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THE TREND TOWARD IDEALISM

BY ROBERT SCOTT CALDER,

LINDENWOOD COLLEGE, MISSOURI

TO SAY that our modern civilization has been characterized by unprecedented material and industrial progress is but to put the hallmark of realism upon it. It has been a practical age in which interest has centered in things. Both head and hands have been occupied with the world of sense; the scientist with his test tubes and microscopes and telescopes, the laborer in smelting plants or factories. Literature, too, and education and art have felt the realistic spirit and responded to it. The sciences have replaced the humanities. The greatest intellectual activities of the time have been along scientific lines, the study of nature, and of man as a part of nature.

It was to be expected that the philosophical conceptions of such a period would partake something of the same color and tone. In an age when commerce rather than culture dominates life, when the physical more than the spiritual engages men's thoughts, when matter is regarded as more ultimate and real than mind,—what is all this but materialistic thinking and philosophy? For it does not look beyond experience for the explanation of experience. It assumes that nature is explained when nature's operations and laws of action are discovered; that by reducing matter to atoms and molecules and electrons we arrive at the ultimate nature of matter, that we reach mind and consciousness by tracing the external physical stimulus along the nerve tracks through the lower to the higher centres of the nervous system to a cell in the cortex of the brain. There, it is claimed, because we have come to the end of a long chain of physical links, we have come upon thought, knowledge, love. And these mental, moral or spiritual concepts or feelings are thus shown, it is assumed, to be only a material change, a movement or activity, that is muscular or chemical or nervous in character.

Pragmatism and Neo-realism are the latest attempts to build a philosophy upon such a naturalistic foundation.

Their appeal is strong, of course, to the practical, commercial, utilitarian, sense that is characteristic of the age, but they fail to satisfy our deepest thought or our profoundest and persistent hopes. They may modify, but they cannot stem, the increasing tide of idealistic tendencies.

The popular verdict of the last century would seem to be in favor of realism. Reality was conceived to be material rather than spiritual, external and not inner. That, at least, is the practical pronouncement of the age. But there is another side. "Things are not what they seem." There was much in the life and thought of the last hundred years and more that was essentially idealistic. Men have not been wholly engrossed with things and enamoured of them. Mind has not been totally submerged in matter, and conscious thought and feeling reduced to movements of brain molecules. The inner life of the spirit has not been lost during the long journey into the external world of experience. The philosophy that emerges out of the scientific research and realism is idealism of some form. And science itself has contributed substantially to this result.

I

The original interpretation of the scientific search for truth in the external world was idealistic. This new departure was not simply a reaction, the swing of the pendulum from the idealism of the eighteenth century to the realism of the nineteenth. German idealism, beginning with Kant and continued in his followers, especially Shelling and Hegel, had explored the realms of inner experience and had attempted to explain the universe on a purely rationalistic basis. It was inevitable that there should be a return to the external world, but the external world that was returned to was a vastly different world because of the sojourn in the inner world of experience. The broad, general, rationalistic conception of the world which idealism had built up was now to be sought for and confirmed in external experience. The impulse to scientific investigation, the very conception of the nature

of the world to be investigated is to be traced back to idealistic thinking.

II

Moreover, Science itself is essentially idealistic. What is science but the search for mind in nature? We assume that nature is orderly, and consistent. These are spiritual, idealistic qualities. We expect to find intelligence in nature, and we find nature full of ideas, ideals, laws, goals. It is the discovery of these that makes science. A mere knowledge of the facts of nature does not and cannot of itself produce a science. It is the recognition of mind, intelligence, rationality, ideas, principles, laws, in nature, and the systematic description of these that constitute a science. What are atoms, the ether of interstellar space, the law of gravitation,—what are these but rational, idealistic conceptions? Mind can know nature because mind is in nature.

The idealistic nature of science is evident when we think of science as the discovery of universals. Experience, observation, experimentation, all forms of empirical investigation are concerned with particulars, and can result in nothing more than the amassing and collecting of particular facts. Science is the outcome of such a procedure only when the mind discovers idealistic elements in those facts,—universal, necessary, truths woven, as it were, in and out, through and through the whole fabric of particular, contingent facts, making them a rational, harmonious whole, giving ideal unity and meaning to an otherwise confused mass. In other words, when mind has found mind in nature, when external experience has shown itself to be thoroughly idealistic in character, then and only then do we have science.

The unique characteristic of modern science, that distinguishes it from all previous attempts to study nature, and that is the explanation of its marvellous achievements, is rational and idealistic. That is its historical point of view, its conception of nature as a growth, a development. Before, nature was regarded as a mechanism. It was investigated with a view to discover the laws that govern the existing relations and operations of

nature's forces. But now, since Darwin's time and before, nature is conceived, not as a mechanism only, a perfect machine, but as a process, an evolution. The theory of evolution, better than the nature of science in general, illustrates the idealistic temper of this realistic movement. For the evolutionary conception of the nature and developing process of the external world, considered simply as an hypothesis, is thoroughly rationalistic and idealistic. Its reduction of all life to the terms of a single comprehensive formula, its grand grasp of the whole universe as it was and is and will be, in one—shall we say?—sublime thought, its comprehension within one supreme, all-embracing concept not only all the almost infinitely complex powers and processes of nature considered as a static mechanism, but also the equally infinite series of continuous and successive changes by which this present orderly mechanism has been gradually evolved, and probably will be merged by like stages into other mechanisms of different and still higher orders,—what is all this but the perfection of idealistic thinking? That such thinking does find its counterpart in nature, that mind meets mind there, and the outer fits into the categories of the inner realm of experience,—does not this imply that both are essentially of the same stuff, that ultimate reality is not to be found in things, but in mind, that the final explanation of life and experience is to be looked for, not in any dead, inert, lumpish matter, but in living, active, conscious mind or spirit?

III

The very perfection of science as developed in these days, the thoroughness and completeness with which modern science is mastering nature and prying into its secrets and revealing its inmost structure has made it more and more impossible to suppose that the mental, the spiritual, can by any possibility be explained in terms of the material or physical. The scientific conception of the constitution of matter is an illustration. The terms that have been successively applied to the lowest unit to which matter is conceived as reducible show a movement

toward idealistic concepts. We have had in turn molecules, atoms, ions, electrons, ether whirls, and the purely idealistic conception of centres of force, mathematical points where energy is manifested or exerted. These are idealistic conceptions, not empirical perceptions.

IV

Physiological psychology has very carefully and minutely examined the physical basis of mind. The most intimate relation is known to exist between the mental activities and nervous processes. James has expressed it, "no psychosis without neurosis." Mental functions, both sensory and motor, have been so definitely located in the cortex of the brain that the surgeon knows exactly where to relieve the congestion when any sense organ is deranged or group of muscles paralyzed. The higher and purely mental activities have been discovered to have their special locus in the brain as well. These intellectual centres, however, are located in but one hemisphere; and, what is still stranger, that one may be either the right or the left, depending apparently upon which hand was used first and most in infancy,—if the right hand, the left hemisphere is thus used and honored, and if the left, the right hemisphere. This indicates that the mental functions are not congenital, are not an essential part of man's physical inheritance, as the sensory and motor functions are, which have their inherited seat in both hemispheres. This indicates—does it not?—that these intellectual functions are in a sense, from the physical point of view, at least, artificial, or acquired, superimposed upon the brain by a higher power or personality, rather than a natural, inherited, congenital feature. The conclusion is thus forced upon us that the brain does not and cannot produce thought in the same way that it seems to produce actions and other physical and nervous responses in men and animals, but that the brain is rather the tool, the instrument of the mind, by which the immaterial spirit expresses itself in a material way and world. The brain thus becomes the violin on which the musician-mind plays, giving expression to spiritual thoughts and

feelings. A conception that ascribes a greater and higher and prior reality to mind than to matter.

V

Psychology gives further help toward the idealistic conception of the world by showing unmistakably the subjective nature of perceptual knowledge. The plain or unreflective man thinks he knows the external world as real because he experiences it through his senses. Does he not see it and hear it and touch it? Can he not feel and handle it? But a little reflection with the help of science itself soon dispels that thought. All sense experience is subjective, though the occasion or cause may be external. For example, color is subjective. The physical or external occasion of the color experience is vibrations of the ether, which are converted by some action in the retina, probably chemical, into nervous energy and conveyed by the optic nerve to the proper place in the brain-cortex, where it is interpreted as color. An increase or decrease in the number of vibrations of the ether causes the sensation of color to vary from the violet to the red, through the whole range of prismatic colors. So the grass is not green nor the sky blue nor the rose red. These colors are sensations; they are not in the things, but in us. The same is true of sounds. It is only figuratively true that nature is full of music, for in nature there is no such thing as sound. Sound is sensation, and therefore mental and subjective. The objective reality which occasions sound is movements of air. It can be demonstrated in the same way that all our sensations are subjective, affections of the mind. Psychologists and scientists of every school of philosophy are agreed thus far,—sensations are subjective. Some go much farther and declare that space and time as well are equally subjective. And their arguments have weight.

VI

As one more evidence of the spirit of the nineteenth century thinking, let me refer to the idealism of some of the great poets of that period. For philosophy and poetry

are brothers. Philosophy is the theory of life. Poetry is the exposition of life. Both bring the same message. Both report the same simplicities of being, the same eternities of truth. As Professor Morris says, "The very reason why the poet speaks a universal language, intelligible to the universal heart and mind of man, is that he reports concerning things which are genuine, abiding, eternal, intrinsically real, which are the soil in which human nature and the nature of things are so deeply, however unconsciously, imbedded, that once mentioned they seem to us as though we ought always to have known them—supremely 'natural,' as we say, a kind of revelation of grand simplicities which virtually we had always known." This work of the poet is that "one touch of nature," of reality, of being, that "makes the whole world kin."

Moreover, the poetic insight often outstrips the slower and more labored reflection of the philosopher. That insight in a materialistic age rang true. Let me mention only three of our English poets. There is Wordsworth, the idealistic poet of nature.

> "And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts: a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is in 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."

Wordsworth believed that "the meanest flower that blows" may "give thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." He saw Duty inwrought into the whole fabric of nature.

> "Flowers laugh before thee on their beds
> And fragrance on thy footing treads:
> Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong,
> And the most ancient heavens through thee
> are fresh and strong."

Browning is strong and rugged always, and idealistic through and through. Hear his thought of the nature and source of knowledge.

"There is an inmost centre in us all,
Where truth abides in fullness: and around,
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
This perfect, clear perception—which is truth.
A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
Binds it and makes all error: and to know
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence imprisoned splendor may escape,
Than in effecting entrance for a light
Supposed to be without. Watch narrowly
The demonstration of a truth, its birth,
And you trace back the effulgence to its spring
And source within us."

"Take all in a word: the truth in God's breast
Lies trace for trace upon ours impressed:
Though he be so bright and we so dim,
We are made in his image to witness him."

Another stanza has more philosophy in it, perhaps, than poetry.

"The individual soul works through the shows of sense
(Which, ever proving false, still promises to be true)
Up to an outer soul as individual too:
And, through the fleeting, lives to die into the fixed,
And reach at length God, man, or both together mixed."

I need only mention Tennyson. One must select from many choice passages. To Tennyson nature was the expression of God. To know nature was to know God.

"Flower of the crannied wall,
I pluck you out of the crannies,
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand.
Little flower,—but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is."

"Our little systems have their day:
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they."

"Dark is the world to thee: thyself art the reason why,
For is He not all but thou that hast power to feel 'I am' ? "

"Speak to Him, thou, for He hears, and Spirit with Spirit can meet,
Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

One more passage in which Tennyson speaks of "knowledge" as the merely intellectual grasp of the facts of intellectual science, and "reverence" as the spirit or attitude of the soul toward the world as idealism conceives it, the expression, the thought of God.

"Let knowledge grow from more to more,
But more of reverence in us dwell:
That mind and soul, according well,
May make one music as before,
But vaster."