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OUR KNOWLEDGE OF ONE ANOTHER

By C. C. J. WEBB

Fellow of the Academy

ANNUAL PHILOSOPHICAL LECTURES

Henriette Hertz Trust

BRITISH ACADEMY

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ANNUAL PHILOSOPHICAL LECTURE
HENRIETTE HERTZ TRUST

OUR KNOWLEDGE OF ONE ANOTHER

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Fellow of the Academy

Read July 9, 1930

I THINK that it will be generally allowed that the nature of our self-consciousness on the one hand, and that of our perception of the external world on the other, are wont to receive in philosophical discussion a larger share of consideration than the nature of our mutual recognition of one another as persons with whom social intercourse is possible. The explanation of this comparative neglect of the problem of our knowledge of one another is probably to be sought, at any rate in part, in the fact that in our acquaintance with our fellow human beings we may, on a first inspection, seem merely to be combining the two other kinds of cognition to which I have referred. That I am not alone I am, it may be suggested, certified by perceptions of the same kind as those which inform me of the existence of external objects other than my fellow human beings; while in my interpretation of these perceptions as in this instance revealing not merely external objects but objects significant of feelings, thoughts, purposes of the same nature as my own, yet not my own, I am but supposing the consciousness which I have of myself to be as it were repeated, although with variations; which variations themselves, however, are only apprehended through an imaginative reproduction of them as feelings, thoughts, purposes belonging to myself. I do not suppose that the assumptions I have just described are usually worked out in detail; if they were, the difficulties which they involve, and to some of which I propose in this lecture to invite your attention, would more often disturb

acquiescence in them. But I think that the assumptions are implied in what I believe to be a not uncommon failure to realize that the problem presented by the mutual recognitions of persons is of no less philosophical importance, no less primary and relatively independent than those of self-consciousness and of perception; that it might even be plausibly contended that this mutual recognition is presupposed both by self-consciousness and by perception of the external world; and that, though this thesis should turn out to be untenable, yet that light may be thrown alike on our self-consciousness and on our perception of the external world by a study of that awareness of other persons which we enjoy in our experience of social intercourse.

It is perhaps worth pointing out, in order to clear the ground, that only to superficial reflection will it seem possible to account for this awareness itself by a process which it is natural enough to employ in ascertaining whether what has the appearance of a living man is truly such or, say, a waxwork figure. There was such a figure of a policeman at the door of Madame Tussaud's Exhibition in my youth, and one was dared to make sure by a pinch whether this were a real or an artificial guardian of the peace. Would he react to the pinch as a real one would—that is, as one would react oneself if so assaulted? But this process, used as a method of testing the reality of a claimant to the status of another person, presupposes our possession of the idea of another person, who can feel and act as I feel and act. It could not create this idea, nor indeed suggest itself at all, were this idea not already present in one's mind. If we suppose it to be the source of this idea, we are forgetting that one cannot perceive one's own body so as to become aware of its shape except in a mirror; and that, as is hinted by the legend of Narcissus and by Aesop's fable of the dog with the meat, a first experience of beholding one's own reflected image would be far from suggesting its true interpretation. Rather

it would lead to such vain embraces or futile attacks as those stories tell of. But, leaving on one side this by no means unimportant consideration, the attempt to account for our awareness of other persons as an inference from the resemblance of their bodily shape and movements to our own implies that our initial position is that of a 'solipsist', aware only of himself and needing, before he can attain to consciousness of any reality other than himself, to infer a cause beyond himself of what at first appear to him to be merely states or feelings of his own. I have a recollection of hearing the late Lord Balfour remark in the course of a philosophical discussion that he found it very difficult to deny 'solipsism' to be our original condition, but no less difficult to see how, if it were so, we could ever get out of it. The second difficulty appears to me insuperable, but as to the former I cannot believe that solipsism is a position that any one was ever really in. A purely feeling consciousness, for which the contrast of self with what is other than self does not exist, there may be, though it is not to such a consciousness that we could attribute an act of inference. But, for the term 'solipsist' to be applicable to it, this contrast must be supposed already present, at least ideally. If, however, I attempt, for the sake of argument, to imagine a being conscious of himself and of states of himself as such, but of nothing beyond himself with which to contrast these, I can (though with difficulty and without conviction) persuade myself to picture him as seeking in something other than himself the cause of changes in his own experience, some archetype, so to say, of what as a state of himself he already *ex hypothesi* distinguishes from himself; but that he should take this something other than himself to be a reduplication of that which, also *ex hypothesi*, is essentially unique, the *solus ipse*, insistence on whose uniqueness for each subject is the very point of the doctrine which we are criticizing, this I cannot bring myself even to imagine.

But the impossibility of the whole doctrine is perpetually

being forced upon us as we try to describe it by the difficulty which we find in expressing it intelligibly. An original or native solipsism is surely a chimera. The only fact to which the name can be legitimately given is a speculation arising in the mind of one who, though already possessed of the conception of other selves, asks himself whether it could not be dispensed with, and forces his imagination to make an effort to dispense with it.

If, however, we dismiss as on every ground unsatisfactory the attempt to explain our knowledge of one another as an inference from the shape and movements of certain external objects to their association with a consciousness such as each of us has of his own self, what account are we to give of that knowledge? For, despite the difficulties which I have mentioned as besetting that which I have rejected, it seems plain both that we do, as a matter of fact, regard a certain sort of shape and certain kinds of movement as inseparably conjoined with the capacity for social intercourse which constitutes our experience of persons; and that it is only by 'putting ourselves in their place', by interpreting the behaviour of others by feelings, thoughts, and purposes, such as we ourselves experience in ourselves, that the mutual understanding involved in social intercourse is attained.

So far as regards the former of these apparent facts, we must, no doubt, note that we are quite familiar with cases in which the communication of thoughts, feelings, purposes, may and does take place, through letters, 'broadcasting', books, painting, music, where the parties do not perceive each other's bodily form; nay, where one party may actually no longer exist in the body at all, but 'being dead, still speaks' (as we say) through his works to those who are alive. In such cases it is assuredly not from our perception of an external object shaped and moving in certain ways that we infer the person. On the contrary, we infer from the apprehension of thoughts and emotions not our own that such external objects exist or have existed as we have learnt from our own experience, confirmed by that of others,

are regularly associated with thinking and feeling. Indeed the hypothesis that in some instances thoughts and emotions may be communicated to us by incorporeal spirits, though it may be judged gratuitous and improbable, cannot be ruled out as logically inadmissible. In the majority of alleged instances of such communication, however, it is to be observed that perception of external objects still plays its part; there are written or spoken words, or other sights or sounds, serving as the means of communication; and it is precisely where even these are lacking, where a thought seems to occur or an emotion to arise, which the person to whom this happens takes to be 'put into his mind' by some one else, that this supposition of origination by the activity of another person would be generally allowed to be most precarious and unverifiable.

Normally, at any rate, the perception of a certain kind of external object is necessary to prompt us to engage in social intercourse by indicating the presence of a person capable thereof. But this perception by itself would have no effect in bringing about such intercourse without the establishment of a *rapport* between the communicating parties which is a direct relation, not analysable into relations of any other kind or explicable in terms of any others. The invention of writing and of other means of human communication and expression has introduced into the mechanism of such communication various modifications which not only substitute, as the primary provocative to social intercourse, for the perception of a human body the perception of the object serving as the means of communication, but also render possible, as we have seen, the apprehension by one person of thoughts, feelings, and purposes, of another person, which have not been communicated by that other especially to him, and that even where no mutual *rapport* between the author and the recipient of the communication is possible. A study of the effect of these developments on the consciousness of personal fellowship would be of great value; but what I am now concerned to point out is that they

all presuppose the existence of what I have called a mutual *rapport* between persons, such as is exemplified in an ordinary conversation, and cannot be exhaustively accounted for as an inference from the perception by each interlocutor of the other's body and its movements. Upon the reality or necessity to the life of man as a rational and social being of this *rapport* I would insist; but, while decidedly distinguishing it from any process (however closely associated with it) which should be capable of explanation in terms of a purely natural science, pledged to leave what is spiritual out of its calculations, I have no such interest as might be suspected in maintaining the actuality or even the possibility of what is usually called 'telepathy', still less of conversations with discarnate spirits. The reality and necessity of a direct relation between human minds or souls is quite compatible with the presence in the constitution of human nature of conditions inconsistent with the occurrence of such alleged phenomena. Until, however, the presence of such conditions is satisfactorily ascertained, the question of their occurrence must remain a matter of empirical evidence.

I now turn from the perception of external objects to the self-consciousness which, according to the 'inferential' theory of our knowledge of one another, is also presupposed by that knowledge. The consciousness of self may be, as Descartes held, the bed-rock of certainty, to which when we are come, we can question and doubt no farther; but it is not with this consciousness of self that our experience begins. Of all the truths that Plato taught, none is more irrefragable than the truth intimated in his parable of the large and small letters that we come to a knowledge of our own inner being through acquaintance with the societies in which the spiritual nature whereof individual souls are instances has expressed itself, and by which these individual souls have themselves been moulded. The history of moral reflection as presented in literature, wherein appreciation of goodness and badness in others long precedes such introspection as

we find, for example, in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine; the language in which, when introspection and self-examination have come into use, we talk of the soul's interior life; the method instinctively pursued in self-criticism of trying 'to see ourselves as others see us'—all confirm this doctrine of Plato's; and we may recall the same philosopher's description in the *Theaetetus* of thinking as a silent converse of the soul with herself, patterned as it were upon such discussions as he has detailed for us in his own Socratic dialogues.

The lesson of all this is that we can no more derive our knowledge of one another from our self-consciousness than from our perception of external objects, or from a mere combination of the two. For our knowledge of one another would seem to be anterior in time to our consciousness of self as such; and indeed a more plausible case might be made out for deriving our self-consciousness from our consciousness of other persons than *vice versa*. The child, as has often been remarked, is apt to speak of himself in the third person before he acquires the habit of using the first; and sometimes the first realization of the unique selfhood implied in calling oneself 'I' may with children of a reflective disposition come as a sudden and, for the moment, overwhelming experience. I can recollect something of the kind as happening to me when five or six years old; and the like is related of himself as a very young child by Jean Paul Richter.¹ Again, the tendency of children and primitive men to personify objects which we should regard as impersonal has been frequently noted; and this observation might be employed in support of a contention that our perception of material things is so far from forming a premiss of the inference whereby we reach the knowledge of other persons, that that perception itself originates rather in our primary apprehension of other persons by the dropping out of it, in certain cases, in which it has been frequently disappointed, of the expectation of a personal response.

¹ Quoted in the review of his biography in Carlyle's *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, ed. 1888, i. 30.

I could not, however, myself go so far in reaction from the theory which I began this lecture by criticizing. I think indeed that in all probability the apprehension of one's fellows is, of the three kinds of apprehension which we have been considering, the first to predominate in human experience; that reflection on oneself as separate from one's fellows or on *things* as being of a different nature from theirs is subsequent to our recognition of them. But these distinctions, when recognized, are recognized and not created. Self-consciousness and perception of an external world are alike fundamentally diverse from one another and from awareness of other persons, however intimately associated and intertwined with one another these three modes of consciousness may be. Nowhere, to my mind, has the impossibility of deriving our perception of an external world from any experience which does not already involve it been more convincingly demonstrated than in the remarkable articles published on this subject some twenty years ago in *Mind*¹ by Mr. Joseph, my immediate predecessor in the delivery of a lecture on this foundation; and the recognition of self-consciousness as the fundamental feature of all experience is, one may fairly say, the characteristic note of modern philosophy. No manipulation of unextended feelings will yield the consciousness of an extended world; no genuine 'solipsist' (did such exist) could discover *another* self. But it is because he *is* a self that a man can be aware of others that are selves; as it is because he *is*, or if we prefer to say so, *has* a sensitive material organism that he can perceive other material objects, including indeed those other sensitive material organisms, the establishment of physical contact wherewith is the normal condition of spiritual relations between persons for which such contact can never by itself fully account; but including also objects the contact with which does *not* prove to be the occasion of these relations, and which we thus come to distinguish as not *persons* but only *things*.

¹ Vol. xix, pp. 305 and 457; xx, p. 161.

I should then maintain on the one hand that, while our consciousness of self is *sui generis*; while it is, as Descartes showed, beyond the reach of question or doubt, because even doubting presupposes a doubter; while it is the recognition of that unity of apperception which, as Kant taught, is presupposed in all the processes of synthesis which constitute our experience; yet, on the other hand, this consciousness of self is mediated to us by the apprehension of others as our *fellows*. We could not apprehend them as such, if we were not that to them which we apprehend them as being to us, namely *socii*; nor could we be their fellows if *we* were not *selves*, whose nature is revealed to us in the mirror which they, as it were, hold up to us; and when, through the mediation of social intercourse there has been developed in us an *explicit* consciousness of self, this is the recognition of a distinction between ourselves and others which is already in existence and without which social intercourse could not have been.

Again, I suppose that the first external object of which each of us was aware was the body of his mother or nurse, and this it was which mediated to us our primary experience of social intercourse. Were there not really a body, an external object, and had not the infant a body external to it in space and in physical contact with it, we should not have been aware of it; while it is only at a far more advanced stage of our mental development, and only gradually then, that the differentiation between the *merely* external object or thing and the human or animal body, the external object which is capable of mediating social or quasi-social intercourse, becomes the sharp distinction which it is for us to-day.

It would take me too far afield or carry me into regions with which I can claim no familiar acquaintance were I to do more than point out here that a certain support is lent to the thesis here defended, which gives to our awareness of our fellows a primacy of the kind above described among our modes of apprehending reality, both by the results of modern investigation of what is called 'crowd-psychology'

and also by the theories, based in the main on the study of mental pathology, which go by the name of the 'new psychology'. For the former suggest that we still bear about us, and unmistakably display on certain occasions, the traces of the development of individual personality within the bosom of a group, the members of which were directly conscious of their unity therein; while the latter find the key to the understanding of the structure and growth of the human mind in what they are wont to describe as *libido*, or, as we may prefer to say (in order to avoid a word with associations that inevitably colour its use in a wider than its original sense), in love-relationships, such as would first arise in their most elementary form within the community of the primitive family.

I pass now to some considerations regarding the relation of our knowledge of one another to that form of human experience the study of which has for some considerable time chiefly occupied my own attention. I mean our religious experience.

Religious experience I take to be a normal function of the human spirit; and by religious experience I understand the consciousness of Something to which all else that we experience, ourselves included, *totum quod sumus et in quo sumus*, is related as to its background, its meaning, or its cause, and related, since we are thus ourselves included, not merely remotely and inferentially but directly and intimately; which therefore excites in us a sentiment of awe and reverence, which may range from a cowering fear like Caliban's up to the 'perfect love' of St. John, which 'casts out fear, because fear hath torment', but of which this is the peculiar and distinguishing object, not to be confounded with other objects of fear or love which are not, to use the convenient term lately made current by Professor Rudolf Otto, 'numinous'. The famous lines composed by Wordsworth 'a few miles above Tintern Abbey' describe, no doubt, the religious experience of a great poet, and an experience in mediating which what we call the beauty of nature played an excep-

tionally preponderant part; and I am speaking of religious experience as existing in some fashion and degree in the child or savage as well as in the mature or the civilized man, and as capable of mediation by many other forms of being than those which especially communicated to the writer of those lines the consciousness which they describe. Yet, for reasons which I will shortly give, I will remind you that this was the consciousness of

A Presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

I quote these familiar words because it would be hard to find any better expression of the truths which I wish here to insist upon in regard to religious experience: the truth that it is the experience of a unitary principle in all experience and in the multitude of objects of experience, and may be mediated by any part of that experience or by the totality of its parts; and the truth that it is an experience which, as Wordsworth says, 'disturbs' him who enjoys or suffers it, as being an experience of what intimately concerns him, and touches him, so to say, to the quick.

'The mind of man', 'all thinking things', 'all objects of all thought';—the different kinds of experience which we have already discussed, the apprehension of our fellows, the consciousness of self, our perception of the external world, all mediate the experience of something which is other than them all, yet can reveal itself in any of them all. The many forms of nature-worship; the Indian faiths for which God is above all the *Atman* or true Self; the type of religion most familiar to ourselves, wherein, where a multitude or even two or three are gathered together, another more august

socius is discovered in the midst of them, in their common relation to whom they find the principle of their social unity; these illustrate the 'varieties of religious experience' corresponding to the different modes of its mediation. It is the third variety which is relevant to our present inquiry.

In that variety the object of the religious consciousness is commonly envisaged as 'another person'—as the object, that is to say, of the kind of knowledge with which this lecture is concerned—but always, I think, with a difference. In this connexion I should like gratefully to acknowledge the assistance in the discrimination of religious from social experience which I have received from the treatment of the subject in Professor Alexander's Gifford Lectures on *Space, Time, and Deity*.¹ We cannot count, as he has pointed out, on the same kind of response in the case of God as certifies us that we are in spiritual relations with another finite person; and a man's religion has often been wrecked on the discovery which was made by the priests of Baal of old, that 'there is neither voice nor any to answer nor any that regards' his prayers. It is not given to many to welcome, as Goethe welcomed, the express affirmation of Spinoza that in loving God we must not seek for a reciprocation of our love. But neither is it necessary to accept that affirmation. Without expecting the kind of answer of which the priests of Baal were disappointed, we may be assured that our worship is not in vain. May I here adopt some words from the passage in Professor Alexander's book to which I have already referred—although in so doing I shall omit others in their immediate context which imply certain peculiarities of their writer's theology which I do not accept or find to be necessarily involved in the statement which I shall quote? 'Though we speak', says Professor Alexander, 'as we inevitably must, in human terms of God's response to us, there is no direct experience of that response except through our own feeling that devotion to God or worship carries with it its own satisfaction.' 'God [Professor Alexander says

¹ Vol. ii, pp. 380, 381.

‘the universe’] does not answer our prayers by overt external actions, as our fellows respond to our social approaches to them, but in the strength and sustainment which he [or ‘it’, as my author puts it] gives to our minds.’ ‘In both cases’, he adds, ‘it is intercourse with the object which discovers it to us, but religious intercourse is different from social intercourse, and is only called such by a metaphor. In this respect our faith in God is nearer to simple sensation [I should prefer to say ‘perception’] than our assurance of other minds. The assurance of the reality of God we cannot call surer than our assurance of each other’s minds; both are equally sure; but it is simpler. Moreover, being infinite, God has the wider and deeper attachment in the nature of things, as Berkeley realized.’

These last words of my quotation from Professor Alexander suggest the distinction of religious from social experience, of our knowledge of God from our knowledge of one another, which arises from the different relation in which they respectively stand to the two other kinds of experience with the relation of which to our knowledge of one another the earlier part of this lecture was concerned.

The perception of the external world, itself mediated through sensations from which, nevertheless, taken apart from such perception merely as feelings of the perceiving individual, I believe it to be impossible to derive our knowledge of external objects extended in space—this perception in its turn mediates to each of us the knowledge of other persons, though, here again, that knowledge cannot, I hold, be derived from the perception apart from a spiritual *rapport* (as I have called it) for which the perception by itself does not account. But it is not the perception of external objects as such, but only the perception of *certain* objects—human bodies and their movements, sounds recognized as proceeding from human bodies, papers or the like inscribed with marks attributed to human agency and interpreted as signs of human feelings, apprehensions, purposes, or thoughts—it is only the perception of *such* objects that mediates to us

the knowledge of other persons. We may, as we saw, be mistaken in the first instance as to whether a particular object before us is of this kind, the criterion being what Professor Alexander calls 'an overt external action' (itself of course an object of perception) by which 'our fellows respond to our social approaches'. The discrimination of perceptions in connexion with which such a response is to be expected is, as we saw, only gradually effected in the course of the development whether of the race or of the individual. On the other hand, a perceived object may mediate a consciousness of the numinous—to use Otto's word—and here the test of what may be called a social response is, as we have noted, not usually to be had. Moreover, though not all objects of perception do, nor do any always, mediate this consciousness, *any objects may* do so; since that of which we are aware in our religious experience is immanent in all reality, and (I put it vaguely, in order to avoid raising further questions which, however important, are remote from our present purpose) at the back of all reality.

Turning from our perception of the external world to our self-consciousness, I recognize my fellows indeed in virtue of my being what each of them is, a self: but I recognize them as being selves other than my own self: my relation to them, though it is to be carefully borne in mind that it is not adequately described as one of mutual exclusion (since communication to the other of what is in the mind of each is of its very essence) yet *does* involve mutual exclusion, in so far as from first to last I am not you and you are not I. Such, however, is not the character of the relation between the self and God. No one who believes in God regards God's privity to the thoughts and intents of his heart, however the thought of it may make him ashamed and afraid, as an invasion of his personality, such as he would resent did he discover a like privity on the part of a fellow man to whom he has not chosen to reveal those thoughts and intents. Even at a lower level of spiritual

development, where one would hardly speak of the object of the religious consciousness as 'God', I take it that this object is never treated as a *mere* thing nor as a *mere* fellow being; but that there is attributed to it what I may perhaps be allowed to call a mystical intimacy with us, which 'disturbs' him who experiences it, though not necessarily 'with the joy of elevated thoughts' (for the feeling may be very far from joyful and the thoughts by no means such as we should call 'elevated'), but yet with a sense of something which closely touches the springs of individual personal life.

In conclusion I would add a few words about a matter which is naturally suggested by the considerations which I have been laying before you, and which brings into relation with them a problem of great importance and difficulty, which I can but mention now and not discuss. We saw that we are capable of perceiving external objects because we are ourselves material organisms, or, if we prefer to say so, because we have material bodies which are organic to us; and that we are capable of enjoying social intercourse with other persons because we are ourselves persons or self-conscious selves. Are we to go on to say that we are capable of a knowledge of God because we are ourselves divine? There is much in the symbolical phraseology of the great historical religions to authorize such a statement. The Christian apostle adopts the Stoic poet's declaration that we are God's offspring; the Scriptures which Jews and Christians alike accept as inspired represent man as created in God's image and quickened to life by the imparting of God's own breath; while the human soul was in the Orphic theology an immortal god fallen into a lower sphere of being. Again, the realization of the soul's true divinity is the aim set before us by many, perhaps by most, of the teachers of the faiths which have arisen in India and the Far East; an aim in their recommendation of which they are at one with not a few Western philosophers. It is indeed characteristic of these faiths, as I remarked before,

that the description of the object of religion as the *Ātman* or Self predominates over the representation of that object as another person or persons—while in the West the latter representation prevails, and the other mode of expression is found only in the language of a comparatively few mystically inclined devotees. It would be, I think, on all hands acknowledged that a capacity in the human soul to become in some measure a partaker of the divine nature—the phrase occurs in the New Testament—is implied in its susceptibility to religious experience; but the degree to which the distinction between the subject and the object of religious experience is to be regarded as a vanishing factor in the spiritual development of the former or as belonging to the essence of religion, and as never to the end to be ignored without an impoverishment and ultimate loss of spiritual life—this remains a point of serious divergence between different religious traditions and between different schools of philosophy engaged in the interpretation of the experience which these traditions enshrine. It belonged, I think, to the subject upon which I undertook to address you to refer to this divergence; but to pursue it farther is the business of another inquiry.

