

Solipsism, F.H. Bradley

Selected by D. R. Khashaba

IN our First Book [of *Appearance and Reality*] we examined various ways of taking facts, and we found that they all gave no more than appearance. In the present Book we have been engaged with the nature of Reality. We have been attempting, so far, to form a general idea of its character, and to defend it against more or less plausible objections. Through the remainder of our work we must pursue the same task. We must endeavour to perceive how the main aspects of the world are all able to take a place within our Absolute. And, if we find that none refuses to accept a position there, we may consider our result secure against attack. I will now enter on the question which gives its title to this chapter.

Have we any reason to believe in the existence of anything beyond our private selves? Have we the smallest right to such a belief, and is it more than literally a self-delusion? We, I think, may fairly say that some metaphysicians have shown unwillingness to look this problem in the face. And yet it cannot be avoided. Since we all believe in a world beyond us, and are not prepared to give this up, it would be a scandal if that were something which upon our theory was illusive. Any view which will not explain, and also justify, an attitude essential to human nature, must surely be condemned. But we shall soon see, upon the other hand, how the supposed difficulties of the question have been created by false doctrine. Upon our general theory they lose their foundation and vanish.

The argument in favour of Solipsism, put most simply, is as follows. “I cannot transcend experience, and experience must be my experience. From this it follows that nothing beyond my self exists for what is experience is its states.”

The argument derives its strength, in part, from false theory, but to a greater extent perhaps from thoughtless obscurity. I will begin by pointing out the ambiguity which lends some colour to this appeal to experience. Experience may mean experience only direct, or indirect also. Direct experience I understand to be confined to the given simply, to the merely felt or presented. But indirect

experience includes all fact that is constructed from the basis of the “this” and the “mine.” It is all that is taken to exist beyond the felt moment. This is a distinction the fatal result of which Solipsism has hardly realised; for upon neither interpretation of experience can its argument be defended.

I. Let us first suppose that the experience, to which it appeals, is direct. Then, we saw in our ninth chapter, the mere “given” fails doubly to support that appeal. It supplies, on the one hand, not enough, and, on the other hand, too much. It offers us a not-self with the self, and so ruins Solipsism by that excess. But, upon the other side, it does not supply us with any self at all, if we mean by self a substantive the possessor of an object or even its own states.

And Solipsism is, on this side, destroyed by defect. But, before I develop this, I will state an objection which by itself might suffice.

My self, as an existence to which phenomena belong as its adjectives, is supposed to be given by a direct experience. But this gift plainly is an illusion. Such an experience can supply us with no reality beyond that of the moment. There is no faculty which can deliver the immediate revelation of a self beyond the present (Chapter x.). And so, if Solipsism finds its one real thing in experience, that thing is confined to the limits of the mere “this.” But with such a reflection we have already, so far, destroyed Solipsism as positive, and as anything more than a sufficient reason for total scepticism. Let us pass from this objection to other points.

Direct experience is unable to transcend the mere “this.” But even in what that gives we are, even so far, not supplied with the self upon which Solipsism is founded. We have always instead either too much or too little. For the distinction and separation of subject and object is not original at all, and is, in that sense, not a datum. And hence the self cannot, without qualification, be said to be given (ibid.). I will but mention this point, and will go on to another. Whatever we may think generally of our original mode of feeling, we have now verifiably some states in which there is no reference to a subject at all (ibid.). And if such feelings are the mere adjectives of a subject reality, that character must be inferred, and is certainly not given. But it is not necessary to take our stand on this disputable ground. Let us

admit that the distinction of object and subject is directly presented—and we have still hardly made a step in the direction of Solipsism. For the subject and the object will now appear in correlation; they will be either two aspects of one fact, or (if you prefer it) two things with a relation between them. And it hardly follows straight from this that only one of these two things is real, and that all the rest of the given total is merely its attribute. That is the result of reflection and of inference, a process which first sets up one half of the fact as absolute, and then turns the other half into an adjective of this fragment. And whether the half is object or is subject, and whether we are led to Materialism, or to what is called sometimes “Idealism,” the process essentially is the same. It equally consists, in each case, in a vicious inference. And the result is emphatically not something which experience presents. I will, in conclusion, perhaps needlessly, remark on another point. We found (Chapter ix.) that there prevailed great confusion as to the boundaries of self and not-self. There seemed to be features not exclusively assignable to either. And, if this is so, surely that is one more reason for rejecting an experience such as Solipsism would suppose. If the self is given as a reality, with all else as its adjectives, we can hardly then account for the supervening uncertainty about its limits, and explain our constant hesitation between too little and too much.

What we have seen so far is briefly this. We have no direct experience of reality as my self with its states. If we are to arrive at that conclusion, we must do so indirectly and through a process of inference. Experience gives the “this-mine.” It gives neither the “mine” as an adjective of the “this,” nor the “this” as dependent on and belonging to the “mine.” Even if it did so for the moment, that would still not be enough as a support for Solipsism. But experience supplies the character required, not even as existing within one presentation, and, if not thus, then much less so as existing beyond. And the position, in which we now stand, may be stated as follows. If Solipsism is to be proved, it must transcend direct experience. Let us then ask, (a) first, if transcendence of this kind is possible, and, (b) next, if it is able to give assistance to Solipsism. The conclusion, which we shall reach, may be stated at once. It is both possible and necessary to transcend what is given. But this same transcendence at once carries us into the universe at large. Our private self is not a resting-place which logic can justify.

II. (a) We are to enquire, first, if it is possible to remain within the limits of direct experience. Now it would not be easy to point out what is given to us immediately. It would be hard to show what is not imported into the “this,” or, at least, modified there by transcendence. To fix with regard to the past the precise limit of presentation, might at times be very difficult. And to discount within the present the result of ideal processes would, at least often, be impossible. But I do not desire to base any objection on this ground. I am content here to admit the distinction between direct and indirect experience. And the question is whether reality can go beyond the former? Has a man a right to say that something exists, beside that which at this moment he actually feels? And is it possible, on the other side, to identify reality with the immediate present?

This identification, we have seen, is impossible; and the attempt to remain within the boundary of the mere “this” is hopeless. The self-discrepancy of the content, and its continuity with a “what” beyond its own limits, at once settle the question. We need not fall back for conviction upon the hard shock of change. The whole movement of the mind implies disengagement from the mere “this”; and to assert the content of the latter as reality at once involves us in contradictions. But it would not be profitable further to dwell on this point. To remain within the presented is neither defensible nor possible. We are compelled alike by necessity and by logic to transcend it (Chapters xv. and xix.).

But, before proceeding to ask whither this transcendence must take us, I will deal with a question we noticed before (Chapter xix.). An objection may be based on the uniqueness of the felt; and it may be urged that the reality which appears in the “this-mine” is unique and exclusive. Whatever, therefore, its predicates may seem to demand, it is not possible to extend the boundaries of the subject. That will, in short, stick hopelessly for ever within the confines of the presented. Let us examine this contention.

It will be more convenient, in the first place, to dismiss the word “unique.” For that seems (as we saw) to introduce the idea of existence in a series, together with a negative relation towards other elements. And, if such a relation is placed within the essence of the “this,” then the “this” has become part of a larger unity.

The objection may be stated better thus. “All reality must fall within the limits of the given. For, however much the content may desire to go beyond, yet, when you come to make that content a predicate of the real, you are forced back to the ‘this-Mine,’ or the ‘now-felt,’ for your subject. Reality appears to lie solely in what is presented, and seems not discoverable elsewhere. But the presented, on the other hand, must be the felt ‘this.’ And other cases of ‘this,’ if you mean to take them as real, seem also to fall within the ‘now-mine.’ If they are not indirect predicates of that, and so extend it adjectivally, then they directly will fall within its datum. But, if so, they themselves become distinctions and features there. Hence we have the ‘this-mine’ as before, but with an increase of special internal particulars. And so we still remain within the confines of one presentation, and to have two at once seems impossible.”

Now in answer, I admit that, to find reality, we must betake ourselves to feeling. It is the real, which there appears, which is the subject of all predicates. And to make our way to another fact, quite outside of and away from the “this” which is “mine,” seems out of the question. But, while admitting so much, I reject the further consequence. I deny that the felt reality is shut up and confined within my feeling. For the latter may, by addition, be extended beyond its own proper limits. It, may remain positively itself, and yet be absorbed in what is larger. Just as in change we have a “now,” which contains also a “then”; just as, again, in what is mine there may be diverse features, so, from the opposite side, it may be with my direct experience. There is no opposition between that and a wider whole of presentation. The “mine” does not exclude inclusion in a fuller totality. There may be a further experience immediate and direct, something that is my private feeling, and also much more. Now the Reality, to which all content in the end must belong, is, we have seen, a direct all-embracing experience. This Reality is present in, and is my feeling; and hence, to that extent, what I feel is the all-inclusive universe. But, when I go on to deny that this universe is more, I turn truth into error. There is a “more” of feeling, the extension of that which is “now mine”; and this whole is both the assertion and negation of my “this.” That extension maintains it together with additions, which merge and override it as exclusive. My “mine” becomes a feature in the great “mine,” which includes all “mines.”

Now, if within the “this” there were found anything which could stand out against absorption—anything which could refuse to be so lost by such support and maintenance—an objection might be tenable. But we saw, in our nineteenth chapter, that a character of this kind does not exist. My incapacity to extend the boundary of my “this,” my inability to gain an immediate experience of that in which it is subordinated and reduced—is my mere imperfection. Because I cannot spread out my window until all is transparent, and all windows disappear, this does not justify me in insisting on my window-frame’s rigidity. For that frame has, as such, no existence in reality, but only in our impotence (Chapter xix.). I am aware of the miserable inaccuracy of the metaphor, and of the thoughtless objection which it may call up; but I will still put the matter so. The one Reality is what comes directly to my feeling through this window of a moment; and this, also and again, is the only Reality. But we must not turn the first “is” into “is nothing at all but,” and the second “is” into “is all of.”

There is no objection against the disappearance of limited transparencies in an all-embracing clearness. We are not compelled merely, but we are justified, when we follow the irresistible lead of our content.

(b) We have seen, so far, that experience, if you take that as direct, does not testify to the sole reality of my self. Direct experience would be confined to a “this,” which is not even preeminently a “mine,” and still less is the same as what we mean by a “self.” And, in the second place, we perceived that reality extends beyond such experience. And here, once more, Solipsism may suppose that it finds its opportunity. It may urge that the reality, which goes beyond the moment, stops short at the self. The process of transcendence, it may admit, conducts us to a “me” which embraces all immediate experiences. But, Solipsism may argue, this process cannot take us on further. By this road, it will object, there is no way to a plurality of selves, or to any reality beyond my private personality. We shall, however, find that this contention is both dogmatic and absurd. For, if you have a right to believe in a self beyond the present, you have the same right to maintain also the existence of other selves.

I will not enquire how, precisely, we come by the idea of other animates’ existence. Metaphysics has no direct interest in the origin of ideas, and its business

is solely to examine their claim to be true. But, if I am asked to justify my belief that other selves, beside my own, are in the world, the answer must be this I arrive at other souls by means of other bodies, and the argument starts from the ground of my own body. My own body is one of the groups which are formed in my experience. And it is connected, immediately and specially, with pleasure and pain, and again with sensations and volitions, as no other group can be. But, since there are other groups like my body, these must also be qualified by similar attendants. With my feelings and my volitions these groups cannot correspond. For they are usually irrelevant and indifferent, and often even hostile; and they enter into collision with one another and with my body. Therefore these foreign bodies have, each of them, a foreign self of its own. This is briefly the argument, and it seems to me to be practically valid. It falls short, indeed, of demonstration in the following way. The identity in the bodies is, in the, first place, not exact, but in various degrees fails to reach completeness. And further, even so far as the identity is perfect, its consequence might be modified by additional conditions. And hence the other soul might so materially differ from my own, that I should hesitate, perhaps, to give it the name of soul. But still the argument, though not strict proof, seems sufficiently good.

It is by the same kind of argument that we reach our own past and future. And here Solipsism, in objecting to the existence of other selves, is unawares attempting to commit suicide. For my past self, also, is arrived at only by a process of inference, and by a process which also itself is fallible.

We are so accustomed each to consider his past self as his own, that it is worth while to reflect how very largely it may be foreign. My own past is, in the first place, incompatible with my own present, quite as much as my present can be with another man's. Their difference in time could not permit them both to be wholly the same, even if their two characters are taken as otherwise identical. But this agreement in character is at least not always found. And my past not only may differ so as to be almost indifferent, but I may regard it even with a feeling of hostility and hatred. It may be mine mainly in the sense of a persisting incumbrance, a compulsory appendage, joined in continuity and fastened by an inference. And that inference, not being abstract, falls short of demonstration.

My past of yesterday is constructed by a redintegration from the present. Let us call the present $X(B-C)$, with an ideal association $x(a-b)$. The reproduction of this association, and its synthesis with the present, so as to form $X(a-B-C)$, is what we call memory. And the justification of the process consists in the identity of x with X . But it is a serious step not simply to qualify my present self, but actually to set up another self at the distance of an interval. I so insist on the identity that I ride upon it to a difference, just as, before, the identity of our bodies carried me to the soul of a different man. And it is obvious, once more here, that the identity is incomplete. The association does not contain all that now qualifies X ; x is different from X , and b is different from B . And again, the passage, through this defective identity to another concrete fact, may to some extent be vitiated by unknown interfering conditions. Hence I cannot prove that the yesterday's self, which I construct, did, as such, have an actual existence in the past. The concrete conditions, into which my ideal construction must be launched, may alter its character. They may, in fact, unite with it so that, if I knew this unknown fact, I should no longer care to call it my self. Thus my past self, assuredly, is not demonstrated. We can but say of it that, like other selves, it is practically certain. And in each case the result, and our way to it, is in principle the same. Both other selves and my own self are intellectual constructions, each as secure as we can expect special facts to be. But, if any one stands out for demonstration, then neither is demonstrated. And, if this demand is pressed, you must remain with a feeling about which you can say nothing, and which is, emphatically, not the self of any one at all. On the other hand, if you are willing to accept a result which is not strictly proved, both results must be accepted. For the process, which conducts you to other selves, is not weaker sensibly, if at all, than the construction by which your own self is gained. On either alternative the conclusion of Solipsism is ruined.

And if memory, or some other faculty, is appealed to, and is invoked to secure the preeminent reality of my self, I must decline to be persuaded. For I am convinced that such convenient wonders do not exist, and that no one has any sufficient excuse for accepting them. Memory is plainly a construction from the ground of the present. It is throughout inferential, and is certainly fallible; and its gross mistakes as to past personal existence should be very well known (pp. 84, 213). I prefer, in passing, to notice that confusion as to the present limits of self, which is

so familiar a feature in hypnotic experiments. The assumption of a suggested foreign personality is, I think, strong evidence for the secondary nature of our own. Both, in short, are results of manufacture; and to account otherwise for the facts seems clearly impossible.

We have seen, so far, that direct experience is no foundation for Solipsism. We have seen further that, if at all we may transcend that experience, we are no nearer Solipsism. For we can go to foreign selves by a process no worse than the construction which establishes our own self. And, before passing on, I will call attention to a minor point. Even if I had secured a right to the possession of my past self, and no right to the acceptance of other selves as real, yet, even with this, Solipsism is not grounded. It would not follow from this that the not-myself is nothing, and that all the world is merely a state of my self. The only consequence, so far, would be that the not-myself must be inanimate. But between that result and Solipsism is an impassable gulf. You cannot, starting from the given, construct a self which will swallow up and own every element from which it is distinguished.

I will briefly touch on another source of misunderstanding. It is the old mistake in a form which is slightly different. All I know, I may be told, is what I experience, and I can experience nothing beyond my own states. And it is argued that hence my own self is the one knowable reality. But the truth in this objection, once more, has been pressed into falsehood. It is true that all I experience is my state—so far as I experience it. Even the Absolute, as my reality, is my state of mind. But this hardly shows that my experience possesses no other aspect. It hardly proves that what is my state of mind is no more, and must be taken as real barely from that one point of view. The Reality certainly must appear within my psychological existence; but it is quite another thing to limit its whole nature to that field.

My thought, feeling, and will, are, of course, all phenomena; they all are events which happen. From time to time, as they happen, they exist in the felt “this,” and they are elements within its chance congeries. And they can be taken further, as states of that self-thing which I construct by an inference. But, if you look at them merely so, then, unconsciously or consciously, you mutilate their character. You use a point of view which is necessary, but still is partial and one-sided. And we shall see more clearly, hereafter, the nature of this view (Chapters xxiii. and

xxvii.). I will here simply state that the import and content of these processes does not consist in their appearance in the psychical series. In thought the important feature is not our mental state, as such; and the same truth, if less palpable, is as certain with volition. My will is mine, but, none the less, it is also much more. The content of the idea willed (to put the matter only on that ground) may be something beyond me; and, since this content is effective, the activity of the process cannot simply be my state. But I will not try to anticipate a point which will engage us later on. It is sufficient here to lay down generally, that, if experience is mine, that is no argument for what I experience being nothing but my state. And this whole objection rests entirely on false preconceptions. My private self is first set up, as a substantive which is real independent of the Whole; and then its palpable community with the universe, which in experience is forced on us, is degraded into the adjective of our miserable abstraction. But, when these preconceptions are exposed, Solipsism disappears.

Considered as the apotheosis of an abstraction, Solipsism is quite false. But from its errors we may collect aspects of truth, to which we sometimes are blind. And, in the first place, though my experience is not the whole world, yet that world appears in my experience, and, so far as it exists there, it is my state of mind. That the real Absolute, or God himself, is also my state, is a truth often forgotten and to which later we shall return. And there is a second truth to which Solipsism has blindly borne witness. My way of contact with Reality is through a limited aperture. For I cannot get at it directly except through the felt “this,” and our immediate interchange and transfluence takes place through one small opening. Everything beyond, though not less real, is an expansion of the common essence which we feel burningly in this one focus. And so, in the end, to know the Universe, we must fall back upon our personal experience and sensation.

But beside these two truths there is yet another truth worth noticing. My self is certainly not the Absolute, but, without it, the Absolute would not be itself. You cannot anywhere abstract wholly from my personal feelings; you cannot say that, apart even from the meanest of these, anything else in the universe would be what it is. And in asserting this relation, this essential connection, of all reality with my

self, Solipsism has emphasised what should not be forgotten. But the consequences, which properly follow from this truth, will be discussed hereafter.

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