

# Phenomenalism

Phenomenalism (*phainomenon*) literally means any system of thought that has to do with appearances. The term is, however, usually restricted to the designation of certain theories by which it is asserted: (1) that there is no knowledge other than that of phenomena — denial of the knowledge of substance in the metaphysical sense; or (2) that all knowledge is phenomenal — denial of the thing-in-itself and assertion that all reality is reality is reality directly or reflectively present to consciousness.

(1) The first form of Phenomenalism reaches its full statement in Hume, though its logical development can be traced back through Berkeley and Locke to Descartes. It consists in the theory that substance is merely a relation between ideas; that its existence, as a reality, is incapable of intuitive or demonstrative certainty. The origin of the idea of substance can be explained on the basis of the imagination (Hume). The transient mental, or world, phenomena are related in the imagination to a supposed substrate — a fictitious ground, permanent and inert — which accounts for their appearance. The theory destroys metaphysics and replaces it with epistemology. This is quite in keeping with Hume's Associationism in psychology. The "Treatise on Human Nature" admits ideas and impressions, together with the association of these elements according to the well-known laws (see Association; Psychology); and nothing more than this is given or is necessary to explain whatever is found in consciousness. For substance (as well as causality, etc.) can be explained adequately as the result of ideas that have been frequently present in conjunction. Hume restricted these views to exact experimental science, and safeguarded the ordinary experience of life by asserting that the concepts of substance, etc., are accompanied by a natural belief, or conviction, of their reality arising from feeling. His doctrine was widely accepted in France, and in Germany became the ideological forerunner of Kant's "Kritik". Though at once labelled Scepticism in England, on account of its consequences in natural theology, it is frankly consistent Empiricism quite in place in the evolution of the school of English thought. Where Locke, criticizing the ideogeny of Descartes, and admitting the part of empirical experience in the formation of ideas, left the metaphysical material substance and the metaphysical soul, as realities, uncriticized, Berkeley, developing his position further taught that the supposed existence of the material world was not only indemonstrable, but false. Only spirits, with their ideas and volitions, exist. *Esse* of the material is *percipi*: and the regularity of nature is no more than the order of ideas as produced in us by another spirit, namely, God. Hume's position is but a step further than this. Soul, or mind, as substance, is no more real than body. Here the Phenomenalism of Berkeley becomes logically complete.

Quite consistent with this conception is the statement of Huxley that mind is only the collection of perceptions united by certain relations between them (see Huxley, "Hume, a Biography", II, ii, p.64), or that of Taine, the Positivist, that the Ego is no more than a luminous sheaf, having no other reality than the lights that compose it (see Taine, "*De l'intelligence*", I, pref., p. 11). As we shall show, the opposition of Hume to the concept of substance seems to rest upon a misunderstanding: for he admits (Treatise I, part 4, sect. 1) "something" that is accountable for impressions and "something" that is impressed (body, mind). Huxley seems but to popularize by his simile the conception of the Scotch philosopher, that there is no mind or soul (as substance) apart from its acts. Huxley compares the soul to a republic in which the members are united by their manifold ties and mutual relationships as citizens. This leaves the impressions and ideas substantial and makes of the mind what Scholastics would call an "accidental" unity, and of the substance (soul) a "permanent possibility of sensations", as Mill expresses it. Max Müller has dealt with this notion in his "Science of Thought" (248) where observes that such terms as *possibility* express a common quality that is always of *something*, from which we have abstracted them. To call mind a "possibility" is at the same time to deny that it is a substance and to assert of it a quality belonging to substance, which would seem to be contradictory.

The idealistic standpoint of Hume, together with the doctrine of Positivism, has had so great an influence upon modern thought that it will be well to show in what the misunderstanding, already referred to, consists. As Cardinal Mercier points out ("*Ontologie*", 1902. p. 263), it is incredible that such thinkers as Hume and Kant, Mill, Spencer, Wundt, Paulsen, Comte, Renouvier, Bergson, and others, should have so totally misunderstood the substantiality of things and of the Ego as to profess a Phenomenalism contradictory to the doctrine of the school. On the other hand, it is no less incredible that philosophers like Aristotle, St. Thomas, and the Schoolman, should have "been at fault in their interpretation of an elementary truth of common sense". On the face of it, a misunderstanding seems probable. To what was this due? First, to the doubt cast by Descartes upon the truth and validity of our notions of substance; second, to the observation of Locke,

that we are incapable of directly attaining to substance. If thought could immediately conceive the substance of a thing, we ought to be able to deduce all its properties from that conception. Third, to the explanation advanced by Hume, of the origin of the idea of substance by habit. These three steps form a sequence in the development of idealism. Fourth, to the Positivism, for which this paved the way, as expressed by Comte and Mill. The various schools of thought that may be grouped under Phenomenalism: plain Empiricism, as taught by Hume; Agnosticism, as advanced by Spencer and Huxley; Positivism, Represented by Comte, Littré, Taine, and Mill; all share in the misunderstanding initiated by Descartes with regard to the nature of substance as put forward by the School. The Criticism of Kant may well be included with them, as limiting the object of human knowledge to experience, or phenomenal appearance — although some knowledge as to the noumenon is reached by way of the postulates of the practical reason — the three ideas, soul, world, God. So also may be included the neo-critical movement of Renouvier.

It is important that this misunderstanding should be cleared up. Scholasticism indeed maintains that we have a direct but confused and implicit intuition of substance. We grasp the reality of "something that can exist by itself". "Every perception is a substance, and every part of a perception is a distinct substance" (Hume, *Treatise*, I, part 4, sect. 5). Thus far the Empiricist agrees with the Scholastic. But upon analysis and reflection, the latter maintains, the distinction between substance and accident emerges. What at first appeared to exist in itself, is seen to exist in something else. That something else is then perceived to be substance; and what before was taken for it, is seen to be accident or phenomenon. Further, as against the criticism of Locke, it is to be remarked that Scholastic philosophy does not claim for the intelligence a direct experience of the specific nature of substance. On the contrary, it relies entirely upon induction to establish such nature. To the objection that induction gives us no knowledge other than of the phenomenal, it answers that we know at least this of the specific substance — that it is the subject of certain observed modifications and the cause of certain observed effects. One further point that is interesting in this connexion is the unfortunate attribution of inertia to substance. Paulsen writes that the soul is not inert as is the atom, thereby sharing the opinion of Wundt. This idea of substance as an inert substrate is also traceable to the Cartesian philosophy, which is thus upon two counts the parent of Phenomenalism. It is hardly necessary to point out that Scholasticism does not regard either the soul or the material atom as inert, except by a mental abstraction which is practiced upon the idea of nature (as immanent activity) to reach the simple conception of "that which is capable of existing in itself" (see Substance).

(2) The second form of Phenomenalism may be found in the doctrine of Fichte and of the school that develops his ideas; as well as in certain tendencies and developments of the system of thought known as Pragmatism. With Fichte, the thing-in-itself of Kant disappears as the ground of experience, and its place is taken by consciousness determining itself. That things are and are known implies a double series, real and ideal, for which Dogmatism is incapable of accounting. There is nothing else, as a ground, than a "being posited" by consciousness. But consciousness is aware of itself, knowing is activity, and the nature of this activity. In this conception the real — the functions of consciousness — is paralleled by the ideal — knowledge of these functions. The thing-in-itself is no longer necessary to explain the possibility of knowledge, which here becomes the explanation of the original relation of consciousness to itself. The object has no existence, save for the subject. Fichte's philosophy has much influenced later thought in Germany as elsewhere. The attempt made by Schelling to avoid the contradiction between his doctrine and that of Kant resulted in a form of idealistic Phenomenalism (developed further by Novalis and von Schlegel), and ultimately in a neo-Spinozistic Pantheism. Hegel's Idealism is a logical, or metaphysical, one, in which the only reality (spirit) "becomes" in a process-form of dialectic. In the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis of Absolute mind, the return to consciousness takes the form of phenomena, as spirit becoming apparent to itself. With Schopenhauer, who begins his *"Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung"* with these words: "'The world is my idea':— this is a truth which holds good for everything that lives and knows. . ." it would seem that a transition from idealistic Phenomenalism to modern "scientific" Realism is in progress.

Pragmatism is the most recent form of Empiricism, and as such belongs to the first form of Phenomenalism noticed above; but its psychologic attitude, and the subjectivist developments it displays, make it perhaps more fitting to mention it here. For the system as a whole the truth of reality rests upon the subjective feeling of certainty (see EPISTEMOLOGY). The answers given as to why this should be are because of (1) an a priori constitution of mind, of transcendental order and for all individuals; (2) utility, coherence, or vital experience (James, Leroy, Schiller); or (3) an act of the will (Ribot). The first two accounts of the psychological fact of certainty insensibly give place to the third, which is the last word of psychological Subjectivism, except one: and that one is the theory of Solipsism. It will be observed that this line of

development is one of an elaboration of a voluntaristic form of Phenomenalism. Where Schiller (Studies in Humanism) writes that the basis of fact accepted by Pragmatism depends upon its "acceptance"; "that it (acceptance) is fatal to the chimera of a 'fact' for us existing quite independently of our 'will'", and James (Pragmatism) "Why may they (our acts) not be the actual . . . growing-places . . . of the world — why not be the workshop of being where we catch fact in the making, so that nowhere may the world grow any other kind of way than this?" Solipsism goes but one step further in declaring that there is no absolute Ego nor absolute non-Ego. There is no more than the individual consciousness (cf. von Schubert Soldern). Admitting the principles, an escape from such a conclusion is difficult. The pure experience of Avenarius, the *reine Erfahrung* for you and for me, is theoretic and inevident. Indeed Humanism itself, as advanced by Schiller, seems to be but a kind of Solipsism. The data of thought are immanent, and we only organized them; but Schiller gives no indication of their origin; indeed he says it is absurd to ask whence the given of thought derives. The whole modern school of Immanence belongs to the development of this form of Phenomenalism.

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