

IV.—EXPERIENCE AND EMPIRICISM.

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ALMOST all philosophers now-a-days are agreed in speaking respectfully of "Experience." Before Kant's time philosophers were divided into Empiricists, on the one hand, and, on the other, those who held that so many and such important conclusions could be derived from "innate truths" alone, that they despised the aid of "Experience." Now-a-days "innate truths" are wholly out of fashion; and though "pure thought" may still be thought to do a great deal, its function is generally limited to the "interpretation of experience." This change is due to Kant, and its full significance is, I think, rarely recognised. The statement that Kant made "experience" the *sole premiss* of all our knowledge will probably sound strange to many; and it may seem even stranger to hear that those who reject his conclusion that our knowledge is *limited* to "possible experience," do not for the most part differ from him in making experience their sole premiss. Yet I think it is easy to see that Kant did do this. Kant tries to defend the truth of "synthetic *a priori* propositions" by showing that they are "conditions for the possibility of experience." This he can only do by showing that they are implied in actual experience. But to show that A is implied by B will not prove that A is true, unless it is assumed that B is true. That Geometry has a claim to validity, which Spinoza's "geometrically demonstrated" Ethics has not got, rests for Kant on the fact that the former is and the latter is not implied in "experience." Spinoza's system may quite well contain nothing but "conditions for the possibility" of something other than actual experience; but the difference in validity between it and geometry would still remain for Kant. It is, therefore, only

the fact that actual experience is true which gives Kant a reason for asserting the validity of "transcendental" and denying that of "transcendent" knowledge. Experience is true, and geometry is implied in it; therefore, geometry is true. Such is Kant's reasoning. To have rested the claim of geometry on its bare self-evidence would not have satisfied him; for the "transcendent" metaphysics, which he declares to be "unscientific," might make exactly the same claim. He thinks he has *proved* the validity of geometry, and *disproved* the possibility of transcendent metaphysics; and for this proof "Experience" is his *sole premiss*.*

Now subsequent non-empirical philosophers differ from Kant, for the most part, only in maintaining that more is implied in "experience" than he could find to be so. They do not claim, any more than he did, to have other and independent premisses for their conclusions, such as the pre-Kantian dogmatists assumed. But this fact suggests two questions, which the following paper attempts to answer:—I. How much do philosophers assume when they assume "Experience" as their sole premiss? II. In what essential respect do Kant and non-empirical post-Kantians differ from such philosophers as Hume and Mill, who are deservedly called "empirical?"

In answer to the first question, I shall endeavour to show that, in assuming "Experience" as a premiss, philosophers assume the truth of a vast number of propositions, which, as a matter of fact, they subsequently conclude to be false.

In answer to the second, I shall endeavour to show that empiricists are distinguished, not by any theory of the *source* of knowledge, but by the fact that they constantly imply that all known truths are of *the same kind as* experiences, although, in fact, they assume the knowledge of truths which are not of this kind.

* The proposition "geometry is implied in experience" is not a premiss of the conclusion "geometry is true," in the piece of reasoning given above. (See Lewis Carroll, in *Mind*, N.S. 14, p. 278.)

I.—*Experience*, in its common philosophical significance, seems to denote a sum of actual experiences. Thus “my experience” or “your experience” means the sum of my or your experiences; and “experience” without such qualification commonly stands for the sum of human experiences. “Experience” does, however, also denote that common character, in virtue of which actual experiences are classed together; and it is obvious that only this common character is susceptible of definition, since the number and variety of actual experiences is too great to be exhausted. “Experience,” then, denotes a kind of cognition; and, like “cognition” and “knowledge” themselves, the word stands for a double fact: (a) a mental state, and (b) that of which this mental state is cognizant. Thus “an experience,” like “an observation,” may stand either for the observing of something or for that which is observed.

The kind of mental state denoted by cognition or consciousness is itself of too simple a nature to admit of definition: it is something which can be easily recognised as one and the same, existing in all instances of cognition, and differing from the various objects of which it is the cognition. It will not be disputed, however, that cognitions are *also* distinguished from all other kinds of mental existents, if any such there be, by the fact that they always do stand in a unique kind of relation to something else—something, namely, of which they are cognitions; and the kinds of cognition are commonly distinguished by the kinds of object of which they are cognitions. That they also differ in themselves would appear to be proved by the fact that one cognition may be the cause of another cognition, although the object of the first is the cause of something entirely different from the object of the second—*e.g.*, in the case of association by similarity. But that there is nevertheless no objection to distinguishing the kinds of cognition by the kinds of their objects would appear to be proved by the fact that in all cases where we know the effects

of a cognition they seem to be connected by a uniform law with the nature of the object of that cognition. It would seem, then, that though cognitions are distinguished from one another by intrinsic differences, these differences always correspond to some difference in the nature of their object. In dividing them, then, according to the nature of the objects, we shall be dividing them truly; and no other course seems open to us, since no one has yet succeeded in pointing out wherein the intrinsic difference of one cognition from another lies.

(1) The first great division between objects of consciousness is between those which are true and those which are false; and "experience" is generally and properly confined to the class of cognitions of what is true: a "false experience" would be commonly allowed to be a contradiction in terms. The word "cognition" itself is sometimes confined, as its etymology suggests, to awareness or consciousness of what is *true*, in which case it is equivalent to "knowledge." But a "false cognition" would not be so generally recognised as a contradiction in terms, as "a false experience" or "false knowledge"; and since the word is grammatically more convenient than "awareness" or "consciousness," I have used it above, and shall use it below, as equivalent to these terms. "An experience," then, is a true cognition; and it must be noted that there is no evidence that a true cognition has any intrinsic difference from a false one, since none of the properties of objects with which the psychological laws of sequence appear to be connected is universally a mark of truth. Thus a true cognition may as readily cause a false one by the laws of association, or a false cognition a true one, as either may produce one of its own kind in this respect. Any cognition of which the object is "that a thing is true" does indeed differ intrinsically from any cognition of which the object is "that a thing is false;" but the cognitions of the things themselves do not so differ. In truth, then, we have a mark of all the

objects of experience to which, so far as is known, no intrinsic property in the states of mind cognizant of them corresponds, although every true proposition differs from any false one.

But (2) not all true cognitions are experiences. The objects of experience all fall within the class of true propositions about existing things; and existence is a mark to which we have reason to suppose that something in the state of mind corresponds—*i.e.*, states of mind cognizant of existential truths differ intrinsically from those which are cognizant of any other class of truths, although they do not differ intrinsically from those which are cognizant of false existential propositions.

But (3) the very same existential truths which we experience may at another time be known to us by memory, or at the very time when we experience them another mind may have attained to a knowledge of them by inference or mere imagination. What is it which distinguishes our experience of them from that knowing of them to which we give these names? The distinction for which we are to look is that which, in Hume's language, divides "impressions" from "ideas." He held that this distinction consisted merely in the superior "liveliness" of the impressions; and it seems to be true that, at most times when we are experiencing, some part of what we experience is cognized with a "liveliness" superior to that, which belongs to most of our memories or imaginations; so that by far the greater number of our "lively" cognitions are experiences. But (*a*) it must be remembered that at each moment of normal experience we have experience of a vast variety of objects: and it would seem certain that, whatever this "liveliness" may be, only a comparatively small number out of this variety—namely, those which are near the centre of attention, are cognized with more liveliness than most imaginations; yet all are certainly experienced. And (*b*) there seems no reason to doubt that some true imaginations may, like hallucinations, possess as high a degree of liveliness as any experience. There does not, therefore, seem to be any intrinsic

property either in an experience or in its object which will serve to distinguish it from all imaginations. We are driven to the conclusion that an experience is in itself quite indistinguishable from a true imagination, memory, or inference, and, if it is to be precisely distinguished from these, can only be so by the circumstances under which it occurs. But language certainly demands such a distinction; it would be generally felt that the term "experience" should denote something which cannot, even in a single case, be identical with that which is denoted by mere imagination: and hence we must say that exactly the same cognition, when occurring under certain circumstances, is properly called an experience, and, when occurring under different circumstances, a mere imagination.

When once it is thus recognised that an experience is to be defined not merely by any intrinsic properties of itself or its object, but also by its circumstances, it becomes easy to distinguish it from *memory* and *inference*. The only difference which seems to differentiate these from it in all cases is one of this extrinsic kind—namely, (*a*) in the case of memory, that it has among its causes a previous cognition of the same object, whereas any object can be *experienced* only once; and (*b*) in the case of inference, that it has among its causes a mental process of a peculiar kind, which is never among the causes of an experience. Moreover, this method of defining experience has been very frequently adopted; an experience has been generally held to be distinguished from other cognitions by its origin or accompaniments.

There still, however, remains the case of certain true imaginations. What kind of circumstances will always distinguish these from experiences?

1. It has been proposed to define experience as "immediate" knowledge. This is a negative definition, referring to the absence of mental causes. But there are certainly some imaginations of which we do not know the mental causes. We

cannot, therefore, assign any definite class of mental causes which is invariably found among the causes of an imagination and invariably wanting among the causes of an experience; and to say, what is probably true—namely, that imaginations always have some kind of mental cause, which experiences are without, is merely to say that they *can* be defined by their mental causes: it does not itself constitute that definition. It may, perhaps, be said that among the causes of every imagination is some previous experience; but, even if this be true, it requires an independent definition of experience before it can itself be taken as a definition of imagination. Nor, finally, are we entitled to assert that experiences have no mental causes, because we know of none. Accordingly in any sense in which we are entitled to assert that experiences are immediate, except that which makes immediacy deny causation by previous experiences, we have an equal right to call some imaginations immediate.

2. It is, perhaps, true that all experiences are accompanied by cognitions of objects closely related to their own—that their objects are always members of a simultaneously cognized continuum. But it is certain that some imaginations, if only their objects be true, may be thus related to both experiences and imaginations occurring simultaneously.

3. It would seem, then, that the only method of distinguishing an experience from an imagination is by means of antecedents or accompaniments other than mental. Let us take the case in which the same object is simultaneously experienced by one man and imagined by another. The total antecedents and accompaniments of both cognitions are the same. If, then, they are distinguished by their antecedents, this must mean, not that they have different antecedents, but that the one has to some of their common antecedents a relation which the other has not got. Nor can this relation be identified with invariable antecedence, since in this case the imagination and the experience have the relation in

question to different antecedents, and consequently neither set of antecedents can be said to precede invariably the cognition which is in one case an experience and in the other an imagination. We must, then, understand the statement that an identical imagination and experience are distinguished by the circumstances under which they occur, as meaning that the one has the same relation to some of its circumstances which the other has to others, and that this is a relation which neither has to all; and this relation would seem to be sufficiently defined by the fact that from the circumstances in question you could infer the future existence of the cognition, although from the existence of the cognition you could not infer which set of circumstances had preceded it. If we call this relation "causal," then we may say that an experience is always distinguished from a true imagination by the nature of its physical causes; and there does, in fact, seem to be a class of causes, capable of exact definition, some member of which class is always among the causes of an experience, but never among those of an imagination. Each different experience has, indeed, a different cause; but the class to which all such causes must belong may be defined in the following way:—

Every event, and consequently every experience, has this causal relation to some set of circumstances at every preceding moment, the set becoming larger and larger as you recede in time from the event in question. Among these sets (which may each be called *one* of the causes of any given experience in a different sense from which each member of any one of them may be called *one* of its causes) there will always be one of which the thing or event, the existence of which is the object of the experience, is a member. Among the causes of an imagination, on the other hand, the thing or event, whose existence is its object, will never be thus included. It follows from this that among the *accompaniments* of an experience there will always also be some having to it the special relation that its existence could be inferred from theirs, and that these accompaniments

will be different for an experience from what they would be for an imagination ; but *this* difference is not capable of a definition which shall be at the same time general and exact, since the condition which renders such a definition possible in the case of antecedents—namely, the identity between part of the object of an experience and part of one of its causes, does not hold for its accompaniments. It must be noticed that in cases where the object of the experience is the existence of something mental—*i. e.*, in the case of what have been called “experiences of the inner sense,” the causes by which it is characterised as an experience will thus *ex hypothesi* include something mental. But it may be useful to observe that in this one case an alternative definition is abstractly possible, if, as seems probable, every kind of mental occurrence both invariably accompanies and is invariably accompanied by one peculiar kind of physical event—namely, that any cognition of a mental occurrence, among the causes of which is included the physical event having such relation to that occurrence, is an experience.

(4) Having thus defined the difference between experience and all other ways of cognizing the same objects, it remains to say something more with regard to the kinds of object which can be properly said to be experienced. It has been laid down above that all such objects must be true, and must be existential propositions. (i) From the first of these conditions it follows that every object of experience must be complex. That this is so is implied by all philosophers who hold, as all do, that inferences can be drawn from the subject-matter of experience ; but it may be thought to conflict with the very common theory that *sensations* or *sense-impressions* are experiences. “Sensations” are frequently spoken of as if they or their objects might be simple ; they are regarded as being or supplying the elements of knowledge. This difficulty, however, seems to be merely due to the fact that “sensation” is commonly used to denote two quite different forms of cognition, which are not in

general clearly distinguished from one another. The proper and usual meaning of "sensation" is that in which it denotes a cognition of *the existence of a simple quality*; a sense in which "sensations" are experiences. But it is commonly thought that this is identical with the cognition of a simple quality, a form of cognition, which is undoubtedly possible, but which is by no means so important.

(ii) It may seem strange to some that the object of an experience should be called a proposition. But such object may undoubtedly be "the existence of such and such a thing," and it seems impossible to distinguish the cognition of this from the cognition "that such and such a thing exists." The object of experience, moreover, is undoubtedly true, and allows valid inferences to be drawn from it, both of which properties seem to be characteristic of propositions.

(iii) What types of proposition can be properly included under the description "propositions about existing things," and hence, as objects of experience, is a more difficult question. In ordinary life we do undoubtedly include, among the objects which we say we experience, successions and coexistences; and the usage of philosophers seems to be generally in agreement with this use of the term. We might thus be said, for instance, to experience the motion of a coloured point. Now, it would seem that this proposition would be properly interpreted in the form: "Such and such existing things, having this and that spatial position at this and that time, are divided from one another by such and such a spatial distance and such and such a temporal distance." But this is not strictly an existential proposition, nor can its meaning ever be exhausted by any number of such; it does not assert the existence of anything: it asserts that two or more existing things have certain relations. At most it is capable of analysis into "the position in space, occupied now by this, has such and such a spatial distance from the position occupied then by that," and "the position in time occupied by this here has such and such a temporal

distance from the position occupied by that there." But to allow that such propositions may be objects of experience involves a twofold modification of our definition. (a) We must extend the definition of "existential proposition" to include the assertion of a relation between existents of which the existence may be the object of experience. It is by such an inclusion of relations between existents that *perception* is distinguished from "sensation"; and perceptions are generally held to be experiences. (b) We must also allow that the existence of a position in space or time may be an object of experience. Yet it would be paradoxical to assert that positions in space or time could be among the causes of anything. We must, therefore, extend the definition of experience by adding that the existence of a thing which is not itself among the causes of an experience, yet if it be included in the proposition from which the effect may be inferred, may be an object of experience. This extension of our definition will certainly allow the existence of positions in space and time to be included among objects of experience. For every causal inference is from the fact that a thing exists *at a particular time and place* to the fact that something else will exist at a particular time and place. Though, therefore, we do in ordinary language restrict the term cause to the thing which so exists, yet the necessary connection involved in the term does not hold between its existence and that of its effect, but between their existence at their respective positions in time and space. The same extension of our definition will, however, also allow us to include among experiences cognitions that such and such a quality exists, apart from any specification of time and place. We have it, then, that an empirical proposition must either (a) assert truly the existence of one or more members of one of the following classes of entity—classes none of which is identical with any other or with the sum of any others: namely, (a) this here now, (β) this now, (γ) this here, (δ) this, (ϵ) this place now, (ζ) this place, (η) this time; or else (b)

must assert a relation between some members, not of these classes, but of the new classes formed in each case by all the existing members of each of them; or, finally, (c) must assert something collectively of some members of the classes last defined. Classes (b) and (c) may perhaps be more clearly defined in the following way—namely, that those only among relational and collective propositions can be objects of experience, or empirical, in which the terms related or grouped presuppose propositions of class (a).

(5) In the above manner (3) must an experience be defined if it is to be distinguished from every case of true imagination. It is to be noted, however, that the use of the word is commonly extended to include cases of imagination which resemble experiences in a respect which can only be defined by means of the above definition. For instance, when we see that a table is wooden, this would commonly be called a case of experience, although some part of the properties which we mean by "wooden" are certainly not among the objects of any cognition caused by the action of the table upon our eyes. In such a case our knowledge of the existence of these properties which have a certain spatial relation to those which *are* among the objects of sight, and are experienced, must be allowed to be a mere imagination, since it has not its objects among its causes; but we call it an experience, because its object is simultaneous with the object of an experience which is simultaneous with it. When, therefore, an imagination resembles a simultaneous experience by having the same temporal relation to its object, we commonly rank it as an experience of class (a); and cognitions, into which it enters in the same way as true experiences of class (a) enter into cognitions of classes (b) and (c), may also be called experiences.

II.—Having thus given a precise meaning to "experience," we may now inquire in what sense, if any, *empiricism* can be defined as implying that "experience is the origin of all our knowledge."

It is plain, in the first place, it cannot mean that experience is its own origin; and, therefore, that by "all our knowledge" we must understand all that is not itself experience.

But with regard to that part of our knowledge which is not itself experience: (i) it is certain that not every empiricist need deny, or imply the denial of, the fact that the brain co-operates with experience in determining what inferences, imaginations, and memories we shall have, just as it co-operates with the object in determining what experiences we shall have. It is not, then, essential to empiricism to hold that experience is the sole *cause* of all knowledge other than itself. And (ii) if our definition merely means that experience is *one* among the causes of all such knowledge, then this is not denied, but constantly implied, by many philosophers who are not empiricists: *e.g.*, when it is allowed that experience is necessary as an *occasion* for the knowledge of a necessary truth.

It remains, then, to inquire in what sense, if any, this definition will hold, supposing that by "origin" be meant "premise," and by "experience" and "knowledge" not our mental states, but the truths of which they are cognizant. Understood in this sense, the definition must mean that experience is the *sole premiss* of any truths we know which are not themselves experienced. But this doctrine, as was said above, fails to distinguish empiricists from Kant and from post-Kantian non-empirical philosophers; since they too imply that we have no title to assert the truth of any proposition which is not implied in experience.

It appears, then, that no implication with regard to the position of experiences as causes or as premises of all our knowledge will suffice to define empiricism. Yet empiricism does undoubtedly imply the assignation of some kind of pre-eminence to experience in respect of truth. There seems to remain but one way in which this can be done—namely, by implying that all the truths we know are of the same *kind* as

the objects of experience. From this principle it would follow that, in a sense, actual experience was the sole *test* of all our knowledge; since it would be true that we could know nothing but what *could* be experienced, and that consequently any piece of knowledge might be disproved by a possible observation or experiment. On the contrary, it is characteristic of non-empirical philosophers to hold that we have some pieces of knowledge which no possible experience could disprove, although almost all suffice to prove them. It would remain true, no doubt, that the empiricist must imply that we have pieces of knowledge which never are tested by actual experience, and which cannot (humanly speaking) be so—*e.g.*, that the moon is spherical. But this very fact helps to explain why the doctrine that “experience is the origin of all our knowledge” has been commonly supposed to define empiricism. For that doctrine by its very terms admits that we do know more than we actually experience, and yet, at the same time, exhibits a wish to maintain that experience is more certain, more truly knowledge, than anything else we know. This inconsistency may very naturally be suggested by the fact that what is of the same kind as an object of experience is just what *can* (in one sense) be experienced, although, as a matter of fact, it never can (in another sense) be experienced.

There seems, then, sufficient reason for taking this implication “That we can know nothing but what could be experienced, *i.e.*, what is of the same kind as what we do experience,” to define empiricism; and this, if our definition of experience has been correct, is exactly equivalent to the definition—that empiricism is distinguished by the frequent implication that all known truths are truths about what exists at one or more moments of time. And the correctness of the definition is further confirmed by the fact that the most general and obvious characteristics of empirical systems seem naturally to follow from this presupposition. Thus (1) empiricists are

always characterised by their treatment of so-called necessary truths, of which an extreme instance are the truths of arithmetic. These truths are not existential truths, and hence we find that empiricists tend either (a) to admit their truth, but to interpret them as analytic or insignificant; or (b) to interpret them as universal, and deny that we can know them. By the former device they are enabled to hold that such truths are mere parts of what we experience, not something different, which can indeed be inferred from experience, but cannot be disproved by it. On the other hand, the device of interpreting all such truths as universal is due to an attempt to assimilate them to existential truths of the form "all these things have this character," and thus to make them *possible* objects of knowledge. And the denial that we can know them is due to the fact that these are a limiting case in which it is impossible not to recognise the incompatibility of possible knowledge in the one sense with that in the other. It seems obviously absurd to maintain that we can observe every instance of a given class; whereas it is not obvious that the same absurdity, if it be an absurdity, is involved in maintaining that we can observe *some* instances, which we do not observe. The empiricist fails to see the difference between the assertions "all these things have this character" and "so many things of *this class* have this character." When he says, "all things of this class, *within the limits of observation*, are of this character," he can still think that he is making an empirical proposition, a proposition in extension, because he seems to himself to be making an assertion not about a whole class, but about a part of a class. His assertion, then, that we can know only *general* and *probable*, not *universal* and *necessary* propositions, seems to be due to the fact that he applies to all truths the test of conformity to the type of objects of experience, and admits as certainly true those only which seem to him, because he confuses this test with the test of actual experience, to have such conformity. (2) A second characteristic of empiricists, which

seems also to follow naturally from this presupposition, is the tendency to regard all inference as either analytic or causal. The view that it is analytic harmonises with their presupposition in the same way as the view that necessary truths are analytic, and the characteristic of causal inference is that it is inference from the existence of one thing to the existence of another.
