
The Exaggeration of the Social

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PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

THE EXAGGERATION OF THE SOCIAL

SINCE Hegel developed his theory of the state, and Spencer his conception of the social organism, it has seemed that nothing is significant which is not 'social.' Morality has been resolved into 'social well-being,' the development of thought into a 'social process,' language has become a 'social institution,' while beauty and causality are 'social conceptions.' The result of all this is misleading in various ways, of which I shall here speak of two that are very common. I shall choose Professor Royce as my 'horrible example'—not because he is more open to criticism than many others, but because I happen to have read him last.

I. The first of these is to treat the social aspect as a peculiar aspect—as if it had laws of its own—where no peculiarity exists. In the chapter on 'The Social Aspect of the Higher Forms of Docility' in his 'Psychology,' Professor Royce shows how the development of language, of general ideas, of the processes of judgment and reasoning, and of self-consciousness, is due to social intercourse. I do not understand him to say that this is the sole factor, but clearly he treats it as a peculiar factor,—that is, as a special sort of process occurring under certain special conditions,—and he leaves it practically unrelated to any other factors in mental development.

Now, of course, among the factors of mental development, no one questions the importance, or even the conspicuous importance, of social relations. But whether this factor is in any way peculiar is another question. Suppose Robinson to have been a native of his island, and thus deprived from the beginning of social intercourse.¹ Still he would not have lacked the conditions for a mental development of the same kind, though of minor degree, as we now possess. In making use of the various natural objects—the *same* object at different times and for different purposes—he would be compelled to develop a language and a system of ideas. The contrast between his judgments about the same thing at different times and between his own mode of behavior and that even of the inanimate objects

¹ The abstract character of the supposition is no bar to the argument. This is the common form of scientific procedure.

would furnish a sufficient 'social' basis for reasoning. The same contrast would be effective in developing a consciousness of self—at least so far as self is distinguished from nature—while intercourse with his dog and his goats would inevitably develop some consciousness of individuality. In a word, then, the comparison of my own thoughts at different times furnishes precisely the same conditions of contrast and identity as the comparison of my own thought with my neighbor's, while the relations between myself and natural objects are, though far less intimate, precisely the same in kind as my relation to my neighbor.² The social conditions detailed by Professor Royce are therefore only a special case of the conditions of identity and contrast required for mental development generally. And in my opinion the emphasis placed upon the social aspect tends to obscure the essential feature of the process in question. For more fundamental than the social contrast is just the fact of contrast.

To choose another illustration—in his lecture on 'Physical and Social Reality' in 'The World and the Individual,' Professor Royce shows how the conception of nature as uniformly and mechanically causal is due to the necessities of social organization, a uniform nature being, of course, a necessary condition of cooperation. The uniformity of nature is thus a 'social conception.' But he fails to note that a uniform nature is equally a condition of isolated individual activity, and indeed of any adjustment of acts to ends, or of one act to another, whether individual or cooperative. The settler in the wilderness can no more dispense with a uniform nature than can the management of a railway. Hence, from this pragmatic standpoint, the uniformity of nature is simply a universal condition of practical activity. In other words, causality as a category is more broadly *practical* than 'social.' And here again I think that the emphasis upon the social, in suppressing the more universal character, is so far misleading.

We have all heard the vague statement that 'all morality is social' and we are familiar with the point of view which reduces all vice to selfishness. This means, of course, that morality lies always between individuals and never within the individual. According to this view, Robinson on his island would be beyond the range of moral judgment, since he would be deprived of the delicious possibility of 'doing good to others.' What such a view amounts to is simply a false way of stating the now generally adopted utilitarian principle that any particular good is to be estimated in relation to other goods, which may be my own or my neighbor's. And here,

² As shown, I think, by Professor Royce in the lecture on 'The Interpretation of Nature' in the Second Series of 'The World and the Individual.'

once more, the emphasis upon the 'social' tends to obscure a more fundamental character. For the essential feature of moral action is simply that of acting from a point of view broader than the present, *i. e.*, it must be in some degree *objective*. This objective standpoint will consider my own future good as well as the good of others. It will be in some degree moral if it never reaches others.

II. A second misuse of the social category (not unrelated to the first) might be called, after a phrase of Professor James, 'the sociologist's fallacy.' It consists in the confusion of a point of view in which 'individual' and 'social' are distinct and correlative with a point of view prior to such distinction and in using the term 'social' to apply indifferently to either. What is not-individual is arbitrarily called 'social' whether the term marks a distinction or the absence of a distinction.

The point is well illustrated in the now popular tendency to regard the individual as the product of society,—or as a differentiation, and possibly an evil differentiation, from an original social unity. Historically this may be regarded as a reaction from the individualistic theories of the eighteenth century, which conceived the individual as a self-contained and complete reality anterior to the organization of society. When now it was seen that the individual could not be defined apart from society, what was more natural than to say that if society is not the product of the individual the individual must be the product of society? And yet if the individual can not be defined apart from society, neither can society be defined apart from the individual. It is therefore a misnomer to describe as 'social' that condition of mankind which preceded (or which, relatively speaking, marked the primitive stages of) social organization, for it is just as much, and just as little, a state of individual independence. It is not even, strictly speaking, to be called 'gregarious,' for any consciousness of belonging to one group rather than another must involve some sense of individuality. The point is indeed a very simple one and has been frequently made clear: what is correlative can not also be prior; there can be no degree of social order without a corresponding degree of individual distinctness. Yet we hear daily of the individual as the product of the social order and only now and then of society as the product of the individuals composing it.

The priority of the social plays a conspicuous part in our 'social psychology.' Professor Royce gives utterance to it both in his 'Psychology' and, though merely casually, in his 'The World and the Individual.' Imitation, the social factor, precedes 'love of opposition,' the individual factor;³ and consciousness of others antedates conscious-

* 'Outlines of Psychology,' p. 277.

ness of self,—or at least this is ‘nearer the truth’ than the reverse order.⁴ But if the child knows himself only in contrast with others, he must, I think, know others only in contrast with himself. Professor Royce says that “in order to contrast oneself with one’s social environment it is necessary, in general, *first* to learn how to do something that has social significance. I can not oppose you by my speech unless I *already* know how to talk. I can not rival you as a musician unless I *already* understand music. I can not endeavor to get the better of a political rival unless I *already* understand politics. But speech and music and politics have to be learned by imitation.”⁵ But (the italics are mine) why *first* and *already*? One might as well say that a triangle can not have three angles unless it *first* has three sides. Granted that the child has nothing of his own to say until he learns to talk, it is none the less true that he does not learn to talk until he has something of his own to say. Speech and music and politics are indeed developed by contact with social environment; they are none the less the products of an individual reaction, which, just so far as one understands, is also creative. And so of a long list of illustrations by which Royce shows that imitation precedes self-consciousness. Each is a case of the sociologist’s fallacy, by which a ‘not-before’ is translated into an ‘after’ and a correlative condition into a prior; and the whole is a reflection of the view that the individual is the product of the social order.

I have spoken of the misuse of the social category as if there were also a proper use for it. As a descriptive category which marks off a group of relations intimately concerned in mental development and a group of objects specially interesting to us, it is undoubtedly very serviceable. But as the basis of a scientific classification it has, so far as I can see, no validity whatever. The relations between the several factors of the individual self present, both for psychology and for ethics, the same conditions as those between the several individuals composing society. There are no social laws which are peculiarly and exclusively social.

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DISCUSSION

A WORD MORE ABOUT TRUTH

TO THE EDITORS OF THIS JOURNAL:

My failure in making converts to the conception of truth which I published in your number for March 14 of this year, seems, if I

⁴ ‘The World and the Individual,’ Second Series, p. 170, also p. 260 ff.

⁵ ‘Psychology,’ p. 278.