

SOME CRITICAL NOTES ON "PERSONALISM"

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I.

None of us who are interested in Protestant thought in America can possibly ignore, and we certainly ought not to neglect, the school known as "personalism" or "personal idealism." We may smile at Borden P. Bowne's enthusiastic claims to originality, or deny, as I shall, some of his conclusions or assumptions; but we must face the fact that he had laid hold of a fundamental aspect of the universe completely, whole-heartedly and spiritedly. He and his followers (Brightman, Flewelling, Knudson, McConnell, et al.), more than any others in this country, at least, have tried vainly to recall philosophy from its barren absorption with the merely mechanical, to a reconsideration of the basic factor of personality in human experience and of its importance for that orderly interpretation of experience which we call philosophy.

In addition to the general significance of personalism, there is a further reason why those of us who are not traditional personalists, but are concerned about the interpretation of religion, should give careful attention to it. All rational and empirical philosophies of religion are today under sharp attack from the robot bombs of neo-Calvinistic, "crisis" theologians. Frankly, it seems to me that we vitally need the emphasis and contribution which the personalists have to bring in opposition to our common antagonists, in this present-day recrudescence of the age-old immanence-transcendence controversy. I can see no final, satisfactory resolution of that paradox, if we continue to ignore the personality factor.

That this reconsideration of the place of personality, in any sound philosophy of the present era, has been

so grudgingly and inadequately carried out, to date, especially in American schools, may be due to several factors. One, undoubtedly, is our passionate interest in and devotion to the so-called natural sciences. Another factor is or has been the reaction, amounting to violent antipathy, of many minds toward the domination of Hegel and Hegelian ways of thought during most of the latter half of the nineteenth century both in England and America. And most personalists have, to say the least, a mild taint of Hegelianism.

My thesis, in these brief notes, is that there is a third factor, closely related to the second, but more specific than merely sharing in a general and often blind antipathy. It has to do with the metaphysical nature of most past and present personalism. When Bowne laid hold on his basic principle of the fundamental importance of personality in the universe, it led him logically to a rejection of Hegelian absolutism in the quantitative sense. This was the sense which James Ward called singularism: that reality is one Absolute Spirit or *Idee*. This singularism Bowne and all his present-day disciples reject. For this "block universe" they substitute a pluralism of persons. But—and this is the important point to note—Bowne and practically all of his followers have clung tenaciously to Hegel's qualitative absolutism, although rejecting his singularism: they remain idealistic monists. Reality, metaphysically speaking, they say, consists only of mind, spirit, personality or persons—the latter usually conceived as of the nature of consciousness. Physical, non-mental things or aspects of experience are only ways in which certain other minds (or the divine mind) appear to us in experience. Now, although they have made much of their pluralism and of

their opposition to Hegelian singularism (and rightly so), the personalists, by embracing, or rather, continuing to embrace, metaphysical idealism of the purest type, have naturally earned, in part, and have shared in the suspicion and antipathy which was the reaction of the last several generations to all absolutisms.

But let us be clear: I am not for a moment defending, and I hope not prejudicially sharing in that reaction. It has all too often been blind, unfair, hopelessly obscurantist, refusing to face the real issues of personalism. It is because I am so completely convinced that Bowne "had something on the ball," and something vitally important, in his primary emphasis, that I am anxious to understand why it has not had wider recognition and influence outside the circle of idealistic philosophy and religion. My answer is: to some, perhaps to a large extent because of its qualitatively absolute metaphysics. This metaphysics has indeed made for its acceptance by many religious thinkers. It has just as undoubtedly led to its summary and often dogmatic rejection by those innoculated with the virus of modern science and anti-Hegelianism. Hence it is our purpose here to examine this ground of the widespread neglect of personalism. Is there nothing but superficial anti-Hegelian or anti-religious prejudice involved? Or is it possible that even in the realm of scholarship, as occasionally happens with popular prejudices, there does lie behind the irrational antipathy a half-conscious recognition of sound grounds for distrust and opposition?

The term "notes," in the title of this paper, was not lightly or inadvertently chosen. For we are faced at this point with profound and far-reaching questions. By "we" I mean primarily those of us who are concerned about the problem of adequately interpreting experience in the full light of all that

science, philosophy and religion can teach us, and yet who must reject the current personalistic metaphysics. In making that rejection, we are in grave danger of overlooking or ignoring the positive contribution which personalism can make and of missing the searching questions which it bequeaths to all of us. To consider these questions and problems in detail and adequately, of course, would be beyond our scope here; but we can at least note what some of them are. Let us begin with a very fundamental problem: that of the significance of empirical method and of its summary abandonment upon occasion.

II

I have referred to personalism as a species of absolutism—qualitative absolutism. Yet the curious thing is that with almost one accord the personalists, from Bowne to Brightman's latest disciple, insist that their point of view is empirical, and that they follow the empirical method. I recognize difficulties of definition and the use of terms, but must insist, nevertheless, that there is an apparent contradiction, or at least a confusing shift of method here: how can a true empiricist be an absolutist, even of the mild personalistic sort? Was not the bogey of old-fashioned materialism (not to mention Hegel's "block universe") slain and quartered on just this score, by appeals to experience rightly interpreted? Any qualitative absolutism, whether it be materialism or idealism, must ultimately completely abandon empiricistic method, and must make a sheer leap of faith, in response to an impulsion of pure reasoning. By this leap of faith differences which are empirically, scientifically established are denied, both by materialism and idealism.

Whether those differences are conceived in terms of the common sense level of experience, or on the molecular or sub-molecular level of theoretical physics, makes no essential difference, so far as I can see. Electrons and protons may indeed be "little bits of

nothing moving very swiftly," but they are definitely *not* what we mean by "thought," "idea," "mind," "spirit," or "person," in any truly empirical, or empirically grounded sense of those terms. And to speak of them, or of their manifestations on the grosser level of sense experience, as "the action of God's mind on my mind" is to utter an empirically meaningless phrase (whatever may be its religious connotations), in a class with the former use by philosophers of the term "soul." Of course, impelled by his logic, any individual has the right to make such a leap of faith — provided he is clear that he is making a leap of faith.

Some of us, who cannot see the logic or feel the impulsion, find it difficult to see why such a leap of faith should be included as an integral part of a so-called empiricistic philosophy. Rather, it would appear to us — however strong the logic — to fly in the face of the empirical facts and of empirical method. For we know nothing, literally and absolutely nothing, in experience, of any direct action of one mind on another mind which is in any respect comparable to this assumed "action of God's mind on our minds," or of other minds on my mind, or whatever the personalistic formula for the explanation of physical things may be.

This problem, then, poses a basic question of method: granted that since Kant we must recognize the validity of both rationalistic and empiricistic elements in sound philosophic method or procedure, are we any more justified in following the impulsion of rationalism beyond experience to an absolute qualitative idealism than the mechanist was in following his empiricistic method to an exclusive materialism? Or rather, does not the very "genuine empiricism" for which Brightman himself pleads,¹ if it be genuine, point toward a different and a sounder, i. e., a more inclusive organic metaphysic?

III

However one may solve for himself this general problem of philosophic method and its application — and one's solution may indeed (as has sometimes been suggested) depend on the "natural set" of one's mind — nevertheless it seems to me that the personalist's metaphysical idealism leads him into a further impasse quite as insoluble as that in which the materialist bogs down. I have reference here to what Ward rightly held to be the two critical problems for any metaphysic: body-mind relations and perception. With reference to perception, I cannot pretend to speak with any authority, except in so far as the essential difficulty involved is identical with that which I find in the problem of body-mind relations. The latter I have examined at some length in a dissertational study, *The Body-Mind Problem in James Ward's Philosophy*.² I chose the work of James Ward for this examination because of the fact that he was an outstanding scientist: a first rate psychologist with thorough biological training, as well as a personalistic philosopher who had given special attention to these problems.³ Further, I was and still am convinced that if there is any hope for an effective idealistic metaphysic, it will lie in the direction of a pan-psychism such as Ward's, rather than in a vague occasionalism or "pantheism of the physical" such as seems to be more popular with American idealistic pluralists. But let us come to closer grips with the problem, approaching it from the angle of its strategic importance for any idealistic metaphysic.

So far as I am aware there have been really only three respectable lines of

¹ In his "An Empirical Approach to God," *Philosophical Review*, 46 (1937) 154-155.

² 1937; not published. On file at the Library of Boston University.

³ See his *Encyclopedia Britannica* article "Psychology," in early editions, and his *Psychological Principles*.

logical argument offered for a qualitatively absolute idealism; and it is almost impossible, practically, to keep these three lines separate. One is the attempt, used so effectively by Ward in his "Naturalism and Agnosticism," and, to some extent, by Bowne in his various polemical writings, to set up an alternative of idealism versus "naturalism," and then to demonstrate the complete fallacy and failure of this so-called naturalism. The latter, of course, was always what we think of today as "old fashioned materialism." In so far as this alternative did have meaning and validity the idealists surely succeeded in discrediting that type of naturalism. But many of us believe that the alternative has been superseded, and hence we must deny the conclusion.

The second line of argument is even more familiar to contemporary students of the history of philosophy. It follows the historic development from Descartes' "impassable gulf" between matter and mind, through Locke's disparagement of the term "substance" and Berkeley's demonstration of the subjective source of all our knowledge of external objects, to what Perry has well named "the ego-centric predicament": that *all* we know we know only in and through our own minds. Hence the external world *must* be of the same nature as mind, idea, or spirit. This, it seems to me, is the one *bona-fide* rational argument upon which present-day idealism really rests. And yet in spite of, or perhaps because of its very logical smoothness, it fails to convince many of us.

The third line of argument (if indeed we may call it that) is that idealism offers a solution to some of philosophy's most persistent problems. One of these is the body-mind problem. Here the proof or demonstration leans heavily upon the argument just outlined. Since body is nothing, really, but mental in nature, the body-mind relation no longer presents any diffi-

culty: it is nothing but a relation between mind and ideas (Berkeley), or mind and minds (Ward), or mind and the divine mind (Brightman).

This looks like a great verbal triumph for idealism. Unfortunately, however, a more careful and less general treatment of the body-mind problem fails to bear out the idealistic optimism, at least for us who are recalcitrant empiricists. There is indeed a gentleman of dubious quality hidden in the philosophic wood-pile! The dubiety enters with the complete abandonment, once more, of the empirical point of view. For again, as in the first and more general problem discussed above (in Section II), there is a type of relationship between mind and idea, or between mind and mind, *assumed* in this solution, which is absolutely foreign to anything we actually know in our human experience. It is that assumption which, for us, destroys the validity of the whole argument. Let us examine it more closely, and see the problem which it poses for us.

Needless to say, the body-mind relationship is exceedingly complicated. I became convinced early in my studies that the problem was scientifically insoluble; if for no other reason, because the temporal data are practically inaccessible or incomparable.⁴ But, in any case, any idealistic solution rests back, in the last analysis, on the Cartesian assumption of the disparate character of the mental and the physical. It is assumed therefore that the conception of one mental reality acting directly upon another mental reality is logically clearer and more practically acceptable than is that of a mental-physical relationship. Ward, so far as I am aware, is the one idealist (at least since Lotze) to attempt an analysis in detail of this series of relationships which make up the body-

⁴ Consider, for example, that although we may time a physical event to an infinitesimal part of a second, conscious events cannot be accurately timed closer than about one-fifteenth of a second.

mind situation. In the end, body-mind relationships are reduced by him to the *direct influence* of one mind upon another, in the concatenation of minds (monads) which constitute the individual. And, as I have indicated above, we are here brought face to face with a completely non-empirical assumption: namely, that at the low level of the constituent monads or minimal minds, which, along with the dominant monad or conscious mind, make up the human organism—that somewhere down there mind acts upon mind, directly, immediately, without any intermediate, symbolical instrumentality of any sort. This, I repeat, is a completely non-empirical assumption such as is always hidden beneath the generalities or the details of the idealistic pluralist's solution of the body-mind problem, and, I suspect, of his solution of the problem of perception. It is just as much a logic-impelled leap of faith at the level of Ward's body-mind solution as it is at the more vague or general level of other idealistic solutions. Incidentally, if I am not mistaken, we are very close here to the same genuine sort of difficulty which Lotze found in the problem of the interaction of physical bodies, and which drove him to absolute idealism. It is a very real problem. Bowne followed Lotze, and the personalists since have chosen that horn of the dilemma. Shall we follow them, or remain empiricists? That is the question, and it brings us to our final comment.

IV

The glory and, to some minds, the damnation of philosophy is that it is a never-ending quest for truth and understanding. At least it is never-ending on the human level. New occasions not only teach new duties; they provide a new philosophic climate for each succeeding generation. Older philosophies, like ancient good, through no fault of their own, become uncouth. This is unquestionably the case with old-fash-

ioned materialism. Some of us feel that it would be quite as truly the case also with metaphysical idealism of the qualitatively absolute sort, today, were it not that the idealist's metaphysics has become so inextricably tied up with much that is invaluable outside of metaphysics. Further, the personalists also have a primary emphasis, over and above their idealism, that represents a timeless metaphysical truth or factor. If, perchance, the recognition of the primacy or importance of personality in philosophic speculation should be lost, a future generation must once more re-achieve that insight. Other ages have temporarily lost sight of it, only to see another Socrates, an Augustine, a Kant or Bowne arise to reassert it.

Therefore, we must not allow the principle of personality as a clue to reality to be overshadowed or permanently ignored, by being indissolubly united to an inadequate or outmoded metaphysic. The term *personalism* is not, as such, the sole possession or prerogative of the idealists.⁵ It is time for—nay, there is long overdue in American thought—a more thorough-going exploration of the possibilities of naturalistic or realistic personalism. I believe "naturalistic" is really the better adjective, although I realize the prejudice it must meet, especially in some religious circles, due to its past associations. But old-fashioned naturalism, i. e., materialism of the crude sort, is as dead as the proverbial dodo. There should be no misunderstanding among informed people on that score. The new personalism must be naturalistic in the best sense, the root sense, of that term. A person must be rediscovered as an organic product or process within a Nature which is, in some real sense, itself both organic and personal.

⁵ Cf. E. S. Brightman, *Is God a Person?* (New York: Association Press, 1932) p. 13-15, and A. C. Knudson, *The Philosophy of Personalism* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1927) Chap. I.

Here again, of course, we touch upon vast and fascinating questions and problems which cannot be dealt with in the scope of any one article: questions of the nature of such organically conceived personality; of the sense in which Nature must be personal or inclusive of forces capable of producing human personalities; of the implications for religion of such a reconstituted personalism. And, of course, the questions herein discussed in relation to the older personal idealism must be dealt with far more adequately.

This indeed is a program and a task to challenge some of the best minds of the rising intellectual generation. It

represents no easy superficial "reconciliation of personalism and behaviorism,"⁶ but a thorough-going, total metaphysical reconstruction. In forging a system in tune with our generation—as well as with the Infinite—such a reconstruction should salvage the best in both traditional idealism and realism. Only so can we successfully vanquish the irrationalism and medievalism, the anti-scientific trend, which threatens to swamp present-day religious thought, under the guise of saving it.

⁶ See the excellent and provocative brief article on this theme by Prof. L. Harold DeWolf, in the Spring number, 1944, of *The Philosophical Forum*, p. 3-7.