

Venerdì 7 aprile, ore 14

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THE OBJECT OF THOUGHT AND REAL BEING

Whenever we think of anything, we think of its having a being which does not merely consist in its being thought of. The being, thus mentally referred to, may be either asserted or merely supposed: if is asserted the assertion may be either true or false: if it is merely supposed, the supposition may or may not be fictitious. But in all cases the mental reference is not merely to the fact that the object is present to consciousness, but to some other kind of being which it is thought of as possessing. When I believe or disbelieve or suppose that a centaur actually exists, I must think of its actually existing. And what I mean by this is certainly not the fact that I think of it. On the contrary, it seems to involve an absurdity to suppose that what I think of has no being except the being thought of. For how can the being of anything be merely constituted by its being related to something else? Is it not a logical precondition of its being related to something else that it should have a distinct being of its own?

Indeed it may be safely assumed that this position would never have been called in question, if there had been no erroneous judgments or fictitious suppositions. But in error and fiction it seems as if something were asserted or supposed which really has no being. Hence we are led to regard being for thought as distinct and separable from real or « transcendent » being. This view, however, when we examine it closely turns out to be radically indefensible even apart from the initial difficulty of something owing its whole being to its relation to something else. So far from explaining fiction and error this view renders them

both inexplicable; and it involves true judgment in the same difficulty. We have to insist in the first place that when once we have committed ourselves to the separation of real being and being for thought, we cannot confine it only to the case of error and fiction; we must extend it to all true judgments, also, except perhaps, those which assert the existence of a present experience of the individual. So far as thought transcends immediate experience, no intrinsic character is assignable by which we can distinguish the general nature of the objects of false judgments from the general nature of the object of true judgments. If the possible severance of what really is and what is thought of is once admitted in some cases, it must be admitted in all. It may be urged against this that some propositions are not only true but evident, and that where there is evidence what is asserted must have real being. Now it may perhaps be conceded that what is evidently implied in what really is, must itself have real being. But this avails us nothing, unless we are already supposed to have a direct apprehension of some relevant reality. Apart from such direct contact with real being, evidence itself must be regarded primarily as an object of thought, so that for it also it is possible to raise the question whether what has being for thought has also being in reality. This question is always relevant except in the limiting case in which what is thought of is also existentially present in the mind, like a pain which is actually being felt. Allowing for this limiting case we may say generally that the severance between thought and reality, if it is admitted at all, must be consistently adhered to both for true judgment and false. But if it be consistently adhered to, the distinction between true and erroneous judgments inevitably becomes an external distinction. The only account we can give of it is that when a judgment is true there is some real being which agrees with conforms or corresponds to the object of the act of judging; and that when the judgment is false the object of the act has no such real counterpart. We cannot escape from this conclusion by an attempt to substitute identity for correspondence. We do not escape by saying that when we believe A to exist, then if it does exist, the A which exists is the very same A that we believe to exist; and that if it does not exist, what is non-existent is again the very same A which we believe to exist. For the alleged sameness of A does not prevent its having two sides or aspects separable from each other, — A as object of thought, and A as really existing: and between these two aspects the relation

thus, on the view we are examining, what is thought remains deivered from what is one of agreement or disagreement, not identity.

But this view will not bear examination. Instead of explaining the possibility of truth and falsity, it makes both inexplicable. Truth does not consist in the mere agreement or correspondence of an object of thought with real being, and error does not consist in the mere disagreement or non-correspondence of an object of thought with real being. To constitute truth or error, the agreement or disagreement must be an agreement or disagreement not with any reality but with some reality which the mind means or intends to describe or characterise in the act of judgment. Unless this reality, as such, is itself an object of thought the distinction between truth and error loses all meaning. The act of judging either rightly or wrongly must be ultimately concerned with what really is; what really is must be rightly or wrongly characterised, and for this to be possible it must itself be present to consciousness and not something which merely represents it or stands for it. When I assert that « this match box is empty », the fact of some other match box being empty does not make my judgment true, and the fact of some other match box being full does not make my judgment erroneous. It may be that what I call a match box is not a match box but something else. But, even if I am so far mistaken, there must still be some real being concerning which the mistake is made, and this must be an object of my thought in making the mistake. The article in my hand may not be a match box, but it is a portion of matter. Again if we suppose that I am dreaming or under a complete hallucination, still there is a reference to surrounding space, which if not occupied in the way I believe, is either otherwise occupied or unoccupied. Finally, if there is no space and consequently no bodies in it, there must be a reference to some reality which is mistaken for space and bodies. In the long run we are always mentally in contact with some reality which is indispensably required to supply the basis of truth and error. Further, the reference is in general not merely to the real universe as a whole, but to some special portion or aspect of it, which if it is not determined in the way we believe, must be determined in some alternative way.

If this position is correct, the condition of erroneous judgments and of such true judgments as are by their intrinsic nature abstractly capable of being erroneous are

as follows. Some real being as such is directly an object of consciousness; this real being is capable of alternative determinations; and one of these is fixed on by the mind in the act of judging as an alternative which is fulfilled ⁽¹⁾, or in the case of negative judgments, which is not fulfilled. It seems to follow that if in the act of judgment the mind has any objects which have being merely for thought, these must be what are called alternative possibilities. On the other hand, if alternative possibilities are not « creatures of the understanding », but belong to the constitution of reality, then we may assume that all objects of consciousness have some kind of transcendent being, or at least that this holds for all objects of the act of judging.

To consider an alternative merely as one alternative among others, is vitally different from believing in it. But wherein does the difference consist? Does it consist in any difference in the object presented to consciousness? Or to be more precise, is there any other difference in the object besides its being, in the one case, something merely supposed, and in the other, something asserted? I cannot find that there is. It will not do to say that in mere supposition we only think of an alternative, whereas in belief we think of it as fulfilled. For we cannot think of an alternative at all without thinking of its being fulfilled. A possibility and its fulfilment are so related that the first involves the thought of the second. Nor will it do say that in belief or judgment we not only think of a possibility being fulfilled, but actually have present to consciousness the fulfilled possibility itself. I do not doubt that this sometimes is so. But where it is so the judgment is necessarily true and its object necessarily real. Hence the case in which the fulfilled possibility is itself an object of consciousness lies outside our present inquiry. For we are here concerned only with erroneous judgments, and with such true judgments, as are not beyond the reach of possible doubt. But for these it seems to hold good generally, that if we consider only what is directly asserted, as distinguished from the grounds or conditions which induce belief in it, this is,

(¹) I say « fulfilled » rather than realised or « actualised » because real being is here contrasted not with possibility but with mere being for thought; and because actuality naturally suggests particular existence.

In the sense in which we may say that *two-and-two-being-four* is an actual fact, the term « actualised » may be substituted for « fulfilled » where I use this last word in the text.

both in the case of truth and error, the fulfilment of a possible alternative, and not the fulfilled alternative itself; and the same holds also for mere supposals as contrasted with judgments. This being so, we find ourselves confronted by two questions: — What sort of being belongs to a possible alternative? Why does belief in a possible alternative as being fulfilled, in distinction from the mere supposal of its being fulfilled, involve the antithesis of truth and error? As regards the first problem, it may appear obvious that alternative possibilities have being only for thought, and not in the real world « How in the world — says Mr. BRADLEY — can a fact exist as that strange ambiguity *b* or *c*? We shall hardly find the flesh and blood alternative which answers to our *or* ». This would be unanswerable if there were no kind of real being except particular existence. But the prejudice in favour of actuality, ⁽¹⁾ as MEINONG calls it, is unjustifiable. Other modes of being, besides actual existence, are essentially involved in the constitution of the universe. Particular existents, in endlessly diverse ways are related to each other as sharing in a common nature and so belonging to classes, sorts, or kinds. But neither a class, nor the peculiar unity of the members of a class which we call their sharing in or being instances of a common nature is itself a particular existent. Are we to say then that really nothing can, in any respect, share a common nature with anything else, and that there are really no sorts or kinds or classes? We might as well attempt to suppose that there are only universals and no particular existents. In both cases, equally, there is no universe left. This bears immediately on our present problem. For if generalities belong to the real constitution of the universe, it follows that alternative possibilities must also belong to the real constitution of the universe. For it is inherent in the very nature of what is general to admit of alternative specifications

On the other hand, there are no alternative possibilities which are not essentially relative to some generality as their basis. To quote Mr. BRADLEY « Man, woman, or child » have a common basis in human being. « In England or America » « alive or dead » commit us to the statement « somewhere not elsewhere » and « organised being ». And so, if we call a man « bad or good » we say at least he is a moral agent ». In a disjunctive judgment what is asserted is that a certain general condition, or group of conditions

(1) Meaning *particular* existence. See previous foot-note.

admits of certain alternative determinations and of no others. The view that what it asserts is ignorance on the part of the person who makes the judgment seems quite untenable. For the only ignorance which it can be supposed to express is ignorance as to which of a group of alternatives is realised. But this presupposes the assertion that there *are* these alternatives. We must affirm « either A or B or C », before we can affirm that we do not know which. Further, in purely classificatory disjunctives which refer merely to a certain generality, without having in view some special case or particular instance of it, there is no suggestion or implication or ignorance at all. There is nothing of the kind, when we assert that « any triangle is either equal-sided or unequal-sided ». What is asserted is that these are all the alternatives which the general nature of triangles admits of. The statement that « *this* triangle is either equal-sided or unequal-sided » does indeed naturally suggest ignorance as to which it is. But even here the ignorance presupposes the further judgment that in as much as it is a member of the class triangles, it is one or the other. And when we know which it is, the disjunctive proposition is not thereby falsified. In coming to know which alternative is fulfilled in the particular instance, we do not cease to know that the fulfilled alternative is one of two which any instance of triangularity as such, admits of. Otherwise, the categorical conclusion of a disjunctive syllogism would contradict the disjunctive premiss. In « A is either B or C, it is not B; therefore it is C », the conclusion « A is C », would be incompatible with the premiss « A is either B or C ».

Another consequence of this position is the relativity of various series of alternatives to correspondingly distinct general conditions or groups of conditions. Just as A may be greater than B although is less than C, so something may be possible in relation to one generality, and impossible in relation to another. It is geometrically possible for a man to live and walk erect who is half a mile high, retaining in other respects the ordinary proportions of a human being. But it is not mechanically possible; the alternative which general geometrical conditions admit of, is other than any of the alternatives which general mechanical conditions admit of. This relativity of possible alternatives to variable generalities, seems to supply a key to the difficult problem how impossibilities as such can be objects of consciousness. It would seem that an impossibility can be thought of only because from another point of view it is a possibility. We may take, as a crucial case, the formu-

lation of the law of contradiction. In one sense, we cannot apprehend the union of two contradictory propositions in a single proposition; for it is in the act of failing to do this that we become aware of the law of contradiction as self-evident. On the other hand, if we could not think of contradictory propositions at all, we could never recognise it as an impossibility. The solution of the difficulty seems to be this. The general character of the propositions, considered merely as propositions leaves open the alternative possibility of their being combined or not combined. Hence from this point of view, we can think of their union as a possible alternative. It is only when we go on to develop our thought in the attempt to bring before the mind the special form which this alternative would assume under the special conditions, that we find our path barred. We can think of the two propositions being united in a single proposition; but when we ask what proposition would fulfil the special conditions, we find, not a thought, but a blank failure to think. It is in and through this mental act that we recognise the proposition as an absurdity.

In distinguishing various modes of being, I by no means wish to suggest that any of them can be isolated from the others. On the contrary, they are inconceivable except in correlation with each other. Their being is being with in the one system of universal reality. To assert that anything in any sense is, implies that it is an integral part or aspect of this system. There is no possibility apart from generality, and in the end, there is no generality apart from particular existence. On the other hand, there is no particular existence which is not a particular case or instance; none therefore which is unrelated to other particular cases or instances in that unique and ultimate way which we name participation in a common nature. And there is no common nature which does not, as such, admit of the alternative specifications which we call possibilities.

On the basis of the preceding analysis, I have to show that neither erroneous judgments, nor right judgments which are capable of being wrong, nor mere supposals, whether fictitious or not, involve the presence to consciousness of any object which has being only for thought, and does not in any way enter into the transcendent constitution of reality. The case of error is of course of central importance. What then is necessary and sufficient to constitute a mistake? First some reality must be present to thought and this reality must have a general nature capable of various alternative determinations. In the thought

of this reality, and the belief in it there is no error: neither is there error in the belief that some one at least of all its possible alternative determinations is fulfilled, provided no decision is made as to which this is. Nor again is there any error in merely thinking of some special alternative as such ⁽¹⁾ which of course includes the thought of this alternative being fulfilled. Error or the risk of error first arises when the mind not only thinks of a possibility being fulfilled, but also believes in its being fulfilled. But this does not involve any object of consciousness; it only involves a new act in relation to the same object. When we believe in a possibility being fulfilled, our belief is false when the alternative asserted is other than any fulfilled alternative. The belief is true when the alternative asserted is coincident with a fulfilled alternative. Further explanation of this requires an examination of the mental act which we call believing, when its object is merely a possibility being fulfilled. The object is not then the fulfilled possibility itself. What is thought of is some reality as being determined in a certain way but the determinate reality itself is not apprehended. There is a difference, for instance, between thinking of a sound being heard, and actually hearing a sound, or between thinking of a toothache as about to be continued and being directly aware through experience of its continuation. Now the vital point is this. The mental attitude of believing in a possibility being fulfilled is, both in itself and in its influence on the further course of thought and conduct, similar in essential respect to what it would be if we did not merely think of an alternative being fulfilled, but of the fulfilled alternative itself. Hence when an alternative before the mind is other than a fulfilled alternative, the belief is in disagreement with reality. It does not agree with the reality to which the mind itself refers as its standard in the act of believing, as what requires to be specified in some determinate way. In other words the belief is false.

It lies beyond my present purpose to discuss the conditions, logical or merely psychological, which determine beliefs whether false or true. I shall therefore only make some general remarks on this point, bearing especially on the distinction between judgments and mere supposals or « Annahmen ». The distinctive character of the judgment

(1) This applies also to the case of a limited group of alternatives, as will be readily seen. For the sake of simplicity I have omitted to deal specially with error in disjunctive judgments.

asserting the fulfilment of one among alternative possibilities in that the alternative asserted more or less completely and persistently preoccupies attention in the disregard of other alternatives, as if there were no others. Hence it influences thought and conduct as if it were the only alternative. One important case is where what is really only one alternative among others, is from the outset presented to consciousness by itself, without any suggestion that there are others. Then the thought of the alternative at once coincides with belief in its fulfilment. Thus, to borrow an illustration from SPINOZA, the thought of the actual present existence of a winged horse is also a belief in its actual present existence when nothing is suggested to the mind which excludes its actual present existence. As SPINOZA notices, this is a common condition of belief when we are dreaming. A vivid dream picture suggests the actual presence of a winged horse, and since, owing to the peculiar conditions of the dream state, there is no counter suggestion, the dreamer believes in the actual presence of a horse with wings. The absurd beliefs suggested to subjects in the hypnotic trance are similarly conditioned. For the most part, however, the mind initially apprehends an alternative as one among others, and the alternative is believed in because of conditions, logical or merely psychological, which give it a predominance such that it is treated as if it were the sole alternative present to consciousness with correspondingly predominant influence in determining the subsequent development of thought and conduct. When this does not take place immediately there is a shorter or longer interval of doubt or interrogation in which alternative possibilities are contemplated and the question is raised as to which is realised; but none of them is decidedly and persistently fixed on. This interrogative attitude agrees with that of mere supposal, in as much as an alternative is contemplated merely as such, without being treated as if it were a fulfilled alternative. But mere supposal is further characterised by the absence of the mental act of questioning; there is no attempt to decide which alternative is to be taken as realised. This account seems to me to cover all the cases which MEINONG, in his epoch making discussion of this subject, brings under the general head of *Annahmen*.

To support this position adequately, it would be necessary to deal in detail with all the various kinds of *Annahmen*. Perhaps, however, it will suffice for our present purpose, to select as a crucial instance, the play of fancy or imagination. Consider, for example, a fictitious narrative such as Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Both the author and reader

of this book start with the implicit presupposition of certain general conditions of human life at a certain time and in a certain locality and among certain classes of society. These general conditions in their generality admit of an indefinite multitude of alternative developments in detail. In the fictitious narrative, the mind follows out one of these. The process of invention is at bottom a process of discovery, the discovery of a special development of which the general conditions are capable. And in so far as the mental attitude is purely one of supposal⁽¹⁾, the special development is regarded merely as being one alternative, without any question of its being realised. So soon as this question is raised, there is either doubt, or positive or negative judgment.

In conclusion, I may refer to the obvious analogy between supposal and merely feeling an inclination towards a certain line of action, between doubting and practical deliberation, and between judgment and voluntary decision. The parallel may be suggestive to the pragmatist.

There may still appear to be one difficulty remaining in the way of the view that no object has being merely for thought. How, it may be asked, do I explain negative judgments? Can the word « not » stand for anything but a creature of the understanding which has no place in the universe of real being? The problem is a very old one, and I can only repeat an old solution. PLATO in the Sophist proposes the question, how can non-being be? and answers it in a way which I find essentially satisfactory. Non-being is otherness, and the word « not » means « other than ». « Red is not blue », or « chalk is not cheese » mean the same as « red is other than blue », or « chalk is other than cheese ». « Birds do not suckle their young », means « whatever attribute a bird may have is other than that of suckling its young » or « every bird is other than any animal which suckles its young ». « Perfect circles do not exist » means « perfect circles are other than any figure belonging to a physical thing actually existing ». « Straight lines cutting a circle in more than two points do not exist », means that such lines are other than anything which has being as a geometrical possibility. There is no example which cannot be similarly treated. But if non-being is otherness, it certainly belongs to the constitution of the real universe. It would be a queer universe in which nothing was really other than anything else.

(1) Perhaps it never is completely so.