CHAPTER XXI.

THE PERCEPTION OF REALITY. [1]

BELIEF.

EVERYONE knows the difference between imagining a thing and believing in its existence, between supposing a proposition and acquiescing in its truth. In the case of acquiescence or belief, the object is not only apprehended by the mind, but is held to have reality. Belief is thus the mental state or function of cognizing reality. As used in the following pages, 'Belief' will mean every degree of assurance, including the highest possible certainty and conviction.

There are, as we know, two ways of studying every psychic state. First, the way of analysis: What does it consist in? What is its inner nature? Of what sort of mind-stuff is it composed? Second, the way of history: What are its conditions of production, and its connection with other facts?

Into the first way we cannot go very far. *In its inner nature, belief or the sense of reality, is a sort of feeling more allied to the emotions than anything else.* Mr. Bagehot distinctly calls it the 'emotion' of conviction. I just now spoke of it as acquiescence. It resembles more than anything what in the psychology of volition we know as consent. Consent is recognized by all to be a manifestation of our active nature. It would naturally be described by such terms as 'willingness' or the 'turning of our disposition.' What characterizes both consent and belief is the cessation of theoretic agitation, though the advent of an idea which is inwardly stable, and fills the mind solidly to the exclusion of contradictory ideas. When this is the case, motor effects are apt to follow. Hence the states of [p. 284] consent and belief, characterized by repose on the purely intellectual side, are both intimately connected with subsequent practical activity. This inward stability of the mind's content is as characteristic of disbelief as of belief. But we shall presently see that we never disbelieve anything except for the reason that we believe something else which contradicts the rest thing. [2] Disbelief is thus an incidental complication to belief, and need not be considered by itself.

The *true opposite of belief*, psychologically considered, are *doubt and inquiry, not disbelief*. In both these states the content of our mind is in unrest, and the emotion engendered thereby is, like the emotion of belief itself, perfectly distinct, but perfectly indescribable in words. Both sorts of emotion may be pathologically exalted. One of the charms of drunkenness unquestionably lies in the deepening of the sense of reality and truth which is gained therein. In whatever light things may then appear to us, they seem more utterly what they are, more 'utterly utter' than when we are sober. This goes to a fully unutterable extreme in the nitrous oxide intoxication, in which a man's very soul will sweat with conviction, and he be all the while unable to tell what he is convinced of at all. [3] The pathological state opposed to this solidity and deepening has been called the questioning mania (*Grübelseucht* by the Germans). It is sometimes found as a substantive affection, paroxysmal or chronic, and consists in the inability to rest in any conception, and the need of having it confirmed and explained 'Why do I stand here where I
stand? 'Why is a glass a glass, a chair a chair' 'How is it that men are only of the size they are? Why not as big as houses,' etc., etc. [4] [p. 285]

There is, it is true, another pathological state which is as far removed from doubt as from belief, and which some may prefer to consider the proper contrary of the latter state of mind. I refer to the feeling that everything is hollow, unreal, dead. I shall speak of this state again upon a later page. The point I wish to notice here is simply that belief and disbelief are but two aspects of one psychic state.

John Mill, reviewing various opinions about belief, comes to the conclusion that no account of it can be given:

What," he says "is the difference to our minds between thinking of a reality and representing to ourselves an imaginary picture? I confess I can see no escape from the opinion that the distinction is ultimate and primordial. There is no more difficulty in holding it to be so than in holding the difference between a sensation and an idea to be primordial. It seems almost another aspect of the same difference. ... I cannot help thinking, therefore, that there is in the remembrance of a real fact, as distinguished from that of a thought, an element which does not consist ... in a difference between the mere ideas which are present to the mind in the two cases. This element, howsoever we define it, constitutes belief, and is the difference between Memory and Imagination. From whatever direction we approach, this difference seems to close our path. When we arrive at it, we seem to have reached, as it were, the central point of our intellectual nature, presupposed and built upon in every attempt we make to explain the more recondite phenomena of our mental being." [5] [p. 286]

If the words of Mill be taken to apply to the mere subjective analysis of belief -- to the question, What does it feel like when we have it? -- they must be held, on the whole, to be correct. Belief, the sense of reality, feels like itself -- that is about as much as we can say.

Prof. Brentano, in an admirable chapter of his Psychologie, expresses this by saying that conception and belief (which he names judgment) are two different fundamental psychic phenomena. What I myself have called (Vol. I, p.276) the 'object' of thought may be comparatively simple, like "Ha! what a pain," or "It-thunders"; or it may be complex, like "Columbus-discovered-America-in-1492," or "There-exists-an-all-wise-Creator-of-the-world" In either case, however, the mere thought of the object may exist as something quite distinct from the belief in its reality. The belief, as Brentano says, presupposes the mere thought:

"Every object comes into consciousness in a twofold way, as simply thought of [vorgestellt] [6] and as admitted [anerkaant] [7] or denied. The relation is analogous to that which is assumed by most philosophers(by Kant no less than by Aristotle) to obtain between mere thought and desire. Nothing is ever desired without being thought of; but the desiring is nevertheless a second quite new and peculiar form of relation to the object, a second quite new way of receiving it into consciousness. No more is anything judged [i.e., believed or disbelieved] [8] which is not thought of too. But we must insist that, so soon as the object of a thought becomes the object of an assenting or rejecting judgment, our consciousness steps into an entirely new relation towards
it. It is then twice present in consciousness, as thought of, and as held for real or denied; just as when desire awakens for it, it is both thought and simultaneously desired." (P. 266.)

The commonplace doctrine of 'judgment' is that it consists in the combination of 'ideas' by a 'copula' into a 'proposition,' which may be of various sorts, as a formative, negative, hypothetical, etc. But who does not see that in a disbelieved or doubted or interrogative or conditional proposition, the ideas are combined in the same identical way in which they are in a proposition which is solidly believed? The way in which the ideas are combined with inner constitution the thoughts object or content. That object is sometimes an articulated whole with relations between its parts, amongst which relations, that of predicate [p. 287] to subject may be one. But when we have got our object with its inner constitution thus defined in a proposition, then the question comes up regarding the object as a whole: 'Is it a real object? is this proposition a true proposition or not?' And in the answer Yes to this question lies that new psychic act which Brentano calls 'judgment,' but which I prefer to call 'belief.'

In every proposition, then, so far as it is believed, questioned, or disbelieved, four elements are to be distinguished, the subject, the predicate, and their relation (of whatever sort it be) -- these form the object of belief -- and finally the psychic attitude in which our mind stands towards the proposition taken as a whole -- and this is the belief itself. [9]

Admitting, then, that this attitude is a state of consciousness sui generis, about which nothing more can be said in the way of internal analysis, let us proceed to the second way of studying the subject of belief: Under what circumstances do we think things real? We shall soon see how much matter this gives us to discuss.

THE VARIOUS ORDERS OF REALITY.

Suppose a new-born mind, entirely blank and waiting for experience to begin. Suppose that it begins in the forms of visual impression (whether faint or vivid is immaterial) of a lighted candle against a dark background, and nothing else, so that whilst this image lasts it constitutes the entire universe known to the mind in question. Suppose, moreover (to simplify the hypothesis), that the candle is only imaginary, and that no 'original' of it is recognized by us psychologists outside. Will this hallucinatory candle be believed in, will it have a real existence for the mind?

What possible sense (for that mind) would a suspicion have that the candle was not real? What would doubt or disbelief of it imply? When we, the onlooking psychologists, say the candle is unreal, we mean something quite definite, viz., that there is a world known to us which is [p. 288] real, and to which we perceive that the candle does not belong; it belongs exclusively to that individual mind, has no status anywhere else, etc. It exists, to be sure, in a fashion, for it forms the content of that mind's hallucination; but the hallucination itself, though unquestionably it is a sort of existing fact, has no knowledge of other facts; and since those other facts are the realities par excellence for us, and the only things we believe in, the candle is simply outside of our reality and belief altogether.

By the hypothesis, however, the mind which sees the candle can spin no such considerations as these about it, for of other facts, actual or possible, it has no inkling whatever. That candle is its
all, its absolute. Its entire faculty of attention is absorbed by it. It is, it is that; it is there; no other possible candle, or quality of this candle, no other possible place, or possible object in the place, no alternative, in short, suggests itself as even conceivable; so how can the mind help believing the candle real? The supposition that it might possibly not do so is, under the supposed conditions, unintelligible. [10]

This is what Spinonza long ago announced:

"Let us conceive a boy," he said, "imagining to himself a horse, and taking note of nothing else. As this imagination involves the existence of the horse, and the boy has no perception which annuls its resistance, he will necessarily contemplate the horse as present, nor will he be able to doubt of its existence, however little certain of it he maybe. I deny that a man in so far as he imagines [percipit] [11] affirms nothing. For what is it to imagine a winged horse but to affirm that, the horse [that horse, namely] [12] has wings? For if the mind had nothing before it but the winged horse it would contemplate the same as present, would have no cause to doubt of its existence, nor any power of dissenting from its existence, unless the imagination of the winged horse were joined to an idea which contradicted [tollit] [13] its existence." (Ethics, 11, 49, Scholium.)

The sense that anything we think of is unreal can only come, then, when that thing is contradicted by some other [p. 289] thing of which we think. Any object which remains uncontradicted is ipso facto believed and posited as absolute reality.

Now, how comes it that one thing thought of can be contradicted by another? It cannot unless it begins the quarrel by saying something inadmissible about that other. Take the mind with the candle, or the boy with the horse. If either of them say, 'That candle or that horse, even when I don't see it, exists in the outer world,' he pushes into 'the outer world,' an object which may be incompatible with everything which he otherwise knows of that world. If so, he must take his choice of which to hold by, the present perceptions or the other knowledge of the world. If he holds to the other knowledge, the present perceptions are contradicted, so far as their relation to that world goes. Candle and horse, whatever they may be, are not existents in outward space. They are existents, of course; they are mental objects; mental objects have existence as mental objects. But they are situated in their own spaces, the space in which they severally appear, and neither of those spaces is the space in which the realities called 'the outer world' exist.

Take again the horse with wings. If I merely dream of a horse with wings, my horse interferes with nothing else and has not to be contradicted. That horse, its wings, and its place, are all equally real. That horse exists no other-wise than as winged, and is moreover really there, for that place exists no otherwise than as the place of that horse, and claims as yet no connection with the other places of the world. But if with this horse I make an inroad into the world otherwise known, and say, for example, 'That is my old mare Maggie, having grown a pair of wings where she stands in her stall;' the whole case is altered; for now the horse and place are identified with a horse and place otherwise known, and what is known of the latter objects is incompatible with what is perceived with the former. 'Maggie in her stall with wings! Never!' The wings are unreal, then, visionary. I have dreamed a lie about Maggie in her stall.
The reader will recognize in these two cases the two sorts of judgment called in the logic-books existential and [p. 290] attributive respectively. 'The candle exists as an outer reality' is an existential, 'My Maggie has got a pair of wings' is an attributive, proposition; and it follows from what was first said that all propositions, whether attributive or existential, are believed through the very fact of being conceived, unless they clash with other propositions believed at the same time, by alarming that their terms are the same with the terms of these other propositions. A dream-candle has existence, true enough; but not the same existence (existence for itself, namely, or extra mentem meam) which the candles of waking perception have. A dream-horse has wings; but then neither horse nor wings are the same with any horses or wings known to memory. That we call at any moment think of the same thing which at any former moment we thought of is the ultimate law of our intellectual constitution. But when we now think of it incompatibly with our other ways of thinking it, then we must choose which way to stand by, for we cannot continue to think in two contradictory ways at once. The whole distinction of real and unreal, the whole psychology of belief, disbelief, and doubt, is thus grounded on two mental facts -- first, that we are liable to think differently of the same; and second, that when we have done so, we can choose which way of thinking to adhere to and which to disregard.

The subjects adhered to become real subjects, the attributes adhered to real attributes, the existence adhered to real existence; whilst the subjects disregarded become imaginary subjects, the attributes disregarded erroneous attributes, and the existence disregarded an existence into men's land, in the limbo 'where footless fancies dwell.' The real things are, in Mr. Taine's terminology, the reductives of the things judged unreal.
DOUBT.

There is hardly a common man who (if consulted) would not say that things come to us in the first instance as ideas; and that if we take them for realities, it is because we add something to them, namely, the predicate of having also 'real existence outside of our thought.' This notion that a higher faculty than the mere having of a conscious content is needed to make us know anything real by its means has pervaded psychology from the earliest times, and is the tradition of Scholasticism, Kantism, and Common-sense. Just as sensations must come as inward affections and then be 'extradited;' as objects of memory must appear at first as presently unrealities, and subsequently be 'projected' backwards as past realities; so conceptions must be
entia rationis till a higher faculty uses them as windows to look beyond the ego, into the real extra-mental world; -- so runs the orthodox and popular account.

And there is no question that this is a true account of the way in which many of our later beliefs come to pass. The logical distinction between the bare thought of an object and belief in the object's reality is often a chronological distinction as well. The having and the crediting of and idea do not always coalesce; for often we first suppose and then believe; first play with the notion, frame the hypothesis, and then affirm the existence, of an object of thought. And we are quite conscious of the succession of the two mental acts. But these cases are none of them primitive cases. They only occur in minds long schooled to doubt by the contradictions of experience. The primitive impulse is to affirm immediately the reality of all that is conceived.

When we do doubt, however, in what does the subsequent resolution of the doubt consist? It either consists in a purely verbal performance, the coupling of the adjectives 'real' or 'outwardly existing' (as predicates) to the thing originally conceived (as subject); or it consists in the perception in the given case of that for which these adjectives, abstracted from other similar concrete cases, stand. But what these adjectives stand for, we now know well. They stand for certain relations (immediate, or through intermediaries) to ourselves. Whatever concrete objects have hitherto stood in those relations have been for us 'real,' 'outwardly existing.' So that when we now abstractly admit a thing to be 'real' (without perhaps going through any definite perception of its relations), it is as if we said "it belongs in the same world with those other objects." Naturally enough, we have hourly opportunities for this summary process of belief. All remote objects in space or time are believed in this way. When I believe that some prehistoric savage chipped this flint, for example, the reality of the savage and of his act makes no direct appeal either to my sensation, emotion, or volition. What I mean by my belief in it is, imply my dim sense of a continuity between the long dead savage and his doings and the present world of which the hint forms part. It is preeminently a case for applying our doctrine of the 'fringe' (see Vol. I. p. 258). When I think the savage with one fringe of relationship, I believe in him; when I think him without that fringe, or with another one (e.g., if I should class him with 'scientific vagaries' in general), I disbelieve him. The word 'real' itself is, in short, a fringe.