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Percy Bysshe Shelley
Speculations on Metaphysics
1880

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Speculations on Metaphysics

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neighbourhood of that city, engaged in earnest and interesting conversation. We suddenly turned the corner of a lane, and the view, which its high banks and hedges had concealed, presented itself. The view consisted of a windmill, standing in one among many plashy meadows, inclosed with stone walls; the irregular and broken ground, between the wall and the road on which we stood; a long low hill behind the windmill, and a grey covering of uniform cloud spread over the evening sky. It was that season when the last leaf had just fallen from the scant and stunted ash. The scene surely was a common scene; the season and the hour little calculated to kindle lawless thought; it was a tame uninteresting assemblage of objects, such as would drive the imagination for refuge in serious and sober talk, to the evening fireside, and the dessert of winter fruits and wine. The effect which it produced on me was not such as could have been expected. I suddenly remembered to have seen that exact scene in some dream of long————

Here I was obliged to leave off, overcome by thrilling horror.[13]

[13] At this point the MS. from which the fragment was given in 1840 closes. Mrs. Shelley says:— "I remember well his coming to me from writing it, pale and agitated, to seek refuge in conversation from the fearful emotions it excited. No man, as these fragments prove, had such keen sensations as Shelley. His nervous temperament was wound up by the delicacy of his health to an intense degree of sensibility, and while his active mind pondered for ever upon, and drew conclusions from his sensations his reveries increased their vivacity, till they mingled with, and were one with thought, and both became absorbing and tumultuous, even to Physical pain." The final page of the M.S. fragment referred to at pp. 282 and 290 seems to be a note for the Speculations on Morals, and is inserted at pp. 303–4.

Contents

I. THE MIND. 5
II. WHAT METAPHYSICS ARE. ERRORS IN THE USUAL METHODS OF CONSIDERING THEM. 8
III. DIFFICULTY OF ANALYSING THE HUMAN MIND. . 11
IV. HOW THE ANALYSIS SHOULD BE CARRIED ON. . . 11
V. CATALOGUE OF THE PHENOMENA OF DREAMS, AS CONNECTING SLEEPING AND WAKING. . . . 12

gree in which it resembles, or differs from, that of others, I am by no means accurately aware. It is sufficient, however, to caution the reader against drawing general inferences from particular instances.

I omit the general instances of delusion in fever or delirium, as well as mere dreams considered in themselves. A delineation of this subject, however inexhaustible and interesting, is to be passed over.

What is the connexion of sleeping and of waking?

II. I distinctly remember dreaming three several times, between intervals of two or more years, the same precise dream. It was not so much what is ordinarily called a dream; the single image, unconnected with all other images, of a youth who was educated at the same school with myself, presented itself in sleep. Even now, after the lapse of many years, I can never hear the name of this youth, without the three places where I dreamed of him presenting themselves distinctly to my mind.

III. In dreams, images acquire associations peculiar to dreaming; so that the idea of a particular house, when it recurs a second time in dreams, will have relation with the idea of the same house, in the first time, of a nature entirely different from that which the house excites, when seen or thought of in relation to waking ideas.

IV. I have beheld scenes, with the intimate and unaccountable connexion of which with the obscure parts of my own nature, I have been irresistibly impressed. I have beheld a scene which has produced no unusual effect on my thoughts. After the lapse of many years I have dreamed of this scene. It has hung on my memory, it has haunted my thoughts, at intervals, with the pertinacity of an object connected with human affections. I have visited this scene asain. Neither the dream could be dissociated from the landscape, nor the landscape from the dream, nor feelings, such as neither singly could have awakened, from both. But the most remarkable event of this nature, which ever occurred to me, happened five years ago at Oxford. I was walking with a friend, in the

ought to consider the mind of man and the universe as the great whole on which to exercise our speculations. Here, above all, verbal disputes ought to be laid aside, though this has long been their chosen field of battle. It imports little to inquire whether thought be distinct from the objects of thought. The use of the words *external* and *internal*, as applied to the establishment of this distinction, has been the symbol and the source of much dispute. This is merely an affair of words, and as the dispute deserves, to say, that when speaking of the objects of thought, we indeed only describe one of the forms of thought—or that, speaking of thought, we only apprehend one of the operations of the universal system of beings.[12]

V. CATALOGUE OF THE PHENOMENA OF DREAMS, AS CONNECTING SLEEPING AND WAKING.

I. Let us reflect on our infancy, and give as faithfully as possible a relation of the events of sleep.

And first I am bound to present a faithful picture of my own peculiar nature relatively to sleep. I do not doubt that were every individual to imitate me, it would be found that among many circumstances peculiar to their individual nature, a sufficiently general resemblance would be found to prove the connexion existing between those peculiarities and the most universal phenomena. I shall employ caution, indeed, as to the facts which I state, that they contain nothing false or exaggerated. But they contain no more than certain elucidations of my own nature; concerning the de-

[12] I give this precisely as printed by Mrs. Shelley, though some errors of transcription may be suspected. The failure to work out the sentence to any proper construction may indeed be incident to the incomplete state of the fragment; but the term *universal system of beings*, with which the fragment closes, is so unusual, so inappropriate to the context that, one can hardly doubt, a careful examination of the MS. would shew the last word to be *things*, not *beings*.

I. THE MIND.

I. It is an axiom in mental philosophy, that we can think of nothing which we have not perceived. When I say that we can think of nothing, I mean, we can imagine nothing, we can reason of nothing, we can remember nothing, we can foresee nothing. The most astonishing combinations of poetry, the subtlest deductions of logic and mathematics, are no other than combinations which the intellect makes of sensations according to its own laws. A catalogue of all the thoughts of the mind, and of all their possible modifications, is a cyclopedic history of the universe.

But, it will be objected, the inhabitants of the various planets of this and other solar systems; and the existence of a Power bearing the same relation to all that we perceive and are, as what we call a cause does to what we call effect, were never subjects of sensation, and yet the laws of mind almost universally suggest, according to the various disposition of each, a conjecture, a persuasion, or a conviction of their existence. The reply is simple; these thoughts are also to be included in the catalogue of existence; they are modes in which thoughts are combined; the objection only adds force to the conclusion, that beyond the limits of perception and thought nothing can exist.

Thoughts, or ideas, or notions, call them what you will, differ from each other, not in kind, but in force. It has commonly been supposed that those distinct thoughts which affect a number of persons, at regular intervals, during the passage of a multitude of other thoughts, which are called *real*, or *external objects*, are totally different in kind from those which affect only a few persons, and which recur at irregular intervals, and are usually more obscure and indistinct, such as hallucinations, dreams, and the ideas of madness. No essential distinction between any one of these ideas, or any class of them, is founded on a correct observation of the nature of things, but merely on a consideration of what thoughts are most invariably subservient to the security and happiness of life; and if

nothing more were expressed by the distinction, the philosopher might safely accommodate his language to that of the vulgar. But they pretend to assert an essential difference, which has no foundation in truth, and which suggests a narrow and false conception of universal nature, the parent of the most fatal errors in speculation. A specific difference between every thought of the mind, is, indeed, a necessary consequence of that law by which it perceives diversity and number; but a generic and essential difference is wholly arbitrary. The principle of the agreement and similarity of all thoughts, is, that they are all thoughts; the principle of their disagreement consists in the variety and irregularity of the occasions on which they arise in the mind. That in which they agree, to that in which they differ, is as everything to nothing. Important distinctions, of various degrees of force, indeed, are to be established between them, if they were, as they may be, subjects of ethical and œconomical discussion; but that is a question altogether distinct.

By considering all knowledge as bounded by perception, whose operations may be indefinitely combined, we arrive at a conception of Nature inexpressibly more magnificent, simple and true, than accords with the ordinary systems of complicated and partial consideration. Nor does a contemplation of the universe, in this comprehensive and synthetical view, exclude the subtlest analysis of its modifications and parts.

A scale might be formed, graduated according to the degrees of a combined ratio of intensity, duration, connexion, periods of recurrence, and utility, which would be the standard, according to which all ideas might be measured, and an uninterrupted chain of nicely shadowed distinctions would be observed, from the faintest impression on the senses, to the most distinct combination of those impressions; from the simplest of those combinations, to that mass of knowledge which, including our own nature, constitutes what we call the universe.

We are intuitively conscious of our own existence, and of that connexion in the train of our successive ideas, which we term our

III. DIFFICULTY OF ANALYSING THE HUMAN MIND.

If it were possible that a person should give a faithful history of his being, from the earliest epochs of his recollection, a picture would be presented such as the world has never contemplated before. A mirror would be held up to all men in which they might behold their own recollections, and, in dim perspective, their shadowy hopes and fears,—all that they dare not, or that daring and desiring, they could not expose to the open eyes of day. But thought can with difficulty visit the intricate and winding chambers which it inhabits. It is like a river whose rapid and perpetual stream flows outwards;—like one in dread who speeds through the recesses of some haunted pile, and dares not look behind. The caverns of the mind are obscure, and shadowy; or pervaded with a lustre, beautifully bright indeed, but shining not beyond their portals. If it were possible to be where we have been, vitally and indeed—if, at the moment of our presence, we could define the results of our experience,—if the passage from sensation to reflection—from a state of passive perception to voluntary contemplation, were not so dizzying and so tumultuous, this attempt would be less difficult.

IV. HOW THE ANALYSIS SHOULD BE CARRIED ON.

Most of the errors of philosophers have arisen from considering the human being in a point of view too detailed and circumscribed. He is not a moral, and an intellectual,—but also, and pre-eminently, an imaginative being. His own mind is his law; his own mind is all things to him. If we would arrive at any knowledge which should be serviceable from the practical conclusions to which it leads, we

as well as those headed ”difficulty of analysing the human mind” and ”how the analysis should be carried on” are from Mrs. Shelley’s edition.

those who are accustomed to profess the greatest veneration for the inductive system of Lord Bacon adhered with sufficient scrupulousness to its regulations. They have professed indeed (and who have not professed?) to deduce their conclusions from indisputable facts. How came many of those[6] facts to be called indisputable? What sanctioning correspondence[7] unites a concatenation of syllogisms? Their promises[8] of deducing all systems from facts has too often been performed by appealing in favour of these pretended realities to the obstinate preconceptions of the multitude; or by the most preposterous mistake of a name for a thing. They . . . .

The science of mind possesses eminent advantages over every other with regard to the certainty of the conclusions which it affords. It requires indeed for its entire developement no more than a minute and accurate attention to facts. Every student may refer to the testimonials[9] which he bears within himself to ascertain the authorities upon which any assertion rests. It requires no more than attention to perceive perfect sincerity in the relation of what is perceived, and care to distinguish tlie arbitrary marks by which are designated from the themselves.[10]

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We are ourselves the depositaries of the evidence of the subject which we consider.[11]

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[6] Cancelled reading, *What are those.*

[7] Cancelled reading, *connexion.*

[8] The word *profession* is struck out in favour of *promises.*

[9] In the MS. *authorities* was originally written here.

[10] Fabulosissima quæque portenta cujusvis religionis alius crediderim quam hæc omnia sine Numine tieri. [Shelley's Note.]

[11] The continuous fragment here breaks off at the beginning of a page. On the next page some headings of the subject are indicated by the inscription of the words "Infancy, Childhood, Youth, Manhood, Old Age" The first of these sections appears to have been begun; but all we have of it, or all Mrs. Shelley gave us of it, is the fragment headed "catalogue of the phenomena of dreams," p. 295. That,

identity. We are conscious also of the existence of other minds; but not intuitively. Our evidence, with respect to the existence of other minds, is founded upon a very complicated relation of ideas, which it is foreign to the purpose of this treatise to anatomize. The basis of this relation is, undoubtedly, a periodical recurrence of masses of ideas, which our voluntary determinations have, in one peculiar direction, no power to circumscribe or to arrest, and against the recurrence of which they can only imperfectly provide. The irresistible laws of thought constrain us to believe that the precise limits of our actual ideas are not the actual limits of possible ideas; the law, according to which these deductions are drawn, is called analogy; and this is the foundation of all our inferences, from one idea to another, inasmuch as they resemble each other.

We see trees, houses, fields, living beings in our own shape, and in shapes more or less analogous to our own. These are perpetually changing the mode of their existence relatively to us. To express the varieties of these modes, we say, *we move, they move;* and as this motion is continual, though not uniform, we express our conception of the diversities of its course by—*it has been, it is, it shall be.* These diversities are events or objects, and are essential, considered relatively to human identity, for the existence of the human mind. For if the inequalities, produced by what has been termed the operations of the external universe, were levelled by the perception of our being, uniting, and filling up their interstices, motion and mensuration, and time, and space; the elements of the human mind being thus abstracted, sensation and imagination cease. Mind cannot be considered pure.

II. WHAT METAPHYSICS ARE. ERRORS IN THE USUAL METHODS OF CONSIDERING THEM.

We do not attend sufficiently to what passes within ourselves. We combine words, combined a thousand times before. In our minds we assume entire opinions; and in the expression of those opinions, entire phrases, when we would philosophize. Our whole style of expression and sentiment is infected with the tritest plagiarisms. Our words are dead, our thoughts are cold and borrowed.[1]

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. . . . . more than suggest an association of words, or the remembrance of external objects distinct from the conceptions which the mind exerts relatively to them. They are about these conceptions. They perpetually awaken the attention of their reader to the consideration of their intellectual nature. They make him feel that his mind is not merely impelled or organized by the adhibition of events proceeding from what has been termed the mechanism of the material universe.

[1] This paragraph is the opening of the section as given by Mrs. Shelley. The rest of the text of the section is here printed from the MS. referred to at p. 282. Mrs. Shelley has instead the three following paragraphs:— "Let us contemplate facts; let us, in the great study of ourselves, resolutely compel the mind to a rigid consideration of itself. We are not content with conjecture, and inductions, and syllogisms, in sciences regarding external objects. As in these, let us also, in considering the phenomena of mind, severely collect those facts which cannot be disputed. Metaphysics will thus possess this conspicuous advantage over every other science, that each student, by attentively referring to his own mind, may ascertain the authorities, upon which any assertions regarding it are supported. There can thus be no deception, we ourselves being the depositaries of the evidence of the subject which we consider. "Metaphysics may be defined as an inquiry concerning those things belonging to, or connected with, the eternal nature of man. "It is said that mind produces motion; and it might as well have been said, that motion produces mind." The third paragraph does not seem to have any necessary connexion with the others.

That which the most consummate intelligences that have adorned this mortal scene inherit as their birthright, let us acquire (for it is within our grasp) by caution, by strict scepticism concerning all assertions, all expressions; by scrupulous and strong attention to the mysteries of our own nature.

Let us contemplate facts. Let me repeat that in the great study of ourselves we ought resolutely to compel the mind to a rigid examination of itself. Let us in[2] the science which regards those laws by which the mind acts, as well as in those which regard the laws by which it is acted upon, severely collect those facts.

Metaphysics is a word which has been so long applied to denote an inqidry into the phenomena of mind, that it would justly be considered presumptuous to employ another. But etymologically considered it is very ill adapted to express the science of mind. It asserts a distinction between the moral and the material universe which it is presumptuous to assume. Metaphysics may be defined as the science[3] of all that we know, feel, remember and believe: inasmuch as our knowledge, sensations, memory and faith constitute the universe considered relatively to human identity. Logic, or the science of words must no longer be confounded with metaphysics or the science of facts. Words are the instruments of mind whose capacities it becomes the Metaphysician accurately to know, but they are not mind, nor are they portions of mind. The discoveries of Horne Tooke in philology do not, as he has asserted, throw light upon[4] Metaphysics, they only render the instruments recqu[is]ite to its perception more exact and accurate.

Aristotle and his followers, Locke and most of the modern Philosophers[5] gave Logic the name of Metaphysics. Nor have

[2] Cancelled readings, (1) *the science which regards the mind itself* (2) *in Metaphysics as in those sciences which regards the laws by which it is.*

[3] Cancelled reading, *The sense in which the word Metaphysics will be employed in the following pages is:* See definition given in foot-note, p. 287.

[4] The words *the science of* are here cancelled in the MS.

[5] Cancelled reading, *Locke and the disciples of his…*