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A Defense of Realism

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## A DEFENSE OF REALISM.

IT is natural to the human mind to seek some basis of ultimate reality. This is not confined to those engaged in philosophical speculation. The plain, unreflecting man assumes spontaneously, though unconsciously, some kind of real background for his experience. This inherent tendency of human nature, various schools of philosophy, from the ancient sophists to the agnostics and positivists of the present day, have sought in vain to thwart. There is no genuine 'philosophic calm' without some substantial answer to those questions which are ever welling up in the soul. Man will endeavor to find some sure footing amid the shifting sands of the phenomena of life. But the critical consideration of the question, what the nature of ultimate reality may be, has taxed the powers of philosophers throughout the ages. The subject is of more than speculative interest. It touches the mainsprings of human thought and human life. According to our conceptions of the foundations of the universe our views may be broad or narrow, stimulating or depressing. To the moral and religious consciousness the question is of vital importance. No theory can satisfy the demands and yearnings of the human soul which does not, on the one hand, ascribe unique reality to man, and which, on the other hand, does not find the ground of all things in the genuine personality of God.

Among the manifold attempts to formulate a theory for the basis of things, leading to opposing extremes of thought, the most significant and comprehensive is the conflict between the so-called systems of idealism and realism. To unsophisticated common sense reality is what it appears to be; an external object is simple and largely independent in its nature; a primrose is a "yellow primrose" and "nothing more." When the insights of science break up this object of unquestioning trust, the basis of reality is pushed farther back into the realm of the mysterious, becoming a "something, we know not what," which

supports the qualities that we know, *noumena* behind *phenomena*, or a great "unknowable force" working its wonders in the universe. On the other hand, the psychological consideration that all knowledge, viewed as a process, and so far as it is related to the conscious subject, must be contained within the sphere of his own conscious life, has led to the notion that all reality must be regarded as *thought* or *idea*. Strict consistency would require a limitation to the thought of the individual thinker. Since the practical assurances of life have rendered the narrowness of such a notion absurd, and have required a recognition of the conscious life of one's fellows also, the theory has been extended so as to include all possible ideas making up the sum total of an ideal universe. Hegel and his followers have endeavored to set aside, or to swallow up, all notion of any distinctive background, and to reduce reality to one coherent, all-inclusive system of ideas.

A striking exposition of the nature and relations of man and God, to which such a system of absolute idealism leads, has been given in the works of Professor Josiah Royce, particularly in his recent book, *The Conception of God*. In the words of Professor Russell, "These various essays constitute the most noteworthy contribution to philosophic theism within the present generation. Whatever our judgment may be respecting this attempt to unite a doctrine of idealism with the interests of theistic faith, one cannot fail to be impressed with the speculative ability, the subtlety of thought, the fine analysis, and the freshness and brilliancy of presentation that characterize these writings."<sup>1</sup> But while the "brilliancy" charms and the "speculative ability" wins admiration, the conclusions reached must be, to the ordinary religious consciousness, extremely disappointing. If this is the best that the deepest thought can furnish, philosophy is powerless to stem the tide of either skepticism or pessimism. Natural science is engaged in establishing and developing the reality of the material world. In the spiritual realm the theories of idealism are endeavoring to occupy the field. Between the two both man and God are in danger of being crowded out of the universe.

<sup>1</sup>"A New Form of Theism" by Professor J. E. Russell in *New World* for June, 1898.

A system wrought out with so great subtlety cannot be answered in any summary manner. The only way to meet the argument is to follow in close touch with the author, and be prepared to call a halt at the first unwarranted step. The necessity for doing this is the excuse for entering somewhat into details in what follows.

The elaboration of the subject by Professor Royce has had the effect of clearing away much of the philosophic dust which has been wont to linger over the field of idealism, and of laying bare the roots of the matter for our inspection. The argument is based upon a truth which modern scientists have been too much disposed to overlook, a fact which, when stated, has the appearance of a truism, that all knowledge of whatever sort must be in the subjective form of consciousness, or experience. Upon the formal certainty of this point the whole system of absolute idealism is built up. If the universe to us is confined to mental content, then this mental content itself is declared to be the ultimate and absolute reality.

The first objection which Professor Royce raises against realism touches the vital point in the controversy. The whole matter seems to turn upon the one word '*beyond*.' While the general supposition of realism is that what I know is "something independent of me," and it is claimed that consciousness "bears witness to the presence of a transcendent object,"<sup>1</sup> the answer is made that, if conscious life must necessarily take the form of thought or experience, then nothing can be known beyond experience, hence the notion that knowledge is of something beyond all experience is unwarranted. The argument in this shape seems conclusive. In form it appears to be clean-cut. But upon critical examination the question arises whether we have not here an instance of that difficulty which has rendered futile so much speculative reasoning—the failure to square logical forms of argumentation with the facts of real life. The vain struggles of the ages with the dialectics of Zeno and of Kant should teach us that logical forms have no validity unless applied to the data of experience. The machinery of logic, to produce genuine results, must be continually fed from "the looms of fact." Discursive

<sup>1</sup>*The Conception of God*, pp. 144–153.

thought is inferior to immediate apprehension. The dialectic process must be regarded as a secondary and subordinate means of arriving at belief or truth. If, in some sense, with certain applications, "indirect insight proves to be better than immediate feeling," the very basis of material upon which such indirect insight works must be fact immediately felt.

This comprehensive and exclusive conception of the *within* and the *beyond* involves quantitative elements which have no place in a system of consistent idealism. To say that there can be no reference within thought to a somewhat beyond thought is to make an application to thought of a mathematical delimitation. There is here a misconception of the nature of the *beyond* of thought. We do not, in thinking, refer to something *beyond thought*, but within the compass of thought itself we distinguish between self and a somewhat really existing *beyond self*. In experience we become immediately aware of reality as an accompanying explanation of the experience. Herbert Spencer is correct in insisting that the primary distinction of consciousness is that between subject and object, or self and not-self. The central mistake of the whole Hegelian system consists in blending subject and object, and then hypostatizing the abstraction of thought. While the real is rational, rationality is by no means identical with reality. In a strict sense, we know nothing of thought, but rather know ourselves as thinking about an object. The real subject matter of philosophy is not the forms of experience, but that which experience gives. It is true that "subject and object are both members of a common reality," and that "the chasm between them is the invention of philosophy with its hard and fast distinctions ;" but while there can be no chasm between them, neither philosophy nor thought itself can get on without making between them a sharp and real distinction. While it is true that the "thing in itself" must be "in the same unity of consciousness with the thoughts that mean it," there is no contradiction in regarding it as a somewhat not identical with the thought process itself. Granting that "immediate knowledge is of what is felt, not of what is not felt,"<sup>1</sup> it does not follow that what is felt is itself a feeling. The very form of expression

<sup>1</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 152.

which the notion necessarily assumes indicates the impossibility of thought without an objective side. In the words of Professor James Seth: "The very conception of knowledge is that it is the apprehension of reality, not a mere subjective play of experience."<sup>1</sup>

Against any attempt on the part of the realist to explain the connection between thought and its transcendent object by the principle of causation, the objection is raised that by this method we simply push the necessity for interpretation step by step farther back, and thus open the door for a "fatal infinite progress." It is claimed that what is meant by causation, when interpreted, becomes idea, and this in turn requires the same principle of causation behind it. The objection rests upon an improper conception of the principle of causation. In its real significance it need imply no *regressus in infinitum*. This old notion has served as a stumbling block in philosophy to the point of weariness. By this category the mind is prompted in its experience to look for reason and explanation. The explanation of experience is the objective element itself given in consciousness. In simple experience no further interpretation is called for. Such interpretation as leads to the difficulty mentioned can be only subsequently made by the forced application of formal logic.

Another point raised against the realist is that what he means by a somewhat beyond experience, implied by experience, can be nothing more or less than further experience; that since experience to us is all, we can have no notion of anything besides just such experience. Here again, if the mechanical conception of experience is accepted, the conclusion seems unquestionable; but here, as before, the answer is a flat denial of the validity of the conception. It is a question of simple fact, to be submitted to spontaneous consciousness, whether by the object is meant a further process of thought or experience, or rather simply indefinable, unanalyzed reality. The question is not what we can conceive the consciousness of objective reality to be, upon reflection, or in what terms we may be forced to describe it. The question is: What is the real meaning of the universal notion, or element of consciousness, giving rise to the "traditional realism of common sense," to contend against which Professor Royce de-

<sup>1</sup> "The Roots of Agnosticism," *New World*, 1894.

clares to have been his purpose in entering this field? While the notions of common sense become prejudiced in details and explanations, yet these simple and ultimate notions and feelings common to the race cannot be safely put aside. The only reliable foundation for philosophy is ultimately just this stock of fundamental feelings.

If what is always meant by the *sameness* of an object is that both others and ourselves will always have the same experience under the same circumstances, then the idealistic conclusion follows. But is it true? Undoubtedly an attempt to define the term might lead to the necessity of employing such a descriptive statement, but the notion, like all other ultimate notions, is incapable of exact definition. In passing instantaneous judgment that an object is the same as has been seen before, who is ever conscious of forming the notion, either explicitly or implicitly, that the same or a similar experience would recur under the given conditions? The instantaneous judgment is directed to the object as such, and means, so far as we can approach a formulation of its meaning, a judgment of permanent substantiality. It is an immediate consciousness of the consistency of the objective element of thought.

The objection that the realist makes an illegitimate leap beyond experience renders pertinent in turn the inquiry by what sort of steps the idealist himself arrives at his all-embracing system. Regarding experience in this quantitative way, and confining all knowledge to the limits of that experience, how is it that idealism becomes absolute, encompassing the universe of reality? The explanation given is that our experience, in "always pointing beyond itself," points to "other possible experience not here presented." "The intimacy of the relation of our fragmentary experience to this total experience is indicated by the way in which our experience implies that total." Our experience "demands from us statements as to whether these ideas are truly fulfilled or not." "It is in this sense that our experience implies a beyond." "The solution of the antinomy lies in asserting that the beyond is itself content of an actual experience." The passage from subjective idealism to absolute idealism is thus made by a mere implication which amounts to nothing more

than analogy. The mere notion of other experience, based upon my knowledge of what experience is, can no more make such other experience a reality to me than can the objectionable notion of what is beyond all experience. Although "I can conceive infinitely more than I can verify," it does not follow that my manifold conceptions are, or ever will be, verified.

While to those "obstinate questionings" and "high instincts," which are "a master light of all our seeing," must be attributed all the force which poetic insight gives them, yet these have an objective reference, and cannot be made subservient to a system of abstraction. It is true that like Tennyson's 'little flower,' man is 'the whole in miniature,' and that "in the little world of the human soul the great universe reports itself." The force of this is to unite the universe in a related and rational system, every part of which has meaning for every other part. It cannot go so far as to consolidate both flower and man, and all that exists, into one homogeneous block.

This system of exclusive dialectics, logically followed out, reduces to a narrow solipsism, and the attempt to reach out and seize upon that other experience which one has simply "meant to mean," is sheer assumption. When Professor Royce declares that there is no such thing as an experience that is not felt, one might go farther and add that so far as we have any means of asserting, there is no such thing as an experience which we ourselves have not felt.

Another step in the argument by which all transcendence is abolished, and lines are drawn out from the knowledge of the individual implicating the individual consciousness in the entire system of reality, is based upon the very power to assert one's ignorance. Professor Royce says: "It is a small thing to say that man is ignorant. It is a great thing to undertake to comprehend the meaning of human ignorance." "Every *if* implies an *is*." The very nature of human ignorance is such that it cannot be conceived or defined "apart from the assertion that there is in truth, at the heart of the world, an Absolute and Universal Intelligence, for which thought and experience, so divided in us, are in complete and harmonious

unity." That is to say, that in stating my ignorance, I thereby indicate that I have a conception of that of which I am ignorant. Does it not seem that there is here a tremendous grasp after the absolute? Carrying this argument to its limits, the greater the statement of ignorance I can manage to make, the more I know, and in conceiving and stating that I am ignorant of the whole sphere of reality beyond my present knowledge, by virtue of the very ability to form such a conception and statement, I indicate an implication and consolidation in the entire system. Such an argument is valid only against that phase of positive agnosticism which claims the impossibility of any knowledge beyond that which is included within its narrow limitations. To attempt to carry the notion so far as to make it serviceable for the theories of monistic idealism is a *reductio ad absurdum*. The bare notion of *something* more than my present knowledge is sufficient to enable me to state my ignorance. While such a notion is universal in humanity, while man is ever prompted to push onward and knowledge grows "from more to more," there is no warrant for so bold an interpretation of that impulse.

The attempt is made to show that such a system of idealism is not inconsistent with the demands of realism; that it admits of real selves and a real absolute or God; but one searches in vain for any approach to success in the attempt. Personality is reduced to experience. "To assert a truth as more than possible, is to assert the concrete reality of an experience that knows this truth." Mere experience cannot assure us of the uniqueness of the individual. "Logical considerations must supply the element of uniqueness." What is identified "is always a collection of universal types, never an individual." "That which constitutes personality is the intelligence of the universal in experience." Personality thus becomes the mere meeting point of lines of thought or experience.

It is curiously significant that at this point the most ambitious system of gnosticism falls into line with the methods of agnosticism. The conclusions of the one give us a self no more real than those of the other. Hume, the 'prince of agnostics,' with reference to the question of any knowledge of the reality of the self,

says: "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, . . . . I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception." Hence, he concludes that men are "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions." Herbert Spencer derives the conscious life of the person from the evolutionary operation of forces. This is a direct reversal of reality. Such views overlook the fact that all thought, all perception, and all conception of force, presuppose the originating reality of the self-conscious person. Consciousness is represented as something derived and exceptional, "the one lock that cannot be fitted, instead of being itself the key that opens all the hoards of the universe." The unique existence of self and the data simply given in consciousness, must be the beginning, if not also the end, of philosophy.

Having construed the reality of the self as experience, the system cannot be expected to afford any satisfactory account of the reality of one's fellow-beings. If my apprehension of my own existence must be confined to the shadows of formality, the best I can do for my fellows is to attribute to them, at second hand, by inference, a formality similar to my own. In another connection, Professor Royce has said that, when "conversing with another man, my experience refers beyond this to a reality supposed by me to have an aspect quite independent of my experience, but this independence is still only the independence belonging to an experience other than my own, namely my fellow's experience."<sup>1</sup> The statement that we merely attribute to our fellow-beings experience like our own finds no approval in consciousness. We know our fellows immediately as standing in a particular relation of reciprocity with ourselves. No sort of logical process of inference, based upon a parallelism with my own consciousness, can suffice to account for the real sort of personality which I attribute to the friend into whose face I am looking. The power of one person to give rise to thought, feeling, activity, in the mind of another, even by the use of customary signs, is among the pro-

<sup>1</sup> "The External World and the Social Consciousness," and "Self-consciousness, Social Consciousness, and Nature," *PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW*, Sept., 1894, and Sept. and Nov., 1895.

foundest of miracles. Personality is a force immediately felt, but never thought.

In passing to the external world, the hold upon reality becomes necessarily further attenuated. Such a forced passage outward from solipsism becomes more inferential and mystical as the advance continues. Having formed attachments with other beings like the self, by a second step in deduction we get all that there is for us of the external world. This becomes a kind of system of social agreement, gradually developed, commencing in the instinct of infancy; mere angles, as it were, in the lines of connection with our fellows. It is by the 'social consciousness' that we form "the idea of a *tertium quid*." It is claimed that if a child should "grow up alone with lifeless nature, there is nothing to indicate that he would become as self-conscious as is now a fairly educated cat." There is doubtless much truth involved in this. No doubt our knowledge of the world has been largely built up and modified through social interchange; but this does not touch our question at the vital point. Can we suppose that without such social consciousness we should have no notion of a not-self? Is it to be presumed that a fairly educated cat has no immediate apprehension of objectivity?

To make out such a conception of God as to satisfy the realistic demands of consciousness must be a still harder task for such a system. Having exhausted the whole stock of formal reality or experience in accounting for the self and fellow-beings, there is nothing left. The only available course is a resort to identity. If experience is reality and includes all of reality, then experience is absolute, and if the Absolute includes all of experience, then he must include the experience of each individual person, and God is simply the sum total of all such experience. According to Professor Royce, "If it is the universal presupposition of rationality that just such a relation may, and in practice does, bind many moments in my own flowing experience to the same object not presented in any one of those moments, then the only way in which this relation can be interpreted is to suppose that all these moments are really fragments of one Unity of Consciousness." The ultimate reality is the whole of experience viewed

as whole. Here the notion of quantity is pushed boldly forward. There is a mistaken application to experience of the formal laws of logic. The relation of sameness between my experience and that of my fellow is not that of a consuming identity; neither is there such a relation necessary between human and Divine experience. While "the individual cannot be ethical and undertake to exist separately from God's life," to absolutely swallow up the individual life in God's life destroys all basis for ethics. This is doubtless the most alluring of all the philosophic make-shifts which have been proposed to the moral consciousness, but nothing can ever be acceptable which does not accord to man a position concrete and unique. What sort of a notion can be formed of a God literally made up of millions of fragments which cannot possibly be apprehended otherwise than as discrete individuals? In any healthy process of thought, retaining actual connections with real life, how can such a conception be carried farther than the merest fancy of subtle imagination? Such a notion is worthy company for that positivistic abstraction set up to do service as the God of the so-called "religion of humanity." If we, in our experience, are but fragments, is God simply the sum total of these fragments, or is he something more? If the former, then surely the deepest questionings of humanity are never answered, its highest ideals are nowhere realized, and we are "cabined, cribbed, confined," within the narrow round of our human treadmill. If God is something more, then the surplus becomes that transcendent object against which the system contends. In either case the notion is an abstraction, the product of abstruse ingenuity.

The important truth in all this, as in the Hegelian system in general, is that it shows the universe to be through and through systematic and rational. The error lies in disregarding the primary facts of consciousness, in sinking the man in the philosopher, in following so far the specious forms of dialectics as to lose sight of one's philosophic home. In burying the real subject and the real object in the abstraction of thought, the system fails to provide any real foundation for that dynamic principle which for both natural science and philosophy is an indispensable token of reality.

In rejecting such conclusions, what is the alternative? In

turning away from the blankness of materialism only to be disappointed with this most ambitious of spiritualistic systems, is agnosticism the last resort? It must not be forgotten that the author of another system of idealism has also claimed to voice the notions of plain common sense. In view of the extremes to which the speculations of ontological idealism have carried us, is it not time to raise the cry: Back to Berkeley? His ideas are fragmentary; they were not worked out to systematic completion; but they afford sufficient principles and suggestions to form the basis of an adequate system of spiritualistic philosophy. While his view no less emphatically avoided the inconsistencies of materialism, and of crude, uncritical realism, it saved the reality of the world of persons and of God. In the failure to distinguish his theory from other types of idealism, it has suffered a vast amount of unwarranted criticism. Since Berkeley's time, there has been a popular notion that he abolished the external world. Nothing could be further from the truth. He claimed, not without reason, to give to the outer world an absolutely real interpretation. "If by matter you understand that which is seen, felt, tasted, and touched, then I say matter exists, I am as firm a believer in its existence as any one can be, and herein I agree with the vulgar." "Those immediate objects of perception, which according to you are only appearances of things, I take to be the real things themselves." The element that he sought to banish was the useless notion of an indefinite and unknowable somewhat underlying qualities as a *substratum*. In advance of Locke's position that we know only qualities, he argued that in knowing qualities we perceive, or know, reality itself. His statement that the *being* of things is *being perceived* is perhaps unfortunate, but upon this point much needless criticism has been expended. There are clauses in his writings which indicate that upon these points he entertained no such extreme views as have been attributed to him. The statement admits of two interpretations. In insisting upon the truth of one, he appears to have relatively neglected the other. It is impossible to deny that a thing can enter into consciousness only in the form of being known, but this does not conflict with the further truth that the

reality of the thing is not exhausted by knowledge. According to such a system of thought, consistently completed, the process of conscious mental activity originates in the direct action of the Infinite upon the finite, or, since it is necessary to recognize the force of subjective activity, it should rather be stated as a direct interaction between the Infinite and the finite spirit.

It is interesting to note that the scientific world, with all its ridicule of Berkleianism, has found no better way than to run a parallel course. The "unknowable force" of cautious scientific agnosticism, so far as it is allowed to go, takes the place of Berkeley's Infinite Spirit. Mr. Lewes has cheerfully accompanied Berkeley as far as the limits of positivism, only criticising him for taking a step beyond.

Much criticism has been given upon the supposition that the theory does not provide for the continued sameness of the object ; but there seems to be nothing to warrant this. To those who break loose from the crude notions of materialism, and accept the premise that all reality known to us is only known as acting or energizing, the sameness of the object can be defined only as continued energizing in uniformly regulated methods.

If for the mature reflective consciousness, as well as for the consciousness of early childhood, reality is dynamic ; if the self appears to us only as acting, and we are conscious of our relations with our fellows as an inter-action, may we not take the further step with Berkeley, and accept the proposition that in all other perception there is an immediate inter-action between the Infinite and the finite ? This need not involve us in the objectionable theories of pantheism. To claim that perception is such an immediate inter-action does not involve the notion of blind force, or the assertion that the Infinite is exhausted by the range of human perception. Is the view that the universe which we know as the objective side of consciousness, is the immediate 'will of God,' an assumption ? The revelations of nature, crowding in upon all our conscious life, and constituting our primary points of contact with the world of reality, must be regarded as having their source in the Absolute, whatever our conception of the Absolute may be. According to this view, God is neither impersonal nor supra-personal, but *supremely personal*.

If we are to accept idealism, it must have an objective reference. Idealism may well be psychological and epistemological, but *not ontological*. In the act of knowledge the difference between subject and object is not overcome. Hegel should have rested in the position that thought is founded upon difference, without proceeding to identification. Individuals must be admitted to exist not merely as parts, but in a genuine sense, as wholes. Thought is to be regarded as an account of the world, and not as the world itself. Life is more than a "binomial theorem." The universe is not an "unearthly ballet of bloodless categories." Our knowledge, at first hand, is a matter of actual seeing. Not reason, but immediate apprehension, is fundamental. We are not confined to the method of tracing the threads of logic through a wilderness of speculation, but may here and there rise to a commanding position and take a direct view of our bearings.

If we name our faith realism, there is no objection so long as it is sufficiently critical. The lumpy notions of materialism, or the conception of an independent *substratum*, can have no place. On this line the two great opposites can easily meet and both together may extend a hand to Reid's 'man of the street,' accepting the truth of what he really means, but with the modifications of clear insight. The essential elements of the common consciousness of the race must eventually find vindication. Philosophy comes into this plain and practical life of ours, "not to destroy, but to fulfill." Upon this basis the chilling influence of scientific conclusions is overcome; the deepest yearnings of the religious consciousness have free scope; questions about the miraculous have no longer a disturbing influence; and the Infinite and Absolute God comes, in very truth, into actual touch and sympathy with man's inmost soul.

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