

16 October 1967

READING 3

NEW KNOWLEDGE

PART 1

It's very clear indeed that the needs of all of us at the present time divide sharply into two categories. The first is simply to *experience*, to go ahead and enjoy eating peaches, using the methods we have for 'being happy remembering I AM'; and gradually shedding critical thoughts and negative emotions by remembering that 'I AM lives in the hearts of all' as well. Those who feel like this don't want to be burdened with any more knowledge.

But the second kind of need is to *know* more and more, to hunger and thirst for Knowledge of Truth, and to realize Consciousness (in oneself and in the world) that way; to know all about how the peaches grow, and be able to instruct others in the art of cultivating them.

We are told that this organisation should provide for both these needs; that it mustn't attempt by force to combine the two; that the two will merge eventually but not mid-way. One cannot change trains 'en route', only at the junction. Both needs are equally important, and both kinds of people equally valuable. But this material is for those who want to *know* so others need not bother with it.

As pointed out at the end of last week's paper, such a transformation has come over all forms of knowledge in the second half of this century, that any System that keeps the pre-1950 outlook belongs to the 'dark ages'. Since we call ourselves the 'Society for the Study of Normal Psychology', we have to take a new look in the light of today's knowledge at the following passage from Mr. Ouspensky's 3rd Psychological Lecture:

To know oneself – this was the first principle and the first demand of old psychological schools. We still remember these words but have lost their meaning. We think that to *know ourselves* means to know our peculiarities, our desires, our tastes, our capacities and our intentions, when in reality it means to know ourselves *as machines*, i.e. to know the structure of one's machine, its parts, the speed of different parts, the conditions governing their work and so on. We realise in a general way that we cannot know any machine without studying it. We must remember this in relation to ourselves and must study our own machines. The means of study is self-observation. There is no other way and no one can do this work for us. We must do it ourselves. But before this we must learn *how* to observe and *what* to observe. I mean, we must understand the technical side of observation: we must know that it is necessary to observe different functions and distinguish between them, remembering at the same time about different states of consciousness...

(pp. 35–36)

It is this concept of 'machine' which has undergone the transformation; and the newer outlook is summarised in the small book on *Waking Up* which is now in the printers' hands.

PART 2

Before 1950 'the general conception of function within (any) nervous system was based on the picture of the telephone exchange – input coming from sense organ along a chain of neurons to central exchange and out again along another line to the effector organ (i.e. muscles and joints, glands, etc.)'¹

This was a passive, static picture run to death by those biologists who still talk about ‘centres’, ‘reflex actions’ and regard man and animals as predictable bundles of ‘reflexes’ or ‘tropisms’; contrasting strongly with the active, dynamic, changing picture that alone can account for what we observe in ourselves, as well as in other human beings and animals in their natural environment.

Advances along three main lines – electronics, biochemistry and field observations in biology have changed the old picture into that of the ‘*self-governing circuit*’ composed of smaller and smaller circuits and itself part of larger and larger ones; a machine that is, which is at any given time governed by the objective aim or purpose of the organism as a whole or the pattern of its life within the species, and modified all the way through according to the result.

Here is a simple observation (from a ‘machine’ lower in the evolutionary scale and therefore simpler) which is quite sufficient to demonstrate the inadequacy of the reflex theory.

A blackbird picks up a worm in its beak, and, if it is feeding itself, swallows it. This *might* be a purely reflex train of events. But if it is foraging for its family it does not swallow the worm, though on the reflex theory swallowing ought to follow automatically from the stimulus of the worm in the mouth. It keeps the worm in its beak and perhaps hunts for more before taking them back to the nest. The objective aim or ‘purpose’ of the activity controls its detailed course, inhibits the normal swallowing reflex, if reflex it be.²

Here we have the ‘feeding circuit’ modified by a larger, ‘reproductive’ circuit, itself dependent on the recurrent seasons of the year.

From the old ‘telephone exchange’ concept we were quite unable to account for many of the properties of the brain which we know to be true. Here is one example from last summer’s congress of forty research workers with ‘Memory’ as their main topic:³

In the course of the symposium we were often reminded of the principle that anything recorded in the brain must be reinforced by *repetition* if it is to be retained. This is the very basis of conditioning (learning). The brain is a calculating machine that most readily sorts, synthesises and retains events that are repeated. But there are others that are not repeated. In that case the brain can act as an analogy machine, reliving experiences that were too fleeting. It can call them back, repeat them, sort them, and finally record them...

The small make/break circuits give us our short-term memory – we remember a telephone number just long enough to dial it. If we were forced to retain and stuff our heads with the entire maelstrom of faces, figures, names, sounds, tunes, pictures, advertisements etc. to which we are subjected everyday, we should quickly go mad. On the other hand the things which are incorporated by repetition in our long-term memory circuits are extremely difficult to lose; some remain with us all our lives; they are not affected by drugs, or electroshock, and no amount of brainwashing would eliminate them.³

Though a ‘good memory’ can be extremely useful (particularly to artists, writers and speakers), yet Self-realization chiefly requires the expunging of much of the memory luggage we have collected on our journey. Some of the Shankaracharya’s stories (like this one) stress the point:

¹*Foundations of Neuropsychiatry* by Stanley Cobb, Baltimore, Williams & Wilkins Co., 1958. Chapter 1 only – the rest of the book is irrelevant and out-of-date.

²*The Behaviour of Animals*, by E.S. Russell, London, Edward Arnold & Co., 1946, p.12.

³Reported by Claude Edelman, *Réalités*, October 1967, p.80.

A man came to a Teacher to be given the meditation. He was asked first of all to try to recall something he had seen on the way. 'I'm afraid,' said the man, 'all I can remember is a monkey making rude faces in a tree.' 'Well,' said the Teacher, 'go and sit quietly and when you have succeeded in getting rid of the monkey, come and tell me.' After half-an-hour the man returned with perspiration pouring off him and said, 'Whatever I do, the monkey is only getting bigger and bigger – I can't push him out.'

The Teacher said to him: 'Before you learn to meditate you must also learn two lessons: the first is, don't try to "push anything out" of your head or it will repeat, get bigger and last longer. Turn away from it, forget it quickly. The second lesson is that if you have such difficulty in losing one recently acquired impression like that monkey, it will naturally take a long time before the Meditation will dissolve away all the cloud of error you have collected over this and many lives. So be patient.'

PART 3

Although this is a field of exploration still only in its infancy (even in scientific circles), yet the new picture puts us within range of the real Truth that our System (and particularly its symbol of the Enneagram) could convey to us. For it leads to the possibilities expressed in another statement of Mr. Ouspensky's:

Man is a machine, but a very peculiar machine. He is a machine which in right circumstances and with right treatment can know itself as a machine, and having fully realised this in general, he may find certain particular movements in himself, which do not happen by themselves but which can be developed only by special work on himself. By developing these movements he can really become a man, i.e. acquire the capacity *to do*. This is a very long process, and very few, even of those who start successfully, come to any tangible results. But if man remains a machine, he can do nothing. Everything happens to him.

(1st Psychological Lecture, p.7)

Much that used to be ascribed to psychology is found to be within the capacity of this 'peculiar machine'. We will get on quicker if we know more about it and how to use it.

PART 4

To understand better this marvellous nervous equipment that Nature has given us, some of us need to know a little about the basic principles of the 'self-governing circuit'. Last week I appealed to our engineers to come up with a simple description, and this we are grateful to acknowledge. A particularly clear account was sent in by R.T.H. Ellis and will be made available (with comment) in the Library. But a word of warning may be necessary. We, as a Society, are not interested in the building and programming of computer machines and mustn't get submerged in the jargon!

We want to get a simple picture of the problems which the engineers are solving in *their* way, in order to discover how our nervous systems solve the same problems but with living cells and not electrical units – protoplasm, not metals and crystals. It is important for the Society just now, that some people should make this effort to study the 'Natural Laws' which determine our functions, and distinguish them from the 'man-made laws' of computers.

Hence we come to distinguish the 'Observer' (Consciousness in its three aspects) from the machinery observed. At present we are unable to observe in our total ignorance of the machinery.

Current scientific method can say nothing about Consciousness. In the example of the blackbird, (p.76), we can know nothing about its perceptual world, whether it thinks or feels, is happy or unhappy, or conscious of an aim. We can only observe its behaviour from which to learn something about the Creator. Only if we know God in ourselves can we see that God is in the blackbird as well as the mechanism.

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