7-1-1967

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Thomas Brown on Mental Analysis

The metaphilosophical question of the value of philosophical analysis became a basic one for Thomas Brown with the publication of a fundamental attack on philosophic method by Francis Jeffrey, in his review of Stewart's *Account of the Life and Writings of Thomas Reid*. There Jeffrey takes issue not primarily with individual points in the writings of Reid and Stewart, but rather with the manner in which these men, and indeed all philosophers since Hume, have construed their function. His attack is an immediate and a direct one: "It does not appear to us that any great advancement in our knowledge of the operations of mind is to be expected from . . . the cultivation of this interesting but abstracted study."

Jeffrey then goes on to make a distinction between two classes of inductive philosophy—those whose objects are amenable to experiment, and the knowledge of which results in increased human control over them, and those which are known only by observation. In the latter case, increased knowledge does not entail increased power. *Mere* observation yields facts which cannot be modified. "Observation can only inform us that they exist, and that their succession appears to be governed by certain general laws." Since, moreover, we cannot control the observational phenomena, determination of causes also becomes, to a large measure, conjectural.

Mental phenomena seem typical of facts of the second class. Observing the operations of the mind clearly does not increase our authority over them. "No metaphysician expects by analysis to discover a new power, or to excite a new sensation in the mind."

But, suggests Jeffrey, perhaps we can increase our knowledge by observation, if not our power. His conclusion here too is negative. Philosophical analysis of mental phenomena yields nothing not already known. "Everyone knows exactly what it is to perceive and to feel, to remember, imagine, and believe; and though he may not always apply the words that denote these operations with perfect propriety, it is not possible to

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2 Jeffrey, p. 624.

3 Jeffrey, p. 624.
suppose that anyone is ignorant of the things." A man who does not know the philosophical proposition that memory depends on attention nonetheless focuses his attention when he wishes to remember. An animal trainer may never have heard the laws of association articulated, yet makes use of them.

The truth is, that as we only know the existence of mind by the exercise of its functions according to certain laws, it is impossible that any one should ever discover or bring to light any functions or any laws of which men would admit the existence, unless they were previously convinced of their operation on themselves. A philosopher may be the first to state these laws, and to describe their operation distinctly in words; but men must be already familiarly acquainted with them in reality, before they can assent to the justice of his descriptions.6

The labors of the metaphysician, in fact, should not be compared with those of the physicist or chemist, whose investigations yield something which was not present at the advent of the inquiry, but rather with those of the grammarian, who classifies and orders the words of a language already familiar to his readers. The unavoidable conclusion is that nothing new has been added to our knowledge, and we have gained nothing save perhaps clarity of conception. Jeffrey feels that we must therefore relegate philosophy to the status of an innocuous and barren pursuit. "The chief value of such speculations will be found to consist in the wholesome exercise which they afford to the faculties, and the delight which is produced by the consciousness of intellectual exertion."6

As Jeffrey remarks in a later review, of Stewart’s Philosophical Essays, the very word analysis is unsuitable for describing the philosophy of mind, if it is taken to imply that something new is ascertained as a result of the analysis, as in a chemical analysis. Conceiving philosophical analysis on the analogy of physical dissection is fallacious. In the former something is revealed which was not previously thought to be there. Regarding the latter, however, "there is no opaque skin . . . on the mind, to conceal its interior mechanism; nor does the metaphysician, when he appeals to the consciousness of all thinking beings for the truth of his classifications, perform anything at all analogous to the dissector, when he removes those outer integuments, and reveals the

4 Jeffrey, p. 625.
5 Jeffrey, p. 625.
6 Jeffrey, p. 626.
wonders of the inward organization of our frame." The proper analogy for comparison with the metaphysician is the man who reveals that we have ten fingers and ten toes, or thirty two teeth. The final proof is, indeed, that philosophy has never produced any positive results. Science has grown immeasurably while philosophy remains at a standstill.

The attack on analysis presented by Jeffrey is not unique. A similar type of argument, in a more generalized form, can be found in the Sophocian dilemma expounded by Plato in the Meno. In contemporary philosophy, the argument is rephrased in general linguistic form as the Paradox of Analyticity. This paradox asserts that an analysis states an equivalence between that which is to be analyzed (the analytandum) and that which is doing the analysis (the analyses). But if this is so, and the analyses has the same meaning as the analytandum, the analysis is a mere tautology and hence trivial. If they do not have the same meaning, then the analysis is incorrect.

We find Brown's philosophy standing diametrically opposed to Jeffrey's attitude towards philosophy, as evidenced by the bold proclamation in his first lecture, where he declares that philosophy, "even in analyzing the powers of [man's] understanding . . . [is] an instrument by which he may have the dignity of co-operating with his beneficent Creator, by spreading to others the knowledge, and virtue, and happiness which he is qualified at once to enjoy and to diffuse."

Brown does not deny that philosophy is capable of going astray, as indeed it did during those centuries when Scholasticism reigned unchallenged. But its uselessness at that time stemmed not from its analysis of the given data, but from an opposite source—its untrammeled speculation:

We have at last arrived at an important truth, which now seems so very obvious a one, that the mind is to be known best by observation of the series of changes which it presents, and of all the circumstances which precede and follow these; that, in attempting to explain its phenomena, therefore, we should know what those phenomena are, and that we might as well attempt to discover, by logic, unaided by observation or experiment, the various coloured rays that enter into the composition of a sunbeam, as to discover, by dialectical subterfuges, a priori, the various feelings that enter into the composition of a single thought or passion."

* Jeffrey, p. 650.
* Brown, p. 3.
We can see clearly how Brown differs from Jeffrey with regard to making the distinction between science and philosophy basic. For him, the key difference is between a priori, speculative philosophy, and scientific, empirical philosophy.

He takes pains, in fact, to discuss the study of the mind on the analogy of the study of bodies. The mind, like material objects, may be considered simply as a substance possessing certain qualities, capable of various modifications which, existing successively as monetary states of the mind, constitute all of mental phenomena. These phenomena may be classified, and their laws of succession determined. Furthermore, as he asserts both in his Lectures and in his Inquiry, causality is as operative on the mental level as on the physical. It is clear then, that philosophy differs only quantitatively from science. Unlike Jeffrey, Brown asserts the applicability of experiment, albeit to a more limited extent, to mental phenomena.

There is a science that may be termed mental physiology, as there is another science relating to the structure and offices of our corporeal frame, to which the term physiology is more commonly applied; and as, by observation and experiment, we endeavor to trace those series of changes which are constantly taking place in our material part, from the first movement of animation to the moment of death; so, by observation, and in some measure by experiment, we endeavor to trace the series of changes that take place in the mind, fugitive as these successions are, and rendered doubly perplexing by the reciprocal combinations into which they flow.¹⁰

Philosophy seems therefore to be something more than mere sterile analysis, if only because experimentation is relevant to it.

But the study of mental phenomena, albeit the most basic aspect of philosophy, is not ultimate. And herein lies another area of Brown's fundamental disagreement with Jeffrey's approach. Philosophy is indeed connected with the modification of human power, precisely because it does have a very significant practical aspect, which Jeffrey has asserted to be the most telling criterion for identifying a non-trivial discipline. This aspect is morality, the weighing and estimating of our actions, of our ends and desires, and of our means to these ends. And it is also with regard to political science, the implementation of these ends, that the practical results of the philosophy of mind become manifest. In modern terms, we might say that our analysis of mind is fundamental for our view of man, which is in turn the basis of our ethical norms, and of our political practice.

¹⁰ Brown, p. 3.
Let us endeavor to read into Brown an argument against Jeffrey which it seems, based on the foregoing analysis, he might well have held. All ethical theories are necessarily based on a particular psychology or classification of mental phenomena, or physiology of the mind, just as different systems of physics are founded on different assumptions. There is indeed a diversity of mutually exclusive ethical as well as political theories. Thus we must conclude that the psychology which serves as the basis of morality is not obvious, and that philosophers do more than restate what is universally known by everyone to be true. Indeed, if such was the role of psychology, there would be no difference between philosophers. We must also conclude that mental philosophy, while in some sense analytic, is something more than mere classification of what is already known universally, but is in some sense closer to the analysis performed by the biologist, even to the point of utilizing experimentation, which Jeffrey admits as meaningful and fruitful. If we grant that Brown had some such argument in mind, we may conclude that it does indeed raise serious doubts as to the total sterility of philosophy. It does, however, nothing at all to explain how philosophy can in some sense tell us new things about that which we in some sense already know, the most interesting point of Jeffrey's objection.

Brown does not immediately consider this objection, but turns to another attempt at answering Jeffrey—by illustrating that the philosophy of mind is non-trivial in its relations with other sciences. All other science is known and systematized only through the mind. It is only natural, therefore, that a proper analysis of mind should be significant. It is vain to expect that our knowledge of mind does not affect our study of matter. "We might almost as well expect to form an accurate judgment, as to the figure, and distance, and color of an object, at which we look through an optical glass, without paying any regard to the color and refracting power of the lens." Science is, after all, a state of the mind. In other words, Brown is Kantian in this sense—we study the mind in order to understand the structure of experience. Indeed he makes the claim that all science depends on the awareness on the part of the scientist of the results of mental philosophy—if he does not acquire them consciously, they are slowly diffused down to him, the best example being the effect on science of the analyses of Bacon, regarding the various Idols. It was, for further example, the improper analysis of mental phenomena which led to the externalization of universals, which in turn served as a restriction on physical

11 Brown, p. 6.
12 Brown, p. 8.
inquiry. In other words, an individual’s psychology or theory of the mind determines not only his moral theory (as we theorized earlier), but his view of nature as well. And the very profusion of physical theories is a sure sign that mental phenomena are not as obvious as Jeffrey claims. One test of a good philosophy of mind, then, is the fruitfulness of the physics it generates. And as long as physics is not absolute and certain, we can be sure our mental philosophy can stand refinement. The clearest example for Brown is causality. Only a correct view of the nature and origin of the concept gives us its proper role in physical investigation. In other words, we see that in yet another way philosophy has a pragmatic effect.

There are other positive results which are derived from the pursuit of the philosophy of mind. One is the avoidance of skepticism. The other is the avoidance of the opposite but equally dangerous evil, dogmatism. To understand the principles of the human mind is to hold a position of sophisticated tolerance towards other human beings, whose minds, being similar to yours, hold similar emotions and desires. Philosophy "shows our common nature, in all principles of truth and error, with those whom we would oppress." It also shows us, as Kant indicated, the limits of our abilities. All criticism is based on a comprehension of the relationship of a work of art to the state of mind. And certainly education, especially moral education, requires more than a superficial acquaintance with the operations of the mind, for it is a fact that not everyone can serve as an educator. With regard to morality, the study of the moral faculties of the mind leads to their strengthening, and a dispassionate study of evil influences curtails their authority. (This occurs by association.) Finally, the mind merits study if only because it is an object in nature:

Would it be no reproach to man, even though he knew all things beside, that he yet knew far less accurately than he might know, his own internal nature, like voyagers who delight in visiting every coast of the most distant country, without the slightest acquaintance, perhaps, with the interior of their own.

Brown insists that he has used the term "physiology of the mind" advisedly. The mind is to be studied in the same manner as any physical object. We study only that of which we are conscious. The laws of inquiry are exactly the same for the mind as for chemistry or physics.

Brown, p. 10.
Brown, p. 15.
Brown, p. 22.
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They are not laws of one science, but of every science, whether the objects of it be mental or material, clear or obscure, definite or indefinite; and they are thus universal, because in truth, though applicable to many sciences, they are only laws of the one inquiring mind, founded on the weakness of its power of discernment, in relation to the complicated phenomena on which those powers are exercised.16

The laws of inquiry are the means of inquiring into the nature of a substance. They are basically two: considering the substance in terms of the parts which form its apparent whole, and considering its modifications and properties—spatial versus temporal existence. Every physical object is an aggregate in fact, and only seems to be a unity in thought. The science which shows us the component parts by analysis is chemistry. Nothing new is created. We merely become aware of what our imperfect senses cannot tell us. Science, as analysis, is nothing more than "an endeavor to repair, by art, the badness of our eyes."17

Knowledge of modifications of body does not arise out of acquaintance with their intimate structure. Causal judgments are required. And such judgments, made on the assumption of the uniformity of nature, are intuitive. These judgments are of the form "If X has followed Y in the past, it will do so in the future." When we talk of power, we mean only the same antecedents always having the same consequents.

These laws of physical inquiry have a direct application to the study of the philosophy of the mind. There too, inquiry can only proceed either by the analysis of what is complex, or by the discovery of causes. We can, of course, only know mind through its phenomena, as we have no access to its essence. The apprehension of mental causal judgments proceeds in exactly the same manner as that of physical causal judgments—the belief is intuitive and the separation of antecedents occurs by experience. Reflection will reveal that it is only by virtue of the fact that we have become accustomed to a given mental cause and effect that we sometimes feel as if we could know the effect a priori, merely by knowing the cause.

The analysis of complex mental phenomena raises more of a problem. It may seem, says Brown, absurd to suppose that analysis is even possible with regard to the mind, "since the mind, and consequently its affections [i.e., its various states] must be always simple and in-

17 Brown, p. 30.
divisible."18 In fact, however, "the science of mind is in its most important respects, a science of analysis, or of a process . . . virtually the same as analysis: and it is only, as it is in this virtual sense analytical, that any discovery, at least that any important discovery, can be expected to be made in it."19 We see then, Brown asserting the possibility of mental analysis, and also adopting a position diametrically opposed to that of Jeffrey. Not only is analysis considered to be not useless, it is also viewed as the only significant vehicle for progress in mental philosophy. We must therefore be careful to keep these two questions distinct: (a) How is something simple susceptible to analysis? (b) How can mental analysis be useful?

All affections of the mind are combinations of feelings related by association. Analysis is what breaks down the complex. But regardless of its components, any affection is still one feeling, "for we cannot divide the states or affections of our mind into separate self existing fractions, as we can divide a compound mass of matter into masses which are separate and self existing, nor distinguish half a joy from half a sorrow."20

The point Brown is trying to make is best expressed with reference to his own example:

The conception of gold, and the conception of a mountain, may separately arise, and may be followed by the conception of a golden mountain; which may be said to be a compound of the two, in the sense in which I use that word, to express merely, that which is thus termed compound or complex is the result of certain previous feelings, to which, as if existing together, it is felt to have the virtual relation of equality, or the relation which a whole bears to the parts that are comprehended in it. But the conception of a golden mountain is still as much one state or feeling of one simple mind, as either of the separate conceptions of gold and of a mountain which preceded it. In cases of this kind, indeed, it is the very nature of the resulting feeling to seem to us thus complex; and we are led, by the very constitution of our mind itself, to consider what we term a complex idea, as equivalent to the separate ideas from which it results, or as comprehensive of them—as being truly to our conception—though to our conception only—and, therefore, only virtually or relatively to us the inquirers—the same as if it were composed of the separate feelings co-existing, as the elements of a body co-exist in space.21

18 Brown, p. 60.
19 Brown, p. 60.
20 Brown, p. 60.
21 Brown, pp. 60-61.

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Thus the analysis is only virtual, since complex mental phenomena are complex only in relation to our mode of conceiving them, but for practical purposes the same as a real physical analysis. All mathematics, in fact, proceeds on this type of virtual analysis. We consider the number four to be simple, a whole, yet we break it down into parts and relations. Mental analysis is very much analogous to mathematical analysis—the discovery of equivalences and comparisons. Once again, Brown makes it a point to emphasize that the analytic aspect of the philosophy of mind is by far the most important.

Having shown that mental analysis is possible without violating the simplicity of the mind, Brown now turns to the question which is philosophically more interesting—the value of analysis as attacked by Jeffrey. The basic premise of Brown's argument was articulated early in the Lectures where he asserts that "we form to ourselves an art of analysis merely that we may perceive what is constantly before our eyes." Later on, the same idea is stressed again. The imperfection of our faculties is what forces us to science of any sort. All aspects of nature are there in front of us—it is just that we lack the sensory equipment. We see a man and know that there is more to him than the surface, yet require artificial means to discover them, since our vision cannot penetrate what light cannot penetrate. In a sense, the proudest discoveries which we make can be considered as memorials to our general inherent weakness. With regard to matter, though we perceive it, it is close attention and analysis which is required for full comprehension. And the same holds in reference to mind. The philosophy of mind is founded "on the imperfection of our power of discriminating the elementary feelings, which compose our great complexities of thought and passion, the various relations of which are felt by us only on attentive reflection, and are, therefore, in progressive discovery, slowly added to relations that have before been traced." To discover the components of our states of mind is a slow process. All that we can know is what we experience, and such experience, be it mental or physical, is elucidated and made meaningful by analysis.

The major point is that we have no right to suppose that just because a particular state is mental, it is totally clear. We know ourselves no better than we know the phenomena of nature. Indeed, we have

20 Brown, p. 30.
21 Brown, p. 65.
more complete knowledge of certain aspects of the universe than we do of ourselves. As Pope puts it:

Could he whose rules the rapid comet bind
Describe or fix one movement of his mind? 24

It is a trivial truth that we must be conscious of all phenomena of the mind. Yet this certainly does not imply that this consciousness entails full comprehension. Brown's answer is very similar to Plato's solution to Meno's sophistic dilemma. For Plato, we in some sense know these things, yet they must be brought out. For Brown, these phenomena are before us, yet require analysis and directed attention before they are fully appreciated.

It is possible to entertain a concept for an extended period without being conscious of certain components of it. Thus we could have a notion of a cube, without ever articulating to ourselves that it has twelve equal edges, and only realizing this on analysis. No one could then deny that the analysis had yielded new information, yet at the same time, that we were aware before the analysis, in some less complete sense, of what a cube was. In all deductive reasoning, as Brown indicates later, 25 and in mathematics as well, the result is in some sense already in the original statement or premises, and therefore if we entertain the original statement, we entertain the result (or conclusion). Yet we nonetheless feel we have gained something at the close of such reasoning, merely because we were not aware of that particular aspect of the original statement prior to the analysis. 26 Analysis renders clear what we see dimly. The value of analysis is clearly evident in mathematics, which constantly discovers new truths from the same foundations.

The same is true of any mental phenomenon. "In [the] spontaneous chemistry of the mind, the compound sentiment that results from the association of former feelings has, in many cases, on first consideration, so little resemblance to these constituents of it, as formerly existing in their elementary state, that it requires the most attentive reflection to separate, and evolve distinctly to others, the assemblages which even a few years may have produced." 27 The savage, according to Jeffrey, will be conscious of his love of country, but does that mean he knows what went into making that feeling? The peasant may experience beauty as well as the speculative critic and the artist, yet surely no one would

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24 Quoted in Brown, p. 65.
25 Brown, Lecture 51.
26 See Brown, p. 312.
27 Brown, p. 62.

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claim that all have the same understanding of the feeling. This is equally true of all affections:

It would, indeed, be as reasonable to affirm that because we all move our limbs, we are all equally acquainted with the physiology of muscular motion; or to take a case still more exactly appropriate, that we all know the sublimest truths of arithmetic and geometry, because we know all the numbers and figures of the mere relations of which these are the science—as that we are all acquainted with the physiology of the mind, and the number of elements which enter into our various feelings, because we all perceive, and remember, and love, and hate. It is, it will be allowed, chiefly, or perhaps wholly, as it is analytical, that the science of mind admits of discovery; but, as a science of analysis, in which new relations are continually felt on reflection, it presents us with a field of discovery as rich, and, I may say, almost as inexhaustible in wonders, as that of the universe without. ⁵⁸

Further, if all things about mental phenomena were obvious, there would be no conflict in philosophical theories about them and their analysis. Thus, concludes Brown, "to say that [the philosophy of mind] is now complete, because it has in it every thing which can be the subject of analysis, is as absurd, as it would be to suppose that the ancient chaos, when it contained merely the elements of things, before the Spirit of God moved upon the waters of the abyss, was already that world of life, and order, and beauty, which it was afterwards to become." ⁵⁹

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⁵⁸ Brown, pp. 62-63.
⁵⁹ Brown, p. 63.