SHADWORTH HOLLWAY HODGSON

1832–1913

On June 13, 1913, the British Academy lost one of its first Fellows, and English philosophy one of its most distinguished and original thinkers. Shadworth Hollway Hodgson was born at Boston, in Lincolnshire, on December 25, 1832, and was educated at Rugby and at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Living for over half a century the quiet contemplative life of the scholar in the very heart of the busy metropolis, he has shown with sufficient conclusiveness that whilst the ceaseless turmoil of commercial enterprise is all around the work of reflective thought may yet be done. At the back of his reserved and severely intellectual nature there was, too, a heart of genuine tenderness and of deep feeling. To that even his devotion to his favourite pursuit bears testimony. He held no post as a university teacher, nor did he ever seek one. His call to the task of speculative inquiry came in another way. Thinking of Beatrice as objectively fulfilling in the scheme of the universe the function she had fulfilled and was fulfilling in his own conscious experience, Dante was led to regard her as the symbol and the channel of philosophy, just as for him Virgil was the type or the symbol of human virtue. Hodgson himself would certainly have recoiled from a comparison in any particular of his own life with that of one of the greatest poets of all time, but to others the mediaeval ideal can scarcely fail to be suggested by his exemplification of it. Married in 1855 to the daughter of the Rev. E. B. Everard, Rector of Burnham Thorpe, Norfolk, he had, after a brief period of three years, to face the most terrible sorrow that can befall a man, the death of wife and child. Withdrawing then almost entirely from general society, he consecrated himself with singular zeal and earnestness to the quest of philosophic truth, and made it the sole purpose of his solitary existence. 'Truth', he told the students of Edinburgh some twenty years later, 'is like Shakespeare's Portia, listening to no suitor till he has proved his sincerity by selecting the leaden casket inscribed with the words, *Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.* That', he added, 'is the proper temper of true love, and that is the temper in which we must approach philosophy.'

A series of works, all bound in white buckram, and written in a style characteristically distinctive of the author, remains as the fruit of his lonely toil. *Time and Space: A Metaphysical Essay* appeared in 1865; *The Theory of Practice* (dedicated 'mortuis meis'), 2 vols., in 1870; *The Philosophy of Reflexion*, 2 vols., in 1878; and lastly, in 1898, the four volumes of *The Metaphysic of Experience* which contain the fullest and the most mature presentation of his philosophy. The Aristotelian Society was founded, largely through his instrumentality, in 1880. He was its first President, and continued in that office until 1894. Each year he opened the session with a presidential address, and these addresses, fourteen in all, formed, as he tells us, 'a sort of outline or programme' of his last great book, whilst they still retain an interest and a value of their own. And after he ceased to be President he contributed to the Society many important papers, was a regular attendant at its meetings, and joined always in its debates, taking home with him usually a body of friends to his rooms in Conduit Street, where discussion was prolonged into the hour of midnight. He was one of the band of supporters that Croom Robertson gathered round him on the institution of *Mind* in 1876, and the first number included an article from his pen. For it and for other journals he was a frequent writer. In the *Proceedings of the British Academy* there are three papers of his, the last on 'Some Cardinal Principles in Knowledge' having been read not many months before he died. His life-work was done, and is left in completeness for the judgement of posterity.

Hodgson seldom referred in print to the conditions that determined his own intellectual development, but in one instance he does mention a circumstance that is not without biographical interest. To Shairp, one of his teachers, he was indebted, he tells us, for many things, and not least for the impetus to approach the writings of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the two inaugurators of the nineteenth-century era, at least in England. Of the two, the 'wizard twilight Coleridge knew' appealed to him with greater effect than the 'healing power' of Wordsworth. From Coleridge he learnt the great lesson of the intimate union of the intellectual and the emotional elements in human nature. Coleridge seemed to him to *know* what religion was,—to know it by actual experience. Coleridge taught him that the emotions, and especially the religious emotions, are as deeply inwoven in the structure and the mechanism of consciousness as any feature of sense or reason, that they carry us into the very heart of things, the hidden springs of being. This conviction did not lead him, however, as it led Coleridge, to the elaboration of a theological

philosophy. It did not do so, because he realized, what Coleridge failed to realize, the essential difference between actual religious experience and theological dogma. If religion be defined by its characteristic mark of *faith*, then to Hodgson it seemed there could be no sure anchorage for it but the Infinite; to rest upon the Infinite was for it, in that case, a vital necessity. But dogmatic theology attempts to turn faith into knowledge, attempts to demonstrate faith, instead of simply saying, *Try it*. And in this way the object of faith is conceived not as infinite, but as a substance complete in itself, and therefore as finite. When once this step is taken fetters are laid upon two of the freest things in the universe, religious faith and philosophical speculation. A finite ideal fetters the one, a foregone conclusion fetters the other. Philosophy must indeed recognize the natural relations of man with infinity, but the recognition is imperative just because the facts of religion are facts of experience, and it is the business of philosophy to analyse and rationally interpret the facts of experience so that they become luminous and intelligible to human thought. In short, the very considerations that induced Coleridge to venture upon the construction of a speculative theology, and to offer it as a system of philosophy, were the considerations which weighed with Hodgson in renouncing all such efforts at *a priori* construction, and to insist that experience without leading-strings is the thing to trust to.

Philosophic method, then, as Hodgson conceived it, consisted in analysing the content of consciousness or experience, without assumptions either as to its nature or as to its mode of origin. It appeared to him that in so describing the method of philosophy he was following a path which could be contrasted in a decided manner with Kant's transcendental method on the one hand and with the empirical method on the other. The characteristic feature of the transcendental method had been, he urged, to postulate the existence of causal agency in the subject,—an agency or activity whose function it was to synthesize the data of sense into objects of experience. But to take in this way the existence of an active ego for granted, to explain experience by reference to an agency of this sort, lying behind or beyond it, was to base one's whole philosophy on the assumption of the very thing which it was required to prove. If consciousness be itself a synthetic agency, then we must look to analysis to bring that fact to light. It cannot, however, be rightly assumed to be so prior to the analysis, because the idea of agency, the idea of active power at all, is part of experience, and the object of that idea is known to us in no other way than as an object of one department of experience. The characteristic feature of

empirical methods had been, he maintained again, to postulate the existence of things and their properties, of persons and their functions, and to look upon experience as a product due to the action or influence of such supposed things upon a supposed individual mind. But here, once more, there was assumed beforehand a whole theory of reality, the justification of which, if it is true, philosophy is required to furnish. Common sense does, no doubt, by an art so old and familiar that it has become habitual, take for granted a multiplicity of rounded-off objects, but it is the business of philosophy to analyse experience as it is actually given, not to reason on the basis of the objects or events of common-sense thinking. The common-sense distinctions of subject and object, of self and not-self, of substance and power, of agent and agency, and the like, are unwarranted as initial assumptions in philosophy. They denaturalize it, because they make it arbitrary, dependent on the ideas or categories which may happen to commend themselves as ultimate to particular thinkers, and on the definitions of those ideas or categories which they may choose to give.

If, now, the method of philosophy be the analysis of experience without assumptions, it follows that questions of genesis or history cannot be primary. We must first decide what a content of consciousness is known as, before we are entitled to ask how it comes to be, or what the conditions are that give rise to it. In this respect philosophy is, in Hodgson's view, sharply differentiated from psychology. Psychology treats the phenomena of consciousness after the manner in which the other special sciences treat their specific subject-matter. It presupposes, that is to say, an individual mind or stream of mental processes and external existent entities which are the causes or conditions of the occurrence of these processes, and it proceeds to trace the way in which an individual mind gradually becomes aware of an objective environment and of its own existence as a finite conscious subject. But for the subjective analysis of experience without assumptions, consciousness must be taken simply as a *knowing*, whilst consciousness as an existent will be for it one object amongst others that are known. Moreover, this distinction between knowing and the known, between consciousness and its object, is one which must not be made at the outset. The first thing we are called upon to do is to determine precisely what the distinction really is and what exactly it involves as to the general nature of that which is revealed in knowledge.

With admirable thoroughness and precision Hodgson applied the method he had thus prescribed and vindicated to the various fields of

philosophical inquiry. In an early chapter of *The Metaphysic of Experience* he analyses, for example, with elaborate care what he calls an 'empirical present moment of consciousness', taking as an instance the hearing of a sound. A result of fundamental importance is soon obtained from the analysis,—this, namely, that every such empirical moment involves, on the one hand, a determinate content or quality experienced, and, on the other hand, a process of experiencing, implying change of or within our experience generally. These two, content and process—or, adhering to the concrete instance, the sound heard and the hearing of it—are not differentiated in the simplest forms of experience; and, although as consciousness advances, they come to be distinguished, yet in truth they are differences of aspect and not separable factors or elements. Every specific process-content of consciousness has these two aspects—a knowing and a known, or a perceiving and a percept. Without the one there cannot be the other. But, argued Hodgson, the content perceived is not itself the object of the perceiving; rather is it the nature or quality, the *whatness*, of the perception. And the process of perceiving is the existence or occurrence, the *thatness*, of this content in consciousness. These aspects are, however, the indispensable experiential basis and foundation of the distinction between subject and object. Consciousness is, in short, a self-objectifying process. The principle thus formulated lies at the root of Hodgson's theory of knowledge, and there can be no question of the extreme ingenuity of the explanation he has to offer of the fact, as he takes it to be, of objectification. We are to conceive of the process of consciousness as a continually advancing stream, as moving always towards the future, whilst consciousness in its aspect as content known is as constantly receding into the past. No sooner do I hear a sound than this sound fades away, and is apprehended only in the weaker form of a memory-image. In virtue, now, of its receding into the past, the content known comes to *stand over against* the process of knowing which is advancing into the future. There is inevitably a distance or an interval, so to speak, between the content experienced and the occurrence of the experiencing; and, on account of this distance or interval, the content is converted into an object, which appears to us to exist independently of the process of apprehending. All perceiving is in fact retrospective or reflective; and because it is retrospective or reflective, aware of part after part of its content *as past*, it objectifies its content, throws it out, as it were, as material to be discriminated.

It follows immediately, and Hodgson was never weary of insisting upon the point, that consciousness as a knowing is the only

evidence we have, not only of consciousness itself in all its modes, but of the nature and existence of everything else. Whilst it is ungrounded assumption to suppose that all existence must of necessity consist of consciousness, yet the contents of knowledge do consist of consciousness, their *esse* is *percipi*. Indeed, in one sense of the term—and the primary sense—reality or existence means perceivability. Perceivability is the *sine qua non* basis, the general idea, of existence; existents, whether consisting of consciousness or not, must be thought of (if at all) as at least possibly perceivable. For to think of reality or existence as not revealable in consciousness involves a contradiction. Existence or reality implies as its correlative or counterpart consciousness or knowing. In other words, we can admit no realm of the Unknowable, however indisputable it is that the things to us unknown are innumerable.

But perceivability is not the only meaning of reality or existence. Besides the *whatness* of a content there is its *thatness*, and besides its place in the context of experience there is the fact of its coming to be there. It is true that, in analysing experience, it is necessary in the first instance to abstract from the question how it arises. But so soon as that point in the analysis which discloses the content of consciousness as an existent is reached, the question how it comes has to be faced. As a happening, as an event, each phase of consciousness indicates its dependence upon conditions; and since any phase of consciousness is a particular or limited existence, the conditions must be sought outside of and beyond itself. Those conditions will, however, explain only the fact of the occurrence or existence of a state of consciousness here and now; they will not explain the quality or nature of its content. For example, ether waves impinging on a retina connected with a brain can in no way cause the qualities of light or colours to be *what* they are as sensations; these qualities are *sui generis*, and so far as they are concerned the notion of cause has no relevance. Ether waves can, at the most, cause the occurring of the sensations in question when and where they do occur. In fact, Hodgson was prepared to lay down, as a universal proposition, that the occurrence only, and not the quality, of effects of any kind can be strictly attributed to the causes which are said to produce them. And as thus restricted the conception of cause becomes the conception of what he was in the habit of calling real condition.

An investigation of the real conditions upon which the occurrence of conscious states depends led Hodgson to reject the conclusion of idealism as unwarranted, and to affirm the reality of matter, as an

existent reality distinct from and independent of the knowledge or perception of it. His reasons were briefly these. In the first place, analysis of consciousness as a perceiving, or as a knowing, or as a thinking, yields no suggestion that consciousness itself is an agent. The sense of strain or effort, which is sometimes held to be evidence of agency in consciousness, is, taken by itself, a mere quality of the process-content, just as colours or sounds are. There is, then, no reason for supposing that consciousness itself gives rise to, or is a real condition of, the occurrence of its own states; nor, indeed, for supposing that consciousness apart from its states is an existent at all. In the second place, the conception of matter as a real existent does yield the thought of agency as involved in it. For what we mean by matter as a real existent is an occupancy of space, and this implies cohesion of parts (in any portion of space) *ad intra*, and exclusion of parts (of other portions) *ad extra*. Now cohesion between parts *ad intra* is a mode of force, and exclusion of parts belonging to other portions *ad extra* is, under certain circumstances, a condition of force coming into play. And in the third place, we have positive evidence that for its genesis, as an existent, consciousness is dependent upon the agency of material entities. Consciousness and the bodily organism appear to be in immediate proximity, and the latter to be the immediate real condition of the former. As expressing this relation of consciousness to the mechanism which proximately conditions it, consciousness may be called an epiphenomenon, although it must never be forgotten that its ultimate nature or qualities as such stand altogether outside any possibility of being accounted for by any cause or real condition whatsoever. Admittedly we know of matter only as a percept; however independent of consciousness it may in truth be, we could know it in no other way. But common sense infers the real existence of matter on the basis of what we know, and Hodgson was at great pains to show that this common-sense inference is justified. Originally we obtain our perception of matter from the combination of the two senses, sight and touch. But philosophic analysis enables us to dissociate the secondary qualities, such as colour, from the attributes of real matter, and to see that they in any case must form part of consciousness and of consciousness only. The question accordingly resolves itself into this: Are those properties which we perceive, or which are perceivable, by touch alone also properties of a reality which is not consciousness? The decisive consideration in favour of an affirmative answer Hodgson found to be that one and the same tactual perception cannot exist both in the object said to be touched and in the bodily organism said to be touching

it. We are constrained, therefore, he insisted, to the conclusion that the immediate perceptions of touch and pressure are at the same time perceptions of, or are indicative of, hardness and resistance in the material object. They are, as he expressed it, in point of kind a replica of these. Whilst, then, consciousness or perceiving is the *causa cognoscendi* of matter and its real existence, matter in its real existence is the *causa existendi* of consciousness.

That, however, is not philosophy's final word. Along the path he had been pursuing, Hodgson was convinced he could force his way to yet a higher vantage-ground. The evidence for the real existence of matter was evidence also, he urged, for the real existence of the Supra-material or the Unseen. And it was so, because the conception of matter as coherent space occupancy compels us to look upon matter as having had a beginning in time, and as having a minimum and a maximum limit of extension in space. Consequently we are driven, on speculative grounds, to view the world of real matter as dependent upon some continually operative and eternally real condition or conditions, different from itself, and beyond the range of our theoretical knowledge, yet not on that account to be dismissed from our recognition as unknowable. Common-sense reflexion has habitually traced back the existence and continuance of the material and visible world to an Infinite and Eternal Power, and here, once more, the philosophy of reflexion justifies the reflexion of common sense. We ourselves, indeed, are parts of the material and visible world, inasmuch as we are not merely individual streams of consciousness, but living conscious beings, whose active powers are derived from our material organisms, which powers as operative in us are what we designate reason and volition. In reason and volition, or in what we call conscious action, the agency of material nature becomes capable, partially and to some extent, of directing its own course, and acquires the facility of free choice. By means of the cerebral process of volition, the conscious agent remoulds the material offered by the other cerebral processes, and re-issues it in the shape of acts of choice, each stamped, as it were, with his own image and superscription. To choose in accordance with the dictates of conscience is felt by conscious agents to be an obligation which they cannot evade; the character of preferability which belongs to some contents of consciousness in comparison with others is inherent in the phenomena of consciousness themselves. And the practical reason, in thus telling us how we ourselves *ought to act*, implicitly tells us something of how the Infinite Existent *does act*, seeing that its action is continued in our own. Τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμέν. Bound up, then, with the moral nature of all volition is the

idea of the unseen world as a region of existent consciousness, similar to ours in its essence, although equally infinite and eternal with the unseen world itself. The thought of Personality, which at its best includes such actions only as are prompted by the highest and worthiest emotions, is the thought of the best and noblest reality that is familiar to us, and we take it as a true though inadequate expression for the thought of the supreme reality in the infinite and eternal universe. We have, it has to be admitted, no speculative knowledge of God as a person, and, by the very necessity of the case, we cannot have, for speculatively we have no means of combining the conception of personality with that of infinity. But we are none the less entitled to claim for the thought of God as a Person all the certainty which attaches to reason in its practical aspect—a certainty which although distinct in kind from the certainty of knowledge is in no way inferior.

Such in brief and meagre outline is Hodgson's metaphysic of experience, obtained by an analysis of what he found to be comprised within experience itself. Whether, as a theory of the universe, its parts form a consistent and coherent whole, it will be for a more searching criticism than he lived to see to determine. At various crucial points, no doubt, its strength requires to be tested. Was Hodgson right in regarding the contents of consciousness as themselves made up of consciousness, and as themselves existent entities? If consciousness be, as he maintained, a self-objectifying process, is not agency after all *ipso facto* included in it? Supposing that all we know in the strict sense is consciousness, is the inference he would make to the real existence of matter a valid inference? Does he succeed in keeping true to his conception of real conditioning as accounting for the occurrence merely and not for the content of an event when he comes to deal with the relation between our moral ideas and the Infinite Reality? These and other issues inevitably present themselves to us as we follow his guidance along the road he mapped out and traversed. But, whatever the verdict on such matters may turn out to be, the fact will remain that we have here the result of a great and sustained effort to face the problems of philosophy, and to deal with them in the spirit of a man of science, in the truest sense of that word.

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