



The Mechanism of Social Consciousness

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THE MECHANISM OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS¹

THE organization of consciousness may be regarded from the standpoint of its objects and the relation of these objects to conduct. I have in mind to present somewhat schematically the relation of social objects or selves to the form of social conduct, and to introduce this by a statement of the relation of the physical object to the conduct within which it appears.

A physical object or percept is a construct in which the sensuous stimulation is merged with imagery which comes from past experience. This imagery on the cognitive side is that which the immediate sensuous quality stands for, and in so far satisfies the mind. The reason for this satisfaction is found in the fact that this imagery arises from past experience of the result of an act which this stimulus has set going. Thus the wall as a visual stimulus tends to set free the impulse to move toward it and push against it. The perception of the wall as distant and hard and rough is related to the visual experience as response to stimulation. A peculiar stimulus value stands for a certain response value. A percept is a collapsed act in which the result of the act to which the stimulus incites is represented by imagery of the experience of past acts of a like nature.

In so far as our physical conduct involves movements toward or away from distant objects and their being handled when we come into contact with them, we perceive all things in terms of distance sensation—color, sound, odor—which stand for hard or soft, big or little, objects of varying forms, which actual contact will reveal.

Our conduct in movement and manipulation, with its stimulations and responses, gives the framework within which objects of perception arise—and this conduct is in so far responsible for the organization of our physical world. Percepts—physical objects—are compounds of the experience of immediate stimulation and the imagery of the response to which this stimulation will lead. The object can be properly stated in terms of conduct.

I have referred to percepts as objects which arise in physical experience because it is a certain phase of conduct which, with its appropriate stimuli and responses, gives rise to such products, *i. e.*, movement under the influence of distant stimuli leading to contact experiences of manipulation.

Given a different type of conduct with distinguishable stimulations and responses, and different objects would arise—such a different field is that of social conduct. By social conduct I refer simply to that which is mediated by the stimulations of other ani-

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mals belonging to the same group of living forms, which lead to responses which again affect these other forms—thus fighting, reproduction, parental care, much of animal play, hunting, etc., are the results of primitive instincts or impulses which are set going by the stimulation of one form by another, and these stimulations again lead to responses which affect other forms.

It is of course true that a man is a physical object to the perception of another man, and as really as is a tree or a stone. But a man is more than a physical object, and it is this more which constitutes him a social object or self, and it is this self which is related to that peculiar conduct which may be termed social conduct.

Most social stimulation is found in the beginnings or early stages of social acts which serve as stimuli to other forms whom these acts would affect. This is the field of gestures, which reveal the motor attitude of a form in its relation to others; an attitude which psychologists have conceived of as predominantly emotional, though it is emotional only in so far as an ongoing act is inhibited. That certain of these early indications of an incipient act have persisted, while the rest of the act has been largely suppressed or has lost its original value, *e. g.*, the baring of the teeth or the lifting of the nostrils, is true, and the explanation can most readily be found in the social value which such indications have acquired. It is an error, however, to overlook the relation which these truncated acts have assumed toward other forms of reactions which complete them as really as the original acts, or to forget that they occupy but a small part of the whole field of gesture by means of which we are apprised of the reactions of others toward ourselves. The expressions of the face and attitudes of body have the same functional value for us that the beginnings of hostility have for two dogs, who are maneuvering for an opening to attack.

This field of gesture does not simply relate the individual to other individuals as physical objects, but puts him *en rapport* with their actions, which are as yet only indicated, and arouses instinctive reactions appropriate to these social activities. The social response of one individual, furthermore, introduces a further complication. The attitude assumed in response to the attitude of another becomes a stimulus to him to change his attitude, thus leading to that conversation of attitudes which is so vividly illustrated in the early stages of a dog fight. We see the same process in courting and mating, and in the fondling of young forms by the mother, and finally in much of the play of young animals.

It has been recognized for some time that speech belongs in its beginnings, at least, to this same field of gesture, so-called vocal gesture. Originally indicating the preparation for violent action, which

arises from a sudden change of breathing and circulation rhythms, the articulate sounds have come to elaborate and immensely complicate this conversation of attitudes by which social forms so adjust themselves to each other's anticipated action that they may act appropriately with reference to each other.

Articulate sounds have still another most important result. While one feels but imperfectly the value of his own facial expression or bodily attitude for another, his ear reveals to him his own vocal gesture in the same form that it assumes to his neighbor. One shakes his fist primarily only at another, while he talks to himself as really as he talks to his *vis-à-vis*. The genetic import of this has long been recognized. The young child talks to himself, *i. e.*, uses the elements of articulate speech in response to the sounds he hears himself make, more continuously and persistently than he does in response to the sounds he hears from those about him, and displays greater interest in the sounds he himself makes than in those of others. We know also that this fascination of one's own vocal gestures continues even after the child has learned to talk with others, and that the child will converse for hours with himself, even constructing imaginary companions, who function in the child's growing self-consciousness as the processes of inner speech—of thought and imagination—function in the consciousness of the adult.

To return to the formula given above for the formation of an object in consciousness, we may define the social object in terms of social conduct as we defined the physical object in terms of our reactions to physical objects. The object was found to consist of the sensuous experience of the stimulation to an act plus the imagery from past experience of the final result of the act. The social object will then be the gestures, *i. e.*, the early indications of an ongoing social act in another plus the imagery of our own response to that stimulation. To the young child the frowns and smiles of those about him, the attitude of body, the outstretched arms, are at first simply stimulations that call out instinctive responses of his own appropriate to these gestures. He cries or laughs, he moves toward his mother, or stretches out his arms. When these gestures in others bring back the images of his own responses and their results, the child has the material out of which he builds up the social objects that form the most important part of his environment. We are familiar with this phase of a baby's development, being confident that he recognizes the different members of the group about him. He acts then with confidence toward them since their gestures have come to have meaning for him. His own response to their stimulations and its consequences are there to interpret the facial expressions and attitudes of body and tones of voice. The awakening social intelligence

of the child is evidenced not so much through his ready responses to the gestures of others, for these have been in evidence much earlier. It is the inner assurance of his own readiness to adjust himself to the attitudes of others that looks out of his eyes and appears in his own bodily attitudes.

If we assume that an object arises in consciousness through the merging of the imagery of experience of the response with that of the sensuous experience of the stimulation, it is evident that the child must merge the imagery of his past responses into the sensuous stimulation of what comes to him through distance senses. His contact and kinesthetic experiences must be lodged in the sensuous experiences that call them out if they are to achieve objective character in his consciousness.

It will be some time before he can successfully unite the different parts of his own body, such as his hands and feet, which he sees and feels, into a single object. Such a step must be later than the formation of the physical objects of his environment. The form of the object is given in the experience of things, which are not his physical self. When he has synthesized his various bodily parts with the organic sensations and affective experiences, it will be upon the model of objects about him. The mere presence of experiences of pleasure and pain, together with organic sensations, will not form an object unless this material can fall into the scheme of an object—that of sensuous stimulation plus the imagery of the response.

In the organization of the baby's physical experience the appearance of his body as a unitary thing, as an object, will be relatively late, and must follow upon the structure of the objects of his environment. This is as true of the object that appears in social conduct, the self. The form of the social object must be found first of all in the experience of other selves. The earliest achievement of social consciousness will be the merging of the imagery of the baby's first responses and their results with the stimulations of the gestures of others. The child will not succeed in forming an object of himself—of putting the so-called subjective material of consciousness within such a self—until he has recognized about him social objects who have arisen in his experience through this process of filling out stimulations with past experiences of response. And this is indeed our uniform experience with children. The child's early social percepts are of others. After these arise incomplete and partial selves—or "me's"—which are quite analogous to the child's percepts of his hands and feet, which precede his perception of himself as a whole. The mere presence of affective experience, of imagery, of organic sensations, does not carry with it consciousness of a self to which these experiences belong. Nor does the unitary character of the response

which tends to synthesize our objects of perception convey that same unitary character to the inner experience until the child is able to experience himself as he experiences other selves.

It is highly probable that lower animals never reach any such objective reference of what we term subjective experiences to selves, and the question presents itself—what is there in human social conduct that give rise to a “me,” a self which is an object? Why does the human animal transfer the form of a social object from his environment to an inner experience?

The answer to the question is already indicated in the statement of vocal gesture. Certainly the fact that the human animal can stimulate himself as he stimulates others and can respond to his stimulations as he responds to the stimulations of others, places in his conduct the form of a social object out of which may arise a “me” to which can be referred so-called subjective experiences.

Of course the mere capacity to talk to oneself is not the whole of self-consciousness, otherwise the talking birds would have souls or at least selves. What is lacking to the parrot are the social objects which can exist for the human baby. Part of the mechanism for transferring the social objects into an inner experience the parrot possesses, but he has nothing to import into such an inner world. Furthermore, the vocal gesture is not the only form which can serve for the building up of a “me,” as is abundantly evident from the building-up gestures of the deaf mutes. Any gesture by which the individual can himself be affected as others are affected, and which therefore tends to call out in him a response as it would call it out in another, will serve as a mechanism for the construction of a self. That, however, a consciousness of a self as an object would ever have arisen in man if he had not had the mechanism of talking to himself, I think there is every reason to doubt.

If this statement is correct the objective self of human consciousness is the merging of one's responses with the social stimulation by which he affects himself. The “me” is a man's reply to his own talk. Such a me is not then an early formation, which is then projected and ejected into the bodies of other people to give them the breadth of human life. It is rather an importation from the field of social objects into an amorphous, unorganized field of what we call inner experience. Through the organization of this object, the self, this material is itself organized and brought under the control of the individual in the form of so-called self-consciousness.

It is a commonplace of psychology that it is only the “me”—the empirical self—that can be brought into the focus of attention—that can be perceived. The “I” lies beyond the range of immediate experience. In terms of social conduct this is tantamount to saying

that we can perceive our responses only as they appear as images from past experience, merging with the sensuous stimulation. We can not present the response while we are responding. We can not use our responses to others as the materials for construction of the self—this imagery goes to make up other selves. We must socially stimulate ourselves to place at our own disposal the material out of which our own selves as well as those of others must be made.

The "I" therefore never can exist as an object in consciousness, but the very conversational character of our inner experience, the very process of replying to one's own talk, implies an "I" behind the scenes who answers to the gestures, the symbols, that arise in consciousness. The "I" is the transcendental self of Kant, the soul that James conceived behind the scene holding on to the skirts of an idea to give it an added increment of emphasis.

The self-conscious, actual self in social intercourse is the objective "me" or "me's" with the process of response continually going on and implying a fictitious "I" always out of sight of himself.

Inner consciousness is socially organized by the importation of the social organization of the outer world.

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DISCUSSION

RELIGION AND THE DISCOVERY OF TRUTH¹

PROFESSOR STRATTON'S book is almost altogether concerned with the exhibition of the range of the conflict of motives, of feelings, and of ideas in religious life. In a final brief chapter, however, he argues in favor of the proposition that "religion is justified in taking part in the discovery of truth." I wish to make the following comments upon his defense of that thesis.

There are, we are told, four varieties of truth; and religion is concerned with all four of them. The worshiper, when his faith is at its best, does not only want to "believe usefully and in all consistency and with a just sense of relative values"; he wants also to believe that the ideal world exists not merely in someone's idea, but also independently of the thinker. Let the reader bear in mind that this fourth kind of truth is the one discussed by Professor Stratton and the only one with which I shall be concerned in these pages. It is often called objective truth, but he prefers the term *factual truth*.

¹ *A propos* of Professor Stratton's book, "The Psychology of the Religious Life." London: George Allen and Company. 1911.