyond form, quantity, quality,—Self only and absolute.¹⁰

Here we have affirmed a substantial Base, affirmed by the pure reason, intuition, and mystical realization, but it is clearly not a Substance composed of conceptual stuff any more than it is of a sensuous perceptual nature. So, while on the whole the Western rationalistic thinkers, who have affirmed the reality of the non-sensuous substantial, have given the impression of meaning a conceptual sort of substance, this may well be an error of interpretation and even of understanding on their own part. In other words, the intelligibly or rationally given of which they spoke may well have been Reason plus something more. This I am convinced was the case. What they saw clearly was that here was a somewhat which had no part in sensuous experience, in fact was quite other than that, but which was certainly given to profound insight. Then, if there is only perceptual and conceptual knowledge, it belonged to the conceptual order. But it may belong to another more transcendental order of consciousness which is only isolated with difficulty. Provisionally, then we may say that the pure Existent is neither conceptual nor perceptual.

Whether or not there is a conceptual substantiality, of a nature not reducible to percepts or a transcendental order, is a question we shall leave open here. The essential point of the present critique of the Pragmatist's epistemology in general, and that of William James in particular, is the thesis that the conceptual order is not completely derivable from the perceptual, and that its meaningful reference is not exclusively to an ultimately perceptual referent. And then there remains at least a possible *a priori* referent, which the concept may mean, even though the whole office of the conceptual order may be that of instrumentalism, one way or the other.

⁹ 'Experience' as used by Aurobindo is not restricted to the raw immediacy of the sense or a time conditioned process, but embraces the ways of consciousness which I have called "Realization," "Recognition," "Enlightenment," and so forth.

¹⁰ From *The Life Divine*, pp. 73-74.