



GEORGE FREDERICK STOUT

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1860-1944

THE life of Stout was impressive in its span. He lived contemporaneously with so many of the men who, from the later decades of the nineteenth century, have contributed to the philosophical outlook of our age. And this contemporaneity was not merely chronological. He liked to talk with men younger than himself, and he so talked to them that they accepted him as one of their own generation.

In 1860, the year of his birth, Mill had just published his book *On Liberty*, and was about to engage in the *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*. These two works might fairly be taken to characterize the general background and the central preoccupation of Stout's intellectual life. He looked at every practical social question from the standpoint of a philosophical liberal, but his mental energies had as their chief point of focus Mill's problem of 'our knowledge of the external world'.

His first appearance in the pages of the history of philosophy is in an entry in the diary of Alexander Bain recording that on 27 May 1889 he attended a meeting of the Aristotelian Society when a paper was read by Stout on 'The development of the distinction between the Physical and the Mental, considered from the Psychological point of view'. No début could have been more fitting. Stout's whole life had the character of a prolonged philosophical discussion, of which the relation of the physical and the mental was the central theme. The argument began at Cambridge. It was continued at Aberdeen and at Oxford; it was carried back to Scotland for the thirty-three years of his professorship at St. Andrews, and then to the antipodes. He spent the last years of his life as one of the liveliest members of a lively philosophical circle in the University of Sydney.

Stout had been born at South Shields, where he had spent his youth. He had gone up to Cambridge in 1879. Classics and ancient philosophy were followed by the Moral Sciences Tripos, and he was elected to a Fellowship at St. John's in 1883. There followed a period of great intellectual development in which the combination of critical and constructive abilities was apparent from the outset. In 1892 he followed Croom Robertson as editor of *Mind*, an office which he filled with distinction until 1920. He succeeded, as few others have succeeded, in combining the

performance of time-consuming editorial duties with writing books of his own. He achieved this largely because nearly every paper he wrote is found to fall in place in what must have been, in outline, a preconceived plan.

Stout was at St. John's at the beginning of the golden age of Cambridge philosophy. Great philosophical developments, like great civilizations, seem often to come about through the clash of contrasting cultures. Cambridge in the eighteen-eighties was the meeting-point of diverse streams of thought. Here, and at this time, the classical British tradition in the philosophy of mind was giving way to a larger synthesis and a subtler analysis, both of mind and of nature. Here, and at this time, too, a beginning was being made to repair the great breach in the picture of the universe that had gaped in the pages of philosophy since the time of Descartes.

Cambridge had already begun to develop its technique for saying things with clarity, simplicity, and precision. Stout lectured on the history of modern philosophy, and with reference to these lectures, we have the testimony of G. E. Moore that he has 'a quite exceptional gift for seizing on some particular point of importance involved in a confused philosophical controversy, and putting that point in the simplest and most conversational language; he is particularly direct, and utterly free from anything approaching pretentiousness or pomposity'. But Cambridge philosophers were then less concerned with how things should be said than with what they deemed important to say for our proper understanding of and our behaviour in the world in which we live.

In 1874 Sidgwick had published what C. D. Broad has described as the best treatise on moral theory that has ever been written. In a letter to Bain regarding this book, Sidgwick had said: 'It is an old hobby of mine to rehabilitate Butler, but now that I can persuade no one, I begin to suspect my arguments.' He need not have worried had he known that through the work of Stout, and through Stout's influence on others, Butler's psychology at least would need, half a century later, very little rehabilitation.

The most powerful influence upon Stout during his Cambridge years was, however, that of James Ward. In the larger world Bain was still the dominating figure in the psychological scene but it was through Ward's article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in 1886, that the tradition that Bain represented received its mortal wound; and it was through Ward that a new

epoch was begun in which psychology was transformed by a biological approach and enriched by continental streams of thought. Stout assimilated Ward; and the writers, British and continental, in whom Ward had shown less interest, he explored on his own account. The *Analytic Psychology* was completed by 1896 and by this time Stout had to explain that his debt to Ward was to be seen as much where he disagreed with his teacher as where he agreed.

The publication of the *Analytic Psychology* coincided with his appointment as the first Anderson Lecturer in Comparative Psychology in the University of Aberdeen.

This gave him the opportunity to prepare, as foreshadowed in the *Analytic*, a systematic exposition of psychology 'from a genetic point of view'. The publication of this, his second major work, again coincided with translation to a new post. The last year of the century stands out in the life of Stout by reason of three important events: in 1899 he married Ella Ker; Oxford University, by appointing him its first Wilde Reader, admitted that psychology might be possible; and Stout, by producing the *Manual*, established its existence in this country as a fact.

The tenure of the Wilde Readership enabled Stout to pursue his reflections on the matters with which Oxford was preoccupied, and in the fields in which Oxford excelled. He had for some time entertained the greatest respect for Bradley and he realized perhaps more clearly than anyone else how profoundly important for general psychological theory were some of the things that Bradley was saying at that time. It might in fact reasonably be claimed that the collapse of traditional associationism was due as much to the acumen of Bradley as to that of Ward. In Stout these two influences combined in a subtle and extremely powerful synthesis. He remained at Oxford for four years. In 1903 he was appointed to the chair at St. Andrews.

The influence of Bradley had at first been shown in Stout's treatment of the concept of activity, in his account of association of ideas, and in the doctrine of 'relative suggestion'. During his residence at Oxford his attention was directed to a closer analysis of Mr. Bradley's logic. His appointment to a chair of Logic and Metaphysics might have been expected to confirm this new direction in the course of his thought. For a year or two this was indeed the case. But in the comparative freedom from the immediate pressure of an established philosophical circle, the inward prepotencies reasserted their sway. Thereafter, with un-deviating consistency, Stout's intellectual life remained devoted

to the philosophy of mind. His circumstances provided the most favourable conditions for the development of his systematic philosophy, the main lines of which were already well defined. And the invitations in 1919 and 1921 to give the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh afforded an opportunity for a formal presentation of this philosophy to the world. But these lectures were destined never to appear. His 'system', too, was destined never to appear, at least not through his published writings.

The *Analytic Psychology*, the *Manual*, and the much-revised version of the Gifford Lectures in his *Mind and Matter*, are each works of the greatest philosophical importance. But even collectively, and supplemented by the informative *Studies in Philosophy and Psychology*, they fail to present his view of the universe on the panoramic scale that that view finally assumed in his own mind.

The pen was not his natural medium of expression. His writings have the dry elegance of the best philosophical prose of the nineteenth century. There are one or two papers, as, for example, the devastating examination of the *Philosophy of Mr. Shadworth Hodgson* in which he loosens the rein on his playful controversial humour. There are many passages and some whole papers in which he achieves an amazing combination of lucidity and compression. But in his writings as a whole, he rarely adapts his exposition to the tempo of an impatient reader. He wrote hardly a sentence that contained a superfluous word, and his paragraphs contain few digressions, but he found it difficult to make a philosophical point and then to leave it alone. The restless activity of his mind, his range of information, the wealth of his associations, his anxiety to forestall, his willingness to concede, and his readiness always to restate his thesis in the various ways required by critics simple, subtle, or perverse, combine to convey a specious impression of prolixity. The fact is that he always deployed the whole of his intellectual resources like a general with innumerable battalions under his command.

His public lectures, so far as they were 'public', were similar to his writings. He lectured, in fact, by reading out what he had previously written down. This was not conducive to a wide diffusion of his influence. Physically he was a very small man. He was small in every way except in intellect and personality. But even in his bodily parts he was all there. Everything was small, but everything was present in due proportion. Even his voice was small. Thus it was that a wit reported upon a lecture

to the Academy: 'Stout disappeared behind the lectern and was neither seen nor heard for an hour.' His voice, however, was right for the ends for which he wished to use it. His natural medium was the intimate personal conversation, and his public lectures often ended in a private conversation. Even at the largest philosophical conference, he was apt to forget the presence of the assembly. Very soon after the opening of the discussion of his paper he would descend from the platform, point an emphatic little finger at the heart of his protagonist (for preference Samuel Alexander), and the argument proceeded as though they alone occupied the room.

Stout was never at a loss for someone to talk to. In the earlier decades of the present century, St. Andrews enjoyed a vigorous philosophical life. He, John Burnet, and A. E. Taylor occupied their chairs at the same time, and nearly every philosopher in the country came to St. Andrews for one reason or another. Quite a few passed through the University as lecturers on the way to their chairs. Others came to deliver the Gifford Lectures, to receive honorary degrees, to act as examiners, or just with the good and simple purpose of making a call on Stout.

The intellectual life to which Stout contributed was, however, by no means wholly philosophical in content. Stout had the widest interest in literature; and history, especially military history, ranked in his recreations almost with chess. He would talk with almost anyone on almost anything. Even his caddy, who had reluctantly to report that the professor would never be a very distinguished golfer, felt constrained to add: 'but mind you, in conversation he's a rare intelligent wee mon.'

The most broadly based of the conversational circles of which Stout was the centre was that which was commonly described as 'Mrs. Stout's Discussion Club'. It was so described because Mrs. Stout was the only member who knew its rules and constitution and it was generally left to her to elect its members. There was also a chess club, the procedures of which were equally informal. This club had a long history and a large membership, but it rarely had more than four members at any one time. It was, in fact, not so much a club as a class, as this word is used in logic—the class of residents in St. Andrews who played chess with Stout.

In the summer, and on the bright days of the St. Andrews winter, too, Stout would take long walks with one or other of his colleagues—west over the dunes to the mouth of the Eden, east along the cliffs to the Rock and Spindle Rock, or inland

along Lade Braes. Any of these paths might truly be described as the St. Andrews *Philosophenweg*.

The Stouts owned a car which neither Stout himself nor Mrs. Stout could drive; but there was always a willing niece or some young lecturer to make that engine go. Every year many picnics were arranged. The first of the season always took place on whatever might be deemed by Mrs. Stout the appointed day for summer to come in. It might snow on that day, but this picnic would be held. There are many of their friends who cherish memories of Stout discoursing imperturbably against the background of a blizzard from which the party was protected only by the tenuous defences of that draughty car. Wherever Stout might be, the argument would be followed wherever it might lead.

In these free, spontaneous discussions, one gained a growing sense of participation in the development of a master plan. As his earlier papers to the Aristotelian Society grew into chapters of the *Analytic*, so in these later conversations, the paragraphs of *Mind and Matter* and *God and Nature* were falling into shape. Points that seemed intolerably obscure in his writings were quickly illumined in the informally spoken word. So often a casual remark or a quick rejoinder to a comment gave one the sense of an intuitive apprehension of the idea in itself behind the mere phenomena of his published formulations.

How much of Stout's philosophy is preserved for history yet remains to be determined. A full appraisal will be possible perhaps only in the light of reliquiae awaiting publication. Whoever may undertake to give a definitive exposition will have no easy task.

The greatest difficulty will be to draw the line correctly between the real changes in his views and changes merely in expression. Real and important changes undoubtedly occurred, but these might be introduced without significant changes in his terminology. He would use old and familiar words, his own and those of others, with a new significance. This, in fact, is one of the reasons why so many failed to get the measure of his great originality. Whilst the younger men expressed old doctrines in a new philosophical language, Stout was apt to express a novel thought in archaic terminology.

On the other hand, what sometimes appears to be a revolution in thought was in fact a revolutionary restatement. He was an acute and incisive controversialist, but he always tried to see his critics' point of view. In consequence, he was always ready to

change his terminology and to make concessions. Fundamentally, he was less concerned to rebut than to incorporate the points that were made against him. It is for this reason, perhaps, that throughout his intellectual life he had no spiritual crises, no dramatic phases of conversion. He had an extraordinary capacity for assimilation. He accepted no philosophy but his own, but every other philosophy was grist to his ever-grinding mill. 'I have got them all in my system,' he once allowed himself to say with the modest and satisfied smile reminiscent of that on the face of the proverbial amiable tiger. And, indeed, he *had* got them all, swallowed, digested, and transformed.

It is for this reason extremely difficult and certainly misleading to attach to him any conventional labels. He was described as an idealist and as such he certainly began. But in later life he vehemently protested: 'But I am as good a realist as any,' and the protest was well founded. Sometimes, when he was being especially emphatic about the embodiedness of the 'embodied mind', one was tempted to regard him as something of a 'Behaviourist' and the positivistic streak in his philosophy should not surprise those who remember his acknowledged debt to Hobbes. He was, in fact, almost everything a philosopher could try consistently to be. Most philosophers are distinctive in virtue of what they deny. Stout was distinctive in the surprising range of his affirmations. Encyclopaedic in his knowledge and universal in his sympathies, he devoted his life in effect to a synthesis of all philosophies.

Stout came to believe that the things we see around us are in all essential respects what they appear to be—solid material things of various shapes, sizes, and colours, emitting sounds and smells, moving about, and producing various changes in each other and in us. He believed, too, that we are in all essential respects what we appear to ourselves to be—spiritual beings who know, feel, and will in pursuit of the ends that we desire. In the defence of these and similar beliefs he rightly claimed to be a philosophical exponent of the doctrine of common sense.

He came also to believe, however, that through reflection we could get to know things about ourselves and the world which are not at first apparent to common sense and are not established by the evidence of science. Reflection led him to believe that we and the material objects in the world around us are much less diverse in our natures than is commonly supposed. We *are* spiritual beings but we are not *purely* so. We are

'embodied minds'. The chief implication of his phrase is that of mutual entailment of the properties of matter and the properties of mind. To be a mind at all one must *be* a body. (It is not enough to have one.) More surprisingly, to be a material thing one must exist within a certain unity that is characteristic of mind. As the mind is embodied, so is the world ensouled.

Though the mutual entailment of mind and matter seems to be implied in Stout's exposition, the argument for the animation of nature is different from the argument for the material embodiment of mind. It rests in the main upon an analysis of causality. Causal process is observed under the most favourable conditions in the case of our own activity. The teleological nature that it here displays is not, however, to be regarded as peculiar to the case in question; it is characteristic of causality in general. And so we are led as philosophical scientists to share with early man and all the poets the belief that nature is not merely mindless matter, but that it is something 'akin to and essentially one with our own mental life'.

Thus are we gradually edged by varied and subtle arguments from what at first appears to be the defence of the naïvest beliefs of common sense to what is vaguely but fairly described as 'metaphysical speculation'. But even as a metaphysician, Stout was not so much a transcendentalist as an extrapolationist. He had little interest in questions of deductive logic, and less in dialectical arguments. He would have claimed to be a thorough-going empiricist and that his methods were inductive. He shared with the phenomenalist the belief that our experience is a fair sample of the larger whole of which it is a part. He differs only in the analysis that he gives of this part. He had, one suspects, a fairly detailed theory about the nature of inductive reasoning. 'We establish the principle of induction', he once said, 'in the course of using it.' Unfortunately, this cryptic statement receives no detailed amplification in his published writings. There can, however, be little doubt that in the detailed and subtle analysis of the inductive processes implicit in the perception and 'ideal construction' of the external world which form so large a part of the thesis of the *Manual*, Stout was developing a method which was later to be used in the great extrapolation of mind into the physical world.

A life of 84 years, however, was just not long enough for the task that he had undertaken. He had almost, but not quite, completed a philosophical system in the grand style. Through the three major works we begin to see the outline of a truly

impressive edifice with something of the dimensions of the system of Descartes, of Spinoza, or of Kant. But again, the age was not the most propitious for the kind of philosophical work for which his powers were most adapted. He did not live, philosophically speaking, in an architectural period. Speculative construction was giving way to critical analysis. But even as an analyst, Stout could more than hold his own.

He attracted few disciples but no one among his contemporaries has exercised a more pervasive influence. He was philosophically at home in Cambridge, in Oxford, and in Scotland, and he has been closely studied in five continents. He was throughout his life the philosopher *par excellence* upon whom younger generations could respectfully sharpen their wits. He enjoyed being a whetstone as much as being a knife. The devotion of a disciple was probably one of the few things by which he could have been bored.

Stout retired from his chair in 1936. Later, he went to a young country and entered with characteristic zest into the enjoyment of new ways of life. There he lived and talked, as he had always lived and talked, in the main with men younger than himself, sharing with youth everything except youth's moods of disillusionment. He had lived through queer times, including the darkest years of the Second World War, but never for a moment did he seem to doubt that the world was a good place to live in. 'Life has never been a cheat to me,' he said on one of the few occasions on which he talked about himself, and he made the remark on one of the last of his walks with a friend. From all accounts it is clear that his life at Sydney was of a piece with his life at Cambridge, Aberdeen, Oxford, and St. Andrews. It was a life of philosophical reflection which found the freest expression, not so much in books or lectures, as in witty and instructive conversation with those who succumbed to his irresistible simplicity and charm. But to those, the many, who knew him best at St. Andrews, the picture that remains in the memory is of the life that was lived behind the gaunt grey façade of the house on the Scores.

It is late morning on one of those pale bright days of early summer. Somewhere in the lower floor of Craigard Mrs. Stout is busily occupied with those practical affairs which her husband is not supposed, or not allowed, to understand. She is making the final arrangements for an expedition in the afternoon, or for the entertainment of the guests expected in the evening. Stout has returned from his morning lectures, and has climbed

up to his high attic study to divide his attention, as only a great philosopher, with something of the schoolboy in his constitution, could divide it, between two divergent tasks. On his desk is a chapter of the Gifford Lectures, under revision, and nearby on a low side-table, set out on the board, is an unfinished game of chess.

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