

The World as Object and Subject

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[Page 3] WHEN we come to view the world, and to relate our consciousness to the things of our perception, we are forced to admit a dual relationship thereto. The first of these consists in the power we have of viewing the world as an object, to sense and to perceive the sensations derived therefrom, and thus to relate ourselves to the world as Object. The second consists in our power to view the world as a Subject, to think upon it and to grasp the import and meaning of its multiplex laws. These two powers, by which we are enabled to know the world as in *effect*, and to understand it in *regard to causation*, are the primary factors of all other relations we may bear to it; I refer to such relations as usefulness, pleasure, *etc.*, and their antitheses. It is, therefore, a matter well to be considered whether we have correct perceptions and sound ideas with regard to the constitution and operations of Nature, and thus whether the religious and ethical beliefs held by us are to the extent of our knowledge, well-grounded and secure. Now it will be understood at once that no change or changes that Nature can effect in herself, are of such a character as to give rise to the multiversant theories and wide differences of opinion that are found to be held by the different schools of the present day. That these differences have always existed, and as it would seem, always will exist, does not argue that Nature is everywhere seen differently, or that her disposition is so restless as to force her to sudden and successive changes such as would render her aspects incapable of study, or her meaning inscrutable. It would therefore seem that the view we are individually able to take in regard to Nature as cause and effect, depends first of all upon ourselves as thinking entities, and to the degree of efficiency to which we have educated our faculties of perception; which latter again, are found to depend upon the conditions of our sense organs.

Viewing the world as Object in the first place, let us consider what are the requisite conditions for a true perception of it. It may be [Page 4] admitted that a healthy organism which readily responds to the stimuli set up by means of the sense organs from external sources, and a proper and normal correlation of these organs between themselves, is the essential condition for true perception of the physical world as Object. But in this respect we must not commit the unwarrantable error of supposing that only the normal sense is the healthy one, or that which, along its own lines, is capable of giving a true and final record as to the nature of its order of sensations. Normally, we are content to regard clear translucent water as pure, but when the microscope is brought to bear upon it, we see it as quite otherwise. Similarly with regard to the distant bodies of the solar system, or the yet more distant ones in the vault beyond, we are upon mere visual perception of them undeniably misled, as the telescope will show. Not that these perceptions in themselves are in any way erroneous from the normal standpoint, or incorrect sensations made by the naked eye; but they are instances, among a multitude of others, which lead us to regard the normal range of perception as altogether inadequate when applied to the facts in themselves. But from the standpoint of the possible in Nature, we are led to conclude that, so long as sensations are consistent in themselves, an indefinite extension of the powers of any one sense-organ, even though it may not thereby remain in correlation with the others, would be as true to the extent of its perceptions, as the merely normal one; while it is certain that its range of perception would be materially advantaged. For the

sake of illustration we may take an instance or two from Nature. Take that of hearing. While I am speaking, and from the moment that the breath leaves my mouth to that at which it is received by you in the brain as a sound, there is absolutely no perceptible noise whatever.

This may on first consideration appear as somewhat strange and contrary to experience, but if it is remembered that sound is due to atmospheric vibrations which are propagated in speech, for instance, and that these atmospheric vibrations make absolutely no noise, then practically, and truly, there can be no real sound at all outside of our consciousness, and that the brain only receives and has power only to receive these impressions coming to it from without, which are thence translated into the terms of our consciousness. Now it has been shown that trained ears can distinguish sounds which the normal ear cannot in any sense disentangle, as, for instance, in the case of a chord of music struck on the piano, the trained, ear will distinguish at once what are the component notes of that chord, while the untrained ear will perceive them only as a single sound. Then as to the extent or [Page 5] range of hearing, it has been found by means of a series of graduated pipes, that some persons have greater sensitivity in this respect than others, and at the point where the sound becomes so acute that it is no longer heard by the one person, in consequence of the inability of his ear to respond to the vibrations set up, others will still continue to hear. But these are all normal cases and cannot be dissociated from the general run of sense-perceptions. Let us take a case of clairaudience where, as it would seem, the sense is acted upon from an internal stimulus. Here the test of the case being healthy, though outside normal range of hearing, is the fact that the instances of these super-sensuous perceptions are consistent in themselves, and in many cases are capable of external verification. Now, in a review of these two cases I should be disposed to regard the latter as being immeasurably nearer to the actual state of things than the former, because the exercise of this clairaudient faculty does not preclude that of the normal one, and hence the addition of this faculty to that which is enjoyed by the average person undoubtedly gives to its possessor a wider range of perceptions so far as the sense of hearing can afford them. So long as the perceptions of the clairaudient are consistent in themselves, there is nothing which should incline us to the belief that they are unhealthy or insane; and as in the case of the telescope or the microscope, the added power gives added facts, we must admit that the clairaudient is, to the extent of his abnormal faculty, in advance of ourselves in his knowledge of the world from the standpoint of the Objective. With normal sight and clairvoyance the case stands similarly, while the latter faculty is even more dependable and certainly of far greater extensiveness in its perceptions than that of clairaudience.

It is now to be noted as an important factor in our view of these abnormal cases, that, when a single sense obtains a development in advance of the others, a certain disproportion is at once instituted, whereby the perceptions made by the abnormal faculty are not capable of correction by the rest of the senses, and this, so far as it applies to the certain knowledge of the facts perceived, may be, and doubtless often is, a potent and fruitful source of error. In this way it is possible for the clairvoyant to see things that are false in the same way that we ordinarily may make mistakes of perceiving; or it is perhaps truer to say that the clairvoyant may see things falsely, and in his case there is no possibility of collateral proof of the fact, because this special sense of his is not in correlation with the other senses except when acting in its normal way. But the world as Object does not stay at the threshold of the physical universe, as has been shown; and when it is remembered [Page 6] that we cannot possibly set any bounds to the extension of matter, and further, that our view of the material universe is restricted to a very narrow limit covered by the range of the senses, we are forced to the conclusion that not only are there illimitable fields of existence lying beyond and within our own, but also that our perception of such can only proceed *pari passu* with the development of human faculty.

To illustrate this fact from familiar sources, we have recourse to the sense of sight once more, and here it is to be noted that we are dealing with sense in relation to the highest degrees of material existence that are commonly known to us. The exercise of our sense of sight, then, depends upon a certain set of etheric vibrations which we call light, and our perception of these vibrations is known to extend to definite limits, comprised within the spectrum of colours from red to violet. Now it has been proved, and is a fact commonly well known, that there exist both above the violet and below the red, certain other higher and lower sets of vibrations, imperceptible to the naked eye, but having a distinct influence upon certain chemical substances which can be appreciated by us in its effects, as, for instance, the action of the ultra violet rays upon nitrate of silver. This practically means to say that there are states of existence, states of matter with their corresponding and inherent forces, which are wholly beyond the direct perception of our sense of sight. Regarding either then as a condition of matter, we are face to face with the evidence of our own limitations, for there is every reason to suppose that what pertains to the sense of sight has its correspondence in the other senses, and hence it is reasonable to conclude that there are certain sets of vibration in gross matter which are quite inappreciable by our sense of touch. All of which conclusions would make of man's organism an instrument capable of responding to a brief range of five octaves of vibrations in matter, which we call touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight sensations, according to the sense organ to which they are related.

To suppose that this comprehends the universe in its entirety would be tantamount to saying that the present condition of man was final, and that there was neither past nor future to his evolution or unfoldment. But from a thousand facts within our daily knowledge, and from a consideration of our own racial development, mental and psychic, as well as physical, we are assured that this is not the case; and it therefore becomes an interesting enquiry as to the conditions which obtain in the human organism when the normal range of sense perceptions is exceeded. Occultism teaches us that there exists a state [Page 7] of matter outside and above the highest conditions known to science, which practically constitutes another plane of existence known as the astral plane, to which the subtle body or astral double in man is related, and of which it essentially consists. This astral matter, as forming the link between the physical body and its basis the kamic principle, exists in differing degrees of intensity, and in varying quantity in every person. When it prevails in excess, or again when its rate of vibration is abnormal, it has the effect of throwing the physical body into similar abnormal conditions, which admit of its responding to the lower degrees, and sometimes more interior degrees of vibration in the astral matter, and thus to record impressions from the astral plane.

These vibrations are differently registered by the physical organism, according to the sense-organ which receives them, being to the clairvoyant received as objects of sight, and to the clairaudient as impressions of sound. For in the astral world there is the same correlation of colour and sound, and again of sound and form as has been observed to exist on the physical plane. Modern experiments have shown that there is the same relationship between atmospheric vibrations and etheric vibrations as between the sense impressions we call sound and colour. Consequently we are not surprised to learn that Dr. Albertini has discovered that colour-blindness is accompanied by corresponding deafness to certain notes. Indeed, the whole tendency of modern science, medical and otherwise, seems to be in the direction of establishing the correlation of forces all along the line as a fact in Nature, whether manifesting to us by sight, hearing, smell, taste, or touch. Now with regard to the vibrations of the astral light as it is popularly called, it is to be observed that certain of them will absorb one another, in the same way that two conflicting sounds will produce silence, [Ganot's Physics] or two converging rays of light will produce darkness; while on the other hand certain sets of vibrations have the power of propagating new ones in the same way that two clocks acting upon the same plane or shelf will affect one another. The

pendulum of the clock that is stopped will, after a certain time resume its vibrations and in its turn will stop that of the other clock. Mr. John Elliot discovered this nearly two centuries ago, and the fact is referred to by Sir John Herschell in connection with this subject of sympathetic vibration. The case is very similar with regard to the astral light and the physical body of man. Hence it will be seen to some extent under what conditions [Page 8] our view of the world as Object is conditioned and limited; how that there are worlds both above and below us which we are related to in a very real sense and yet are unable in the large majority of cases to perceive; and how also we are continually affected by the perturbations of the astral matter which interpenetrates the physical world to which our waking consciousness is related, and in our turn affecting others by setting up vibrations in this plastic and subtle matter. Occultism teaches us that this matter surrounds every body, human and otherwise, in different states of activity, and this envelopment is called the aura of a body. The earth, like every other planet, has such an astral aura or photosphere — a self-luminous and semi-transparent substance, which receives all the psychic impressions that are constantly being exhaled from the earth, and which in its turn has the power of reacting to produce effects. To the disturbances which take place in this ethereal substance, such widespread effects as earthquakes and pestilences are attributable, and hence it is called by the Kabalists the Great Dragon, which emanates upon mankind all that is evil in Nature. This, like so many other statements in popular literature, is but a half truth, for the astral light really emanates only that which it has received, and in this sense can effect good quite as much as evil, providing that we, as the active agents, will but set up the right vibrations, viz., those which are propagated by pure and good thoughts and holy feelings. It is by means of this astral world that the planets are capable of affecting us, and every person attracts just those influences in the astral light which his own nature most readily responds to, in accordance with the law of sympathetic vibration to which I have already referred.

Now what we have related as applying to our perceptions on the physical and astral planes of existence might be extended with equal truth to the other planes of cosmic life; for upon each of these, and in every degree thereof, there are always the observer and the observed in relation to one another, and normally, the plane of existence on which consciousness may be active is the real, and the Objective, while both above and below, to use these very inadequate phrases, there are unnumbered degrees of Subjective life. But we must now pass to the consideration of the world as Subject.

When an object has been sensed and perceived, it enters into our consciousness as an object of thought, and as such we may regard it in its relations with other existences in the world of effects. But once we come to reason concerning the cause of its existence, we enter into the subjective world, and our consciousness is related to states of being [Page 9] not included in our perception of the Object in itself, as such. There is hence a distinction made between the appearance of a thing which we hold as a conscious perception, and the thing in itself, towards which the mind makes an effort called reasoning. We therefore distinguish between perception and thought, as between Object and Subject, or between these as related to our mind in the state of knowledge and understanding. It is thus within our power to know the object of perception, and to understand the subject of thought. Hitherto I have referred only to the world as Object and have drawn some illustrations from the physical and astral planes, and in doing so have concerned myself entirely with force and matter. I have now to introduce the third factor, and thus to complete the trinity of hypostases recognized in Theosophy as eternal and co-ordinate verities.

This third factor is intelligence, which in the world as Object, is referred to as consciousness. The materialist views this latter manifestation as a by-product of living matter, and sees it only in relations with certain forms of organic substance such as nerve and brain cell. The origin of things from this standpoint

resolves itself into a "fortuitous concurrence of atoms", or some such wild hypothesis, which necessarily includes the idea that the whole world as we now know it, with all its marvellous correlations of forces, the interplay of its states of matter, and the internal and external harmony that is everywhere observable, as comprehending the results of its own evolution and unfoldment, is nothing more nor less than the outcome of a long game of chance carried on in the depths of cosmic space countless years ago, and by which certain individual atoms were persuaded to a consent of a mutual relationship, which has eventually coerced the whole universe into an agreement thereto. I ask, is it consistent with our laws of thought to entertain the idea of a blind force acting in blind matter in such a way as to produce co-ordinated and harmonious results? Indeed one cannot but fling at such bald reasoning the versed remarks of Manilius:

A most convincing reason drawn from sense
That this vast frame is moved by Providence.
Which like the soul doth every whirl advance;
It must be God, it was not made by chance
As Epicurus dreamt; he madly thought
This beauteous frame of heedless atoms wrought,
That seas and earth, the stars and spacious air
Which forms new worlds or doth the old repair,
First rose from these, and still supplied remain,
And all must be (when chance shall break the chain)
Dissolved to these wild principles again !
Absurd and nonsense ! Atheist, use thine eyes,
And having viewed the order of the skies,
Think if thou canst that matter blindly hurled,
Without a guide, should frame this wondrous world ! [Page 10]

No. We cannot admit of an effect comprehending its own cause, which would be the case if mind were merely the result of matter, and not primarily and ultimately, the cognizer thereof. Theosophy views external Nature as consisting of consciousness, force and matter, which are but the expressions or manifestations on this plane of existence of the Primordial Trinity of Intelligence, Life, and Substance. What these are in themselves is an inscrutable mystery with which the human mind in its present state of existence, grapples to no purpose. We can therefore but regard them in their differentiated manifestations, on planes of being not necessarily objective to us. We see them in ourselves, but not necessarily in relations with the physical body, as thought, feeling, and volition, and the study of the laws of thought, of feeling, and volition, in fact the study of metaphysics and psychology, is for us the domain of the Subjective. The very close relationship that exists between thought and feeling needs only to be mentioned to enter into our recognition by a hundred illustrations drawn from our daily experience. The connection that exists between volition and thought, however, has never until very lately been recognized to the same extent. It is now widely maintained that volition is the effort made towards the realization of thought or action, which effort is said to have its determining cause in the central idea which for the time being dominates the mind.

Now volition may be in response to either thought or feeling, and as having this relationship it is said to occupy the middle ground between them. In this sense it corresponds to force in the world of physics, and to life in the world of ideas. Consciousness has thus a triple expression in thought, volition and

feeling; and as consciousness in the man corresponds to the divine mind in the universe, so these aspects of consciousness in man correspond to the aspects of the universal mind which we call intelligence, life and substance, or in their lower manifestations in the visible world, force, matter, and that power of responsiveness to condition which is variously referred to as selection, affinity, instinct, etc., according to the form in which it manifests, or rather, according to that which manifests it. We have thus a correspondence of thought, volition and feeling in man with universal intelligence, life and substance on the one side, and between [Page 11] this triple manifestation of our consciousness, and instinct (or its equivalent), force, and matter, on the other.

In this way volition through effort is allied to force in the same way that feeling through sensation is allied to matter; and similarly there is a relation between volition and life as between feeling and substance, in the Occultist's conception of these hypostases. Thought in us follows similar inferior and superior relations with the objective and the ideal worlds. In this double view of the universe as Object and Subject, we have necessarily referred to it only in its relationship to man as the cognizer, for although we can never determine finally as to whether the world, either as Object or Subject has any existence outside of the consciousness of man, we are yet able to lay down certain approved facts with regard to the same as it is perceived or conceived by us in the terms of our consciousness and thought. Around man, then, as the central figure of the universe as it is entertained by us, we necessarily group our thoughts concerning the universe, and how much more intelligible do these thoughts become to us, and with how much wider an application they strike us, when we regard the world through man and trace the correspondences which link him as the self-conscious cognizer of all to the objects and subjects of his perception and thought; making of him a little world in the midst of time and space, from which, as from a vantage point, we can look forth upon the illimitable fields of beauty and truth, from the contemplation of which man draws his purest pleasures, his noblest ideals, and his highest aspirations.

You cannot speak of ocean to a well-frog — the creature of a narrower sphere. You cannot speak of ice to a summer insect — the creature of a season. You cannot speak of Tao to a pedagogue: his scope is too restricted. But now that you have emerged from your narrow sphere and have seen the great ocean, you know your own insignificance, and I can speak to you of great principles.

CHUANG TZE, translation by H.A. Giles, p. 201.