

The Possibility of Experience

Experience is universally regarded as the source of a great and useful part of human knowledge. Taking this fact for granted, there yet remains unsolved a purely philosophic problem, viz. The problems of the conditions under which alone the experience of any rational being can be a source of any knowledge whatever. This problem forms the subject of the following paper. Of the importance of the whole question [2] no student of Kant will be for an instant in doubt. Of the obscurities that yet hang about the matter, all modern philosophic discussion is a proof.

A sufficient beginning for our study will be found in one general statement about the nature of all experience. Whatever else may be implied in our concept of experience, this at least is meant by the word, viz. that the experience of any being consists of a series of conscious states. In the nature and ordering of this series, viz. in the content and the relations of its parts, must be found whatever makes knowledge through experience possible. Such at least is the assumption with which we must begin. [3] To make such knowledge possible by means of a series of conscious states, what then must be the nature of that series? As a series of conscious states, to be sure, any experience whatever would furnish at least from moment to moment a knowledge of each state by itself. For by conscious state we mean one in which the content of some moment of feeling or of thought is known to the thinking or feeling being. But such momentary knowledge is not what is desired when we ask that experience should make possible for us really important knowledge. We mean to demand of experience a knowledge extending beyond the content of one moment [4] and either into past and future, or into the external world itself, symbolized, it may be, by inner experience. How can the series of states contain or produce or justify a knowledge extending beyond the conscious data of each state? A being experiencing in succession the sensations warmth, yellowness, sweetness of taste, would indeed know of each sensation in succession that it was present just at the moment when it was present. Yet in order for this being to have any knowledge of what we call an external world or of the laws of that world, or of its own past and future, something more than has so far been mentioned as found in the [5] supposed series of states must be present. What is this more?

In answer we may say that human knowledge as derived from experience seems from the outset to depend upon two conditions in the series of conscious states which forms experience. These conditions are: (1) that in one state there shall be possible a memory of previous states; (2) that in the whole series of states there shall be found certain regularities or uniformities of sequence. The first of these conditions is necessary to make possible in any moment the transcending of that moment and of its data. The second condition makes possible any activity of classification and generalization, any notion of permanency in things or of [6] fixity in the laws of phenomena. We state the conditions as if they were clear and simple. In fact each of them is beset with manifold difficulties. Very strangely not a few writers who lay great stress

upon experience as the source of all knowledge have passed over the chief of these difficulties in perfect silence. As if it were not incumbent upon those for whom experience means everything, to lay great stress on the analysis of the nature of experience!

The Possibility of Memory

The first condition, the condition that experience shall be, not a mere series of detached states, but welded into a whole by means of a memory reproducing the past in the present, how is this to be [7] realized? Two secondary conditions are implied in the first, viz. that past states, states earlier in the series, shall have some influence informing present states, states later in the series; and, secondly, that in a given state this influence of the previous states shall be recognized. In other words, the conditions of real memory are (1) effect of past experience in modifying present experience, (2) consciousness in present experience of this effect as such. Let us exemplify. On seeing an apple, I remember a previous sight of an apple, doubtless also previous occasions when I have eaten apples. This memory makes my present sensation more than a mere transient state. It converts my [8] momentary fragment of knowledge into a part of the whole called experience. My memory of the past determines in great measure what I shall do with the present sensation, whether I shall approach and eat the apple seen, or shall do anything else with it. Memory makes experience in the larger sense possible. Only through memory is the series of states known as a series furnishing rich material for judgments. But now how is the memory possible? Only, as would seem, through a recognition of past experience as actually influencing present experience. Only by knowing that my present perception of an apple is accompanied by “fainter states” that result [9] from previous perceptions of apples am I said to remember with clearness the other apples not now seen. And the two elements of the memory are necessary to all remembrance as such. It is possible, nay for science quite certain, that my consciousness at any moment is influenced by the past experience of countless moments of my own life and of my forefathers’ lives. Yet without my conscious and definite recognition of this influence in a particular case I cannot be said to remember these past moments, nor to know them as part of my experience. Furthermore, even the reproduction in a present moment of some past experience, vividly or faintly, is surely not enough to constitute [10] memory. There must be over and above the actual influence of past upon present a recognition of this influence, and a definite recognition too; else there is no clear memory. The laws according to which states of consciousness have influence upon subsequent states are the psychological laws of retentiveness, of the association and reproducing of ideas. These are often treated as if they explained the whole of memory. In fact they explain only half, and not the most important half of the process. It is one thing to retain and to revive experiences, another thing altogether to recognize the retained and revived experiences as in truth not new data, but representation of past [11] data. It would be one thing to have called up besides the “vivid” images of a present apple “faint” images of other apples

without recognizing these images as standing for past experience; it is quite another to know this apple now present as a new datum in an experience wherein has already been given several other apples, represented by these now present “faint” images.