

October 1960

READING 1
ALL GROUPS
TWENTY YEARS AFTER

PREFACE

It seems a good moment to review the Psychological Lectures which Mr. Ouspensky gave in London at a studio in Warwick Gardens and which reached their final form in 1940 – just twenty years ago. If we try to listen with quite fresh minds, we shall find that much of what he said has been completely misunderstood so that only now can we begin to use them as he meant that they should be used.

Let me try to give you a picture of how these lectures took shape. Up to 1934 there had been just a roomful of people studying the System under him; it had been difficult to find him and very few were admitted to these meetings; including a mere half-dozen of those working at Colet Gardens today. But the need for some sane kind of psychology was becoming insistent; and though the threat of war was yet a distant cloud on the horizon, a sense of urgency was in the air. We had many discussions about how the net could be cast wider so that worthwhile people everywhere could be given a chance to study the System and by their knowledge and their questions help us to understand it better.

One day we were told that there would be a course of psychological lectures and that we were to ask any of our friends who might be interested. As each new roomful of people collected so the sequence of ideas was begun afresh. At the beginning there was no set lecture. One of us had to write up on the blackboard the title: *‘Psychology as the Study of Objective Consciousness’*. Questions were encouraged, Mr. Ouspensky’s answers were taken down in shorthand and carefully revised by him. Gradually the course of six Lectures took shape and was printed for private circulation. He declared himself satisfied that about 10% of the people who came to the Lectures would continue to study the System and work to change their Being. By the time the War came that 10% amounted to nearly 300 people and many of you belong to that 10%.

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‘Psychology as the Study of Objective Consciousness’ – how apt a title! I am sure you will agree that this same beginning will give us a very good start for our Autumn work. I propose to quote the most important ideas from these Lectures in Mr. Ouspensky’s words and in the order he chose so carefully, and then give a commentary on how we see them today – ‘Twenty Years After’.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL LECTURES – P. D. OUSPENSKY

1934 – 1940

FIRST LECTURE

I will speak about the study of psychology, but I must warn you that the psychology about which I will speak is very different from anything that you may know under this name.

To begin with I must say that practically never in history has psychology stood at *so low a level* as at the present time. It has lost all touch with its *origin* and its *meaning*, so that now it is even difficult to define the term 'psychology', i.e. to say what psychology is and what it studies. And this is so in spite of the fact that never in known history have there been so many psychological theories and so many psychological writings.

Later on I will give several definitions of psychology, but first we must try to see how psychology can be divided, i.e. whether there are different kinds of psychology and how they can be studied.

Psychology is sometimes called a new science. This is quite wrong. Psychology is, perhaps, the *oldest science* and, unfortunately, in its most essential features, a *forgotten science*.

In order to understand how psychology can be divided, it is necessary to realise that psychology, except in modern times, has never existed under its own name. People – and especially those who represented learning in different periods – have always been very suspicious of psychology and afraid of it. And so psychology has had to use different disguises.

For thousands of years it existed under the name of philosophy. Even quite recently, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, many works of psychology were classified as philosophy. And in spite of the fact that almost all the sub-divisions of philosophy, such as logic, the theory of cognition, ethics, aesthetics, referred to the work of the human mind or senses, psychology was regarded as inferior to philosophy and as relating only to the lower or more trivial sides of human nature.

Parallel with its existence under the name of philosophy, psychology existed even longer in the form of religion. I do not mean that religion and psychology were one and the same thing. But almost every known religion developed some kind of psychological theory and – what is very difficult for us to understand now – sometimes even a certain practice, so that the study of religion very often included in itself the study of psychology.

There are many excellent works on psychology in the religious literature of different countries and epochs. For instance, in early Christianity, there was a collection of books called *Philokalia*, now existing in Greek and in Russian. This is a collection of writings by different authors, used in the Eastern Church especially for the instruction of monks. Later I will refer to the *Philokalia*.

During the time when psychology was connected with philosophy and religion, it also existed in the form of art. Poetry, drama, sculpture, even architecture were means for transmitting psychological knowledge. For instance, the Gothic cathedrals were really treatises on psychology.

Before philosophy, religion and art had taken their separate forms as we now know them, psychology had existed in the form of mysteries, such as those of Egypt and of ancient Greece. Later, after the disappearance of the mysteries, psychology took the form of symbolical teachings, which were sometimes connected with the religion of the period and sometimes not connected, such as astrology, alchemy, magic, and the more modern masonry, occultism and theosophy.

COMMENTARY 1960 – TWENTY YEARS AFTER

During these twenty years, members of our Society have been searching out the psychology that existed in the past in these different disguises.

Section 1. The Philokalia

To begin with, we were fortunate in obtaining from Mount Athos almost the last remaining Russian edition of the *Philokalia* – conveyed by mule to Athens in five massive volumes. The Abbot of the monastery of St. Pantaleimon corresponded with us and sent us additional material until his death. Only a few extracts have been translated and used at our Meetings, and very much remains unexplored. The quality of some of this writing is illustrated in the following quotation:

Therefore a monk's whole attention should thus be fixed on one point, and the rise and circle of all his thoughts be vigorously restricted to it: namely to the recollection of God [in our term – recollection of the Higher Self] as when a man who is anxious to raise on high a dome or cupola must constantly draw a line round from its exact centre, and in accordance with the same standard it gives, discover by the laws of building all the evenness and roundness required. (St. John Cassian)

The *Philokalia* certainly is centred round a definite practical method, that of *continuous internal prayer*; and it is upon the individual success with the use of this method that the level of spirituality at a given monastery has always depended. An account of the struggles of Father Silouan (pronounced Silwān), one of the greatest modern exponents of this method at this same monastery of St. Pantaleimon, is available in his biography now in our Library – *The Undistorted Image*. Father Silouan was exceptionally strong and determined. He reached Mount Athos in the Autumn of 1892 and after spending the first few days in complete quiet he was introduced to the method of continuous internal prayer, and after three weeks had his first partial illumination. His description of the method is now of interest to us:

We know from some of his notes that the words of prayer should be spoken very slowly, one by one, each engrossing the whole being. The entire person focuses into a single point. The breathing changes and becomes constrained, or, to use a better term, secret, lest its 'temerity' disturb the projection and concentration of the spirit. The mind, the heart, the body to its very bones, are all drawn into this one point. (page 39)

It was, however, only after fifteen years of constant mental torture and endeavour day and night that he got his second result, and another fifteen years before he was able to turn his mind *at will* away from temptation. During all this time he was engaged in a head-on conflict, a conflict only made more severe by hard physical work by day, and mental struggle all night, during which he seldom snatched more than an hour and a half of broken sleep, dozing off on his hard chair. Let this confirm for us our recent lesson that a simpler method exists than that of continuous internal prayer, a method possible for the householder and that all inner conflict is unnecessary and avoidable.

Section 2. The Neo-platonists

Then we have explored some of the psychology contained in the Platonic and Neo-platonic Tradition culminating in the *Enneads* of Plotinus and writings of Ficino, leader of the Platonic Academy at Florence. The only hint that we have found of any practical method used by the

Neo-platonists comes in this passage from Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* (Stephen MacKenna's translation, p.17):

Sleeplessly alert – Apollo tells – pure of soul, ever striving towards the divine which he loved with all his being, he laboured strenuously to free himself and rise above the bitter waves of this blood-drenched life: and this is why to Plotinus – God-like and lifting himself often, by the ways of meditation and by the methods Plato teaches in the Symposium, to the first and all-transcendent God – that God appeared, the God who has neither shape nor form but sits enthroned above the Intellectual-Principle and all the Intellectual-Sphere.

'There was shown to Plotinus the Term ever near': for the Term, the one end, of his life was to become Unified, to approach to the God over all: and four times, during the period I passed with him, he achieved this Term, by no mere latent fitness but by the ineffable Act.

To this God, I also declare, I Porphyry, that in my sixty-eighth year I too was once admitted and entered into Union.

(N.B. Plotinus was 59 and Porphyry 30 when they first met.)

From other evidence in the *Enneads* the word 'Meditation' used in the quotation seems to mean what we now call 'Contemplation', namely *thinking* about something – God, Creation, Nature, on the surface of the mind; whereas we mean by 'Meditation' diving to the depths of the mind *without thought*.

Many more examples could be given, but I want now to dwell only on one:

Section 3. The Vedas of India

We have been hearing lately at first hand from a Master of this Tradition about that great stem in India from which so many branches have sprung – namely the study of the Vedas, the most ancient sacred Scriptures known. In his words (the *Holy Tradition*, p.14):

The first chapter of the Vedas describes what to do, how to do, who is worthy of doing what action at what time in what place. All these do's and don'ts of life are contained in the first chapter of the Vedas. The second chapter describes the connection of man with God... All the different types of worship; how to worship which God to get what from him; all these hows and whats. In the field of the superior life, the connection with the higher life of the Universe, this is described in the second chapter. The third chapter – Upanishads they call it – deals with the wisdom aspect of it. How to evolve, wisdom, enlightenment, various aspects of enlightenment, all is contained in the Upanishads. The Bhagavad-Gita is just the essence of the Upanishadic wisdom; as if so many Upanishads are said to be the different cows, the Bhagavad-Gita is said to be the milk of all the cows, the essence.

This third chapter, known collectively as the Vedanta, contains the psychology of the Vedas. Chapter XXII of *Tertium Organum* begins with a discussion of the theoretical aspects of the Vedanta.

But we have come to understand that all the religion of the Vedanta did indeed include a certain *practice*, centred round a certain practical method – a method about which many mistakes were made. One example, taken again from the *Holy Tradition*, shows how easily mistakes arise:

Lord Buddha, 5,000 years ago, gave the essential teaching. Unfortunately his followers interpreted Lord Buddha's teaching in a way not consistent with the Vedas. The teaching of Lord Buddha was just the simple way of life, for realization – do this, do this, do this, and realize the result. He just gave a practical way of life for realization; he didn't enter into the philosophical aspect of life. Unfortunately his followers tried to make a philosophy of his teaching: somehow by mistake they expounded that *zero* is the origin of life – vacancy, void is the ultimate reality. And the results of this went on for 500 years.

We now see how easily this mistake arises in our own experience. In the first stage of Meditation there is a tendency to reach a state of consciousness in which there is only vacancy or void – everything that we have called 'I' has disappeared. This state is replaced by a feeling of peace, happiness and certainty lasting for a few minutes many times in the course of a few months. Patiently we do it. But if we are lucky we may get glimpses of a state beyond that – the state of Cosmic Consciousness. It would be only after sufficient experience of *that* state that a man could make a philosophy of the world. The followers of Buddha did not go far enough – they began to talk and teach before they had fully experienced. Let us not imitate them!

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CONCLUSION

I want you to consider particularly how profoundly the *theory* of psychology must depend upon its successful *practice*. If we are to develop a teaching of 'Psychology as the Study of Objective Consciousness' we must agree upon a practical method which will yield dependable results to anyone who gives it a fair trial, and must agree also to continue until we reach our ultimate goal and avoid the temptation of jumping to premature conclusions. Perhaps it does not matter *which* of all the available methods is chosen by a given group of people. But what *does* matter is that short periods of daily practice of the pursuit of Consciousness should never be omitted because they are worth more than all the theories in the world. We want results – understanding, enlightenment. Go get them each in your own way.

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If one turns over in one's mind all that is here said and all that one remembers about the great Traditions and then asks oneself the question: 'What exactly is meant by the Fourth Way?' is not one forced to a very strange conclusion?

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