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III.—THE METAPHYSICS OF THE TIME-PROCESS.

BY F. C. S. SCHILLER.

I DO not know whether Mr McTaggart's interesting investigation (*Mind*, vol. II. N. S. 490—504, vol. III. 190—207) of the relations of the Hegelian Dialectic to Time (or rather to the Time-process¹) has obtained the attention it merits, but the problem he has so ably handled is of such vital importance, and the attitude of current philosophy towards it is so obscure, that no apology is needed for a further discussion of his results. That those results came upon me with the shock of novelty I cannot, indeed, pretend; for the impossibility of reconciling the truth of the Dialectic with the reality of the Time-process has long been familiar to me as the chief, and, to me, insuperable difficulty of the Hegelian position. I propose, therefore, to take for granted the reluctant conclusion of Mr McTaggart's almost scholastic ingenuity, namely that there is no known way of reconciling the (admitted) existence of the Time-process with the (alleged) "eternal perfection of the Absolute Idea"—at all events until some other commentator of Hegelism has attempted to revise and refute Mr McTaggart's arguments—and I wish to consider what inferences may be drawn from it with respect to the method of metaphysical speculation in general.

Before doing so, however, I ought, perhaps, to say a word on what Mr McTaggart himself inclines to regard as the positive result of his inquiry, the fact namely that he has not been able to show that there is *no* possible synthesis of the Absolute Idea with the Time-process, and that he is consequently "entitled to believe that one more synthesis remains as yet unknown, which shall overcome the last and most persistent of the contradictions

¹ I prefer to use the latter phrase in order to indicate that I do not regard "Time" as anything but an abstraction formed to express an ultimate characteristic of our experience, and in order to check, if possible, the tendency of metaphysicians to substitute verbal criticism of that abstraction for a consideration of the facts which we *mean* when we say *e.g.* that "the world is in Time." Of that tendency, I fear, even Mr McTaggart cannot always be acquitted (*e.g.* pp. 493—5), and it seems to me to be at the root of most of the metaphysical puzzles on the subject.

inherent in appearance." For faint as is the hope which nourishes this belief, and groundless as are the assumptions from which that hope may, I think, be shown to spring, one may yet congratulate Mr McTaggart on the candour with which he distinguishes his faith in the Unknown Synthesis from the cogency of a logical demonstration, and on the diffidence with which he declines to avail himself of Mr Bradley's convenient maxim to the effect that "what may be, and must be, that certainly is." For certainly, if one does not scruple to regard utter ignorance as the possibility that 'may be,' and the subjective need of saving one's own theory as the necessity that 'must be,' there is no difficulty which cannot be evaded by the application of that maxim and no contradiction which cannot be so 'reconciled.' My only fear would be that if such an axiom were admitted at the beginning of philosophy, it would also prove its end. Mr McTaggart, however, is to be congratulated on having eschewed the dangers of Mr Bradley's 'short way with the insoluble,' and on preferring to base his acceptance of conflicting views on the ancient, time-honored and extra-logical principle of Faith. Still more admirable, perhaps, is the robustness of a faith, which overlooks the curious inconsistency of denying the metaphysical value of Time, and yet expecting from the Future the discovery of the ultimate synthesis on which one's whole metaphysic depends. For myself I avow that such faith is beyond my reach. If I were driven to the conclusion that the inexorable necessities of my mental constitution directly conflicted with patent and undeniable facts of experience, I fear I should be beset by a sceptical distrust of the ultimate rationality of all things rather than solaced by the vision of an "unknown synthesis."

But in this case I hope to show that there is no need to respect a faith one cannot share, and that Mr McTaggart has given more to faith than faith demands.

If the contradiction cannot be solved, it can at least be exposed and explained. And unless I am very much mistaken, it will appear that the incompatibility between the assertion of the reality of the Time-process, and its comprehension by any system of 'eternal' logical truth (whether Hegel's or anybody else's) has its origin in very simple and obvious considerations.

Mr McTaggart cannot find room for the reality of the Time-process, *i.e.* of the world's changes in time and space, within the limits of Hegel's Dialectic. But is this an exclusive peculiarity or difficulty of Hegel's position? Is the Time-process any more intelligible on the assumptions of any other purely logical system, as for instance on those of Plato or Spinoza? I think the difficulty will be found to recur in all these systems. And

this shows that it is not accidental, but intrinsic to the *modus operandi* of all systems of abstract metaphysics.

They cannot account for the time-factor in Reality, because they have *ab initio incapacitated* themselves from accounting for Time as for change, imperfection and particularity—for all indeed that differentiates the realities of our experience from the ideals of our thought. And their whole method of procedure rendered this result inevitable. They were systems of abstract truth, and based on the assumption on which the truth of abstraction rests¹. They aimed at emancipating philosophy from the flux to which all human experience is subject, at interpreting the world in terms of conceptions, which should be true not here and now, but 'eternally' and independently of Time and Change. Such conceptions, naturally, could not be based upon probable inferences from the actual condition of the world at, or during, any time, but had to be derived from logical necessities arising out of the eternal nature of the human mind as such. Hence those conceptions were necessarily *abstract*, and *among the things they abstracted from was the time-aspect of Reality*.

Once abstracted from, the reference to Time could not, of course, be recovered, any more than the individuality of Reality can be deduced, when once ignored. The assumption is made that, in order to express the 'truth' about Reality, its "thisness," individuality, change, and its immersion in a certain temporal and spatial environment may be neglected, and the timeless validity of a conception is thus substituted for the living, changing and perishing existence we contemplate. Now it is not my purpose here to dispute, or even to examine, the correctness of that assumption itself. What I wish here to point out is merely that it is unreasonable to expect from such premisses to arrive at a deductive justification of the very characteristics of Reality that have been excluded.

The true reason, then, why Hegelism can give no reason for the Time-process, *i. e.* for the fact that the world is 'in time,' and changes continuously, is that it was constructed to give an account of the world irrespective of Time and Change. If you insist on having a system of eternal and immutable 'truth,' you can get it only by abstracting from those characteristics of Reality, which we try to express by the terms individuality, time, and change. But you must pay the price for a formula

¹ I have in this sentence purposely used "truth" in two senses, in order to emphasize a distinction, which is too often overlooked, between the conceptual interpretation of reality, which is truth in the narrower sense, and the *validity* or practical working of those conceptual symbols, which constitutes their truth in a wider sense. (See below, p. 40.)

that will enable you to make assertions that hold good far beyond the limits of your experience. And part of the price is that you will in the end be unable to give a rational explanation of those very characteristics, which had been dismissed at the outset as irrelevant to a rational explanation. Thus the whole contradiction arises from a desperate attempt to eat one's cake and yet have it, to secure the eternal possession of absolute truth and yet to profit by its development in time! Surely this is *not* a fitting occasion for invoking that supreme faculty of Faith, to which philosophy, perhaps as much as theology, must ultimately appeal?

If these considerations are valid, the idea of accounting for the time-process of the world on any system of abstract metaphysics is predestined to failure, and must be declared mistaken in principle. But there remain two questions of great importance: (1) Do such systems of abstract metaphysics lose all value? (2) Is there any other way of manipulating the time-process so as to fit it into a coherent systematic account of the world?

In answering the first question it will be necessary to supplement the negative criticism of the claims of abstract metaphysics by tracing the consequences of their utter rejection. I have so far contended that no abstract metaphysic could say the last word about the world, on the ground that it was *ex vi definitionis* forced to reject some of the chief characteristics of that world. But if it cannot give us the whole truth, can it give us any truth? Is not the alternative to the rejection of the full claims of Hegelism (and kindred systems) a sceptical despair of the power of the reason to find a clue out of the labyrinth of experience?

Such a plea would not be devoid of a certain plausibility. Stress might be laid on the fact that the fundamental assumption of all abstract metaphysics is the fundamental assumption also of all science, that the whole imposing structure of the 'laws of nature' is formulated without reference to the temporal and spatial environment and the individual peculiarities of the things which 'obey' these laws, and so likewise lays claim to an eternal validity. How then can Metaphysic dare to reject an assumption on which the whole of Science rests? Again, it may be urged that from its very nature philosophy is an interpretation of experience in terms of thought, and must necessarily exhibit the intrinsic peculiarities of human thought. If abstraction, therefore, is characteristic of all our thinking, if all truth is abstract, it would seem that all philosophy must stand or fall with the abstract formulas in which alone our thought can take cognizance of reality, and may not dream of

casting off the shackles, or denying the sufficiency, of the systems of abstract truth which the ingenuity of the past has propounded.

Nevertheless I incline to think that it is possible to steer the human reason safely through between the Scylla of Scepticism and the Charybdis of an Idea absolutely irreconcilable with experience. But to do so it is imperative to define exactly the part played by abstraction in a philosophic account of the world.

Evidently, in the first place, it does not follow that because all truth in the narrower sense (*v. note* p. 38) is abstract, because all philosophy must be couched in abstract terms, therefore the whole truth about the universe in the wider sense, *i.e.* the ultimate account that can be given of it, can be compressed into a single abstract formula, and that the scheme of things is nothing more than, *e.g.*, the self-development of the Absolute Idea. To draw this inference would be to confuse the thought-symbol, which is, and must be, the instrument of thought, with that which the symbol expresses, often only very imperfectly, *viz.* the reality which is "known" only in experience and can never be evoked by the incantations of any abstract formula. If we avoid this confusion, we shall no longer be prone to think that we have disposed of the thing symbolized when we have brought home imperfection and contradiction to the formulas whereby we seek to express it—an accusation which, I fear, might frequently be made good against the destructive part of Mr Bradley's "Appearance and Reality"—to suppose *e.g.* that Time and Change cannot really be characteristic of the universe, because our thought, in attempting to represent them by abstract symbols, often contradicts itself. For evidently the contradiction may result as well from the inadequacy of our symbols to express realities of whose existence we are directly assured by other factors in experience, and which consequently are *data* rather than problems for thought, as from the 'merely apparent' character of their reality, and the moral to be drawn may only be the old one, that it is the function of thought to mediate and not to create. If so, our proper attitude will be this, that while we shall not hesitate to represent the facts of experience by conceptual symbols, we shall always be on our guard against their misrepresenting them, and ever alive to the necessity of interpreting our symbols by a reference to reality. In this manner I conceive that it would be possible to utilize the terms of abstract metaphysics, whenever they seemed to yield useful formulas, without erecting them into fetishes and giving them the entire mastery over our reason. From the tyranny of abstractions there would thus always be an appeal to

the immediacy of living experience, and by it many a difficulty which appals on paper would be shown to be shadowy in the field. And conversely, it would perhaps be possible for philosophy to grapple somewhat more effectively with the real difficulties of actual life.

Nor can I see why philosophers should fight shy of such a procedure. For surely the admission that philosophy is an interpretation of experience in terms of thought does not preclude us from the reinterpretation of our symbols by a reference to experience wherever that may seem expedient and profitable. Why should we commit ourselves to a task which must prove either illusory or impossible, that of the rational deduction of the self-evident? It is true that philosophic explanation came into being because experience is not wholly self-explaining. But to admit this is not to imply that everything requires explanation. For all explanation must set out from certain data, which may either be accepted as facts or considered self-evident, and in no wise necessitate or justify the attempt to explain everything, an attempt which must ultimately derive everything from nothing, by the power alone of an intentionally obscure vocabulary. What the data of such an ultimate explanation of the world should be, admits, of course, of further discussion; but I can see no reason in the nature of philosophy as such why the characteristic of Time should not be one of them. And if by a frank recognition of the reality of Time, Imperfection and Individuality we can reach a deeper, more complete and workable insight into the facts of experience, why should our philosophy be worse than one which is driven to reject them by ancient prejudices concerning the perfections which the world ought to possess?

The abstractions of metaphysics, then, exist as explanations of the concrete facts of life, and not the latter as illustrations of the former, and the Absolute Idea also is not exempt from this rule. Nor is it to a different conclusion concerning the subordination of abstract metaphysics that we are led by the consideration of the first argument adduced in their favour, the fact that all science shares their assumption.

That all science abstracts from the particularity and time-reference of phenomena, and states its laws in the shape of eternal and universal truths, is perfectly true. But this fact will not bear the inference it is sought to draw in favour of abstract metaphysics, and must not be allowed to prejudice the inquiry into the proper method of discovering an ultimate theory of the universe. For in the first place the treatment of its initial assumption by science differs widely from that of metaphysics. Science does not refuse to interpret the symbols with

which it operates: on the contrary, it is only their applicability to the concrete facts originally abstracted from that is held to justify their use and to establish their 'truth.' The mathematical abstractions which enable astronomers to calculate the path of a star are justified by their approximate correspondence with its observed position, and if there were any extensive or persistent divergence between the calculation and experience, astronomers would be quite ready to revise their assumptions to the extent even of changing their fundamental notions concerning the nature of space. But in the case of metaphysics the same principle is not, apparently, to apply. If the Dialectic of the Absolute Idea does not accord in its results with the facts of life, we are not to suspect the Dialectic. It possesses an intrinsic certainty by right divine which no failure can be admitted to impair. If the logical (or rather *psychological*) development of the Idea fails to account for the development in time, we may at the utmost postulate an "unknown synthesis." This *may* be philosophy, but it does not look like science.

In the second place, let us ask *why* science abstracts from the particularity of reality. Not, certainly, because it does not observe it. Nor yet because it ascribes to the deductions from its universal laws a precision which they do not possess. On the contrary, it cheerfully admits that all the laws of nature are hypotheses, represent not the facts but tendencies, are to be used merely as formulas for calculating the facts. But why should we want to calculate the facts by such universal formulas? The answer to this question brings us to the roots of the matter. We make the fundamental assumption of science, that there are universal and eternal laws, *i.e.* that the individuality of things together with their spatial and temporal context may be neglected, not because we are convinced of its theoretic validity, but because we are constrained by its practical convenience. *We want to be able to make predictions about the future behaviour of things for the purpose of shaping our own conduct accordingly.* Hence attempts to forecast the future have been the source of half the superstitions of mankind. But no method of divination ever invented could compete in ingenuity and gorgeous simplicity with the assumption of universal laws which hold good without reference to time; and so in the long run it alone could meet the want or practical necessity in question.

In other words that assumption is a *methodological* device, and ultimately reposes on the practical necessity of discovering formulas for calculating events in the rough, without awaiting or observing their occurrence. To assert this methodological character of eternal truths is not, of course, to deny their validity—for it is evident that unless the nature of the world had lent

itself to a very considerable extent to such interpretation, the assumption of 'eternal' laws would have served our purposes as little as those of astrology, chiromancy, necromancy, and catoptromancy. What, however, must be asserted is that this assumption is *not* an ultimate term in the explanation of the world.

That does not, of course, matter to Science, which is not concerned with such ultimate explanation, and for which the assumption is at all events ultimate enough. But it *does* matter to philosophy that the ultimate theoretic assumption should have a methodological character. To say that we assume the truth of abstraction because we wish to attain certain ends, is to subordinate theoretic 'truth' to a teleological implication: to say that, the assumption once made, its truth is 'proved' by its practical working, by the way in which it stands the test of experience, is to assert this same subordination only a little less directly. For the question of the 'practical working' of a truth will always ultimately be found to resolve itself into the question whether we can live by it.

In any case, then, it appears that scientific knowledge is not an ultimate and unanalysable term in the explanation of things: Science subordinates itself to the needs and ends of life alike whether we regard its origin—practical necessity, or its criterion—practical utility. But if so, the procedure of Science can no longer be quoted in support of the attempt to found our ultimate philosophy upon abstract and 'eternal' universals. If the abstraction from time, place and individuality is conditioned by practical aims, the next inquiry must evidently concern the nature of these practical aims, to which all theoretic knowledge is ultimately subsidiary. And if those aims can be formed into a connected and coherent system, it will be to the discipline which achieves this that we shall look for an ultimate account of the world. Is there then a science which gives an orderly account of the ends of life that are or should be aimed at? Surely Ethics is as much of a science as abstract metaphysics, and if it be the science of ultimate ends, it seems to follow that *our ultimate metaphysic must be ethical*.

Let us consider next what the attitude of such an ethical metaphysic would be to the metaphysical pretensions of abstract universals and the time-process respectively. It seems clear, in the first place, that practical aims, or a system thereof, do not easily lend themselves to statement in terms of abstract universals. For an end or purpose seems to be intrinsically the affair of a finite individual in space and time, and the attempt to regard the timeless, immutable and universal as possessed of ends seems to meet with insuperable difficulties. If, therefore, the ultimate explanation of the world is to be in terms of ends,

it would seem as though it must be in terms of individual ends, realized in and through the Time-process. Nor is there anything repugnant to reason in the conception of an end realized in a time-process that would render it difficult for a teleological explanation to admit the reality of the time-process. On the contrary, if the transition from means to end were instantaneous, the distinction between them would vanish, and lose all meaning. Still less has it been found repugnant either to the reason or to the feelings of men to regard the Time-process as the realization of an end or even of a multitude of individual ends, *e.g.* as a process of spiritual redemption. There is, therefore, perfect harmony between an ethical metaphysic and the existence of individuals in Time and Space, while that existence is found to be irreconcilable with any abstract metaphysical formula.

We must conclude, then, that the method of explaining the ultimate nature of the world by an abstract universal formula, or a series of such, is *not* supported by the methodological use of similar formulas in the natural sciences, which, rightly considered, leads to very different inferences. What compensation then has it to offer us for its inability to take account of many of the chief data which a comprehensive philosophy has to explain? Surely the full reality which has to be explained is the individual in the Time-process. And though it will remain no trivial task to exhibit the rationality of the Real, it has yet become evident that rationality is but one of several attributes to be predicated of Reality, and that a mere rationalism or 'panlogism,' therefore, can never be anything but a one-sided philosophy.

We have to consider next the second question raised (on p. 39) as to whether by pursuing a different method philosophy is able to recognize the reality of the Time-process. And if such philosophic recognition is possible, what is the metaphysical value and methodological bearing of the reality of Time (or rather of the Time-process)? Or is there possibly, as Mr McTaggart suggests (*Mind*, N. S. II. p. 496), "something about Time which renders it unfit, in metaphysics, for the ultimate explanation of the universe"? The prejudice to this effect is no doubt well-founded from the standpoint of a philosophy whose initial abstraction excludes Time. But if we decline to hamper ourselves by a method which fails *de facto* to account for Time and imperfection, while its claim *de jure* had to be disallowed as ignoring the supreme practical limitations under which the whole understanding operates, the case is different. It has already been shown that an ethical metaphysic has no difficulty in conceiving the ultimate end as realizable in the Time-process. And indeed from such a standpoint it is possible

to indicate an explanation even of the Becoming which is so puzzling a characteristic of the Real, and the source of all our conceptions of Time and Change—it may be ascribed to the struggle of finite existence to attain that ultimate end. Instead of being left over as an inexplicable surd at the conclusion of a metaphysical explanation, the Time-process thus becomes an integral part of that explanation, and a fruitful source of inquiry opens out to philosophy concerning its value in the discovery and estimation of ultimate truth. It would be impossible within the limits of this paper to attempt any detailed account of the metaphysical conclusions to which the admission of the reality of the Time-process would lead. Suffice it to say that I am convinced that the system we should arrive at would prove no less coherent and complete than any of the great systems of abstract metaphysics, and that the difficulties which it may at first sight seem to involve are due to an (inconsistent) reversion to the methods of abstract metaphysics.

There are however two points which it seems necessary to emphasize. The first is that a metaphysic of the Time-process will stand in the same relation to the explanation of phenomena by their *history*, as a metaphysic of abstract ideas stands to their explanation by universal laws, *i. e.* the Historical Method will represent the application in science of the metaphysical principle. But while to an abstract metaphysic the Historical Method must ultimately be foolishness, a metaphysic of the Time-process will justify that method by expressing it in a metaphysical, *i. e.* final, form. And this alone would suffice to prove its superiority; for now-a-days we can as little dispense with the explanation of things by their history as with their explanation by universal 'laws.' A philosophy, then, which admits both and vindicates the use of the one, without invalidating the other, (even though it regards its importance as methodological and subordinate rather than as supreme,) is manifestly superior to a philosophy which absolutely rejects one of the most valuable of the working assumptions of science. And if we regard the fact that there is a development of the world in Time as the essence of Evolution, it is obvious that only a theory which accepts this Time-process as an ultimate datum will be capable of yielding a philosophy of Evolution and is worthy of the name of Evolutionism.

The second point concerns the ultimate difficulties which are left over on every known system of philosophy, and form antinomies which are insoluble for the human reason as it stands. Such, on Mr McTaggart's theory, are the existence of change and imperfection, such, in his opinion, would be the beginning of the Time-process on mine. Now in face of these

facts an abstract metaphysic is in an extremely awkward position. If it scorns to excuse its failure by pious phrases concerning the infinite capacity of a non-human mind to solve the insoluble, if it dreads to have recourse to the more impious *ἀργός λόγος* of Mr Bradley, and to postulate an Absolute which 'absorbs,' 'transmutes,' 'submerges,' 'suppresses' and 'reconciles' all difficulties *ex officio*, in a manner no doubt highly satisfactory to itself and Mr Bradley, two alternatives remain. Either the idea that a contradiction is a necessary proof of falsehood must be given up, and one or both sides of the antinomy must be accepted in spite of everything—in which case it is hard to say what weapon would be left to refute the most patent absurdities; or one must hope for such an enlargement of the human reason as will give it an insight into what is at present incomprehensible. For the difficulties in question have been under scrutiny too long to render it credible that any thinkable solution has been overlooked. If, however, a development of the human mind be admitted, the reality of the Time-process, in which that development takes place, can no longer be denied, and abstract metaphysic becomes indebted to it for the means to solve its difficulties. Is it not curious, then, to go on maintaining that the Time-process is unfit to form a factor in an ultimate philosophy?

An evolutionist philosophy on the other hand would not only be entitled, but bound, to await a solution of its difficulties from the secular development of the Time-process which had generated them. For its ultimate appeal is not to the abstract reason but to experience, to the Time-process in which that reason develops. It is consequently an *ignoratio elenchi* to infer that a view leading to an antinomy is false, unless it can be shown that the antinomy is a permanent one. But not only is that impossible, but a solution *ambulando* may be expected on two grounds. (1) Reality, the data of our reasonings, may so change as no longer to suggest the antinomy. For instance, the problem of imperfection would vanish, if reality attained to perfection and not even a memory remained of the imperfect. And (2) the antinomy might be resolved by such a development of the mind as would enable it to see through its present difficulties. As for instance, if we could view the world from the standpoint of Mr Bradley's Absolute. I am aware that many of our present philosophers have a rooted objection to putting their hope in the future; yet it is only in the direction of an abandonment of the prejudice against the reality of Time, that I can descry a future for hope, a future for philosophy and a philosophy for the future.

F. C. S. SCHILLER.