1902

An history and criticism of associationalism

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A Thesis

presented by the

Boston University School of Theology.

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It is the aim of this paper to give the history, in outline, and a criticism of the subject of Associationalism. Lest we turn out as the Frenchmen, who argued and fought over the color of a chameleon, and then lost on appeal to the animal itself, which appeared of a still different color,-we begin by definition; after which we shall treat the matter in the order suggested in the heading.

Associationalism is a general name used to express the conditions under which representations arise in consciousness. It is also the name for a certain principle of explanation put forward by one school of philosophers to account for the facts of the mental life. This school of thinkers hold that all the source of knowlege possible is experience, whence they are called Empiricists. From the fact that they hold that all our thinking arises from sense data, they are called Sensationalists. By means of certain laws of association(recurrance,etc.) they hold that all our mental life can be explained; whence they are said to be associationalists. The latter name

owes its origin to Locke, who first used the word in the phrase "Association of Ideas".

A Brief History of Associationalism.

Aristotle first enunciated laws of association, and to him belongs the honorof originating the discussion which has raged at intervals in psychological circles ever since. This great thinker enumerated three primary laws,- contiguity in time and space, resemblance, and contariety. We may quote from his words in the "De Memoria et Reminiscentia":"When, therefore we accomplish an act of reminiscience, we pass through a certain series of precursive movements, until we arrive at a moment,on which the one in which we are in quest of is habitually consequent. Hence too, it is that we hunt through the mental train, excogitating from the present, or some other, or from similar or contrary, or co-adjacent. Through this process, reminiscence takes place. For the movements are in these cases sometimes at the same time, sometimes parts of the same whole, so that the subsequent movementis already more than half accomplished". It must be said, however, that these are mere suggestions, and are not followed out to their conclusions.

After Aristotle, the doctrine seems to have received no attention for many centuries. Robertson, indeed, has hunted down fragmentary allusions to it in Zeno the Stoic, and in Epicurus. So also, he quotes St. Augustine as saying in his Book of Confessions", "that the mind when it tries to temember has hold of part and tries to get hold of the other part". Hamilton also is authority that the Spaniard Ludovicus held to the doctrine in some form. But it is evident tnat these men did not have their ideas sufficiently worked out to be of any credit to themselves or of any service to the world..So we pass them by.

The founder of modern associationalism, and by many considered as the real founder of the school in the first place, is Hobbes. In his"Human Nature" and "Leviathan", he propounded the view that our ideas, volitions, and the other property of our mental life, as it is know to us in experience, are connected with bodily activities, out of which they arise. In other words, he holds that sense impressions give the only elements of consciousness, and by their combinations under certain forms, both thought and memory come about. Thus he says in the "Human Nature":"A succession of conceptions in the mind are caused by the succession they had when produced by the senses. Thus our conceptions follow not as we elect them, but as we chance to see and hear such things." Or again,"Conscience is the opinion of evidence". Here we have a large emphasis on the element of contiguity. We shall see more of

Hobbes through his influence on French writers. But before we let him go, we quote once morefrom the "Leviathan", where in the beginning chapter on"Sense", he says,"There is no conception in a man's mind which hath not at first totally or by parts, been begotten by organs of sense" In the third chapter on "The Sequence or Train of Imaginations", he says, "Not every thought succeeds indifferently,but-it shall be something which succeeded the same before".

Locke is the next to influence the doctrine, though his purpose in his writings was metaphysical rather than psychological. His principal contribution is to be found in his, "An Essay on the Conduct of the Human Understanding". He contends that the soul has no original possessions,-innate ideas , in the language of philosophy,- but is like a blank sheet of unwritten paper,-"a tabula rasa". The proof which he offers for this proposition is that all our ideas arise from experience. Simple ideas come first and are the product of two factors,- sensation and reflection. By sensation is meant such ideas as arise from the activity of the bodily activities; by reflection he means the activities of the mind that are called out by the above process. Complex ideas arise out of combination of these elements of thought and form all the complex processes of thought. This is indefinite enough to be sure. Just because it was

capable of such various interpretation, various schools of conflicting views use Locke as an authority, according as they read in this statement that all our ideas come from experience, literally, or allow but a little room for constructive activity on the part of the mind itself. We shall see something of this divergence, later. The line which we care principally to pursue is in the direction of sensationalism, through Berkeley and Hume.

Berkeley is a pure empiricist. It was his contention that the sensuous ideas were the only thing possible to consciousness. Thus he says, in his"New Theory o f Vision #25,"That one idea may suggest another to the mind, it will suffice that they have been observed to-gether without any demonstration of the necessity of their co-existence, or so much as knowing what it is that makes them co-exist". Thus he denied any constructive activity on the part of the mind itself, cloth- this idea in the denial of any abstract ideas on the part of the mind. As an idea can copy nothing but an idea, and all arise from original sense impressions, it is by a combination of these, or by reproduction, that the body of our knowlege arises.

Hume accepted this work, and carried it out to its full conclusion. Inhis"An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding", in section 2, "Of the Origin of Ideas", he says;"We divide all the perceptions of the mind into two classes, distinct by different degrees of force and vivacity. The less forcible are called thoughts or ideas; but all the more lively perceptions, as when we see or hear or feel, or love or hate, or desire or will, these we call impressions. All the creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting or diminishing the material afforded us by the sense and experience". Instead of the terminology which we found in Locke, of sensation and reflection, or of outer ot inner, he thus created a new terminology, and made all ideas "original" or "copied", (an impression or an idea). All ideas are thus fainter impressions, and ideas that can not be so represented, must be regarded as mere words. By impressions, was meant not only the elements given in outer experience, but also those given in inner experience. Inother words, the first hand material of the sense and of reflection, he made to be impressions. To quote him again, "But admitting these terms, impressions and ideas, in the sense above explained, and understanding by innate, what is original or copied from no precedent perception, then we may assert that all our impressions are

innate and our ideas are not innate". With this as a basis, he went on to explain the mental life as due to three great laws,- contiguity in time and space, resemblance, and cause and effect. Compared with the three laws of Aristotle, before noticed, we see that he has omitted contariety, and has added cause and effect. These principles are for him the sufficient explanation of the mental life. He frankly denies that there are any general ideas, instead of halting between two opinions as did Berkeley, who said that there were and that there were not general ideas. His doctrine of time makes him say that there are no "compound impressions". Yet he allows that an idea may be abstract, avoiding any distinction between feeling and conception, by treating the"consideration" of the felt thing as if it were itself the feeling. He secures uniformity of nature, not from sequence of feelings, as one might exspect, but in exspectation as determined by habit. This, in brief, is Hume's position. It is the simplest and most comprehensive statement that the doctrine has ever received. We might almost stop here in the summary of the history, he has so completely expessed the doctrine, and so little that is original has been added since. It will be necessary, however, to know the lines of thought it took in becoming what it is to-day.

This too great multiplication of the laws broke down Stewart' work. His master, Reid, in his "Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man", made sport of Stewart's divisions, and said that but one law is necessary,- that of habit, But as Hamilton has said, we can as well explain habit by association, as association by habit.

W. Hamilton in the famous appendices to Reid's works, offered trenchant criticisms, and suggested four principles which he thought were dominant in the mental life. These are; 1.Association, or co-suggestion,2. Repetition, or direct resemblance, 3. Redintegration, 4. Preference.

The rock on which this school breaks is their view that all philosophy is to be determined by the psychological point of view and by no other. Whatever is given in this way is accepted by them, as "self evident truth", and the sum total of all such is "common sense".

The French School.

It would be hard to imagine a much greater contrast than the French school offers to the Scottish school. In the former, associationalism received its baldest and most brutal expression. It was indeed more than an "Enlightenment", that it was baptized in,in France.

Condillac was perhaps its most representative figure. In his "Traite de Sensations", he makes the remarkable comparison of the statue, which devoid of anything but the capacity of receiving sensations, by the various excitations which it receives does develope a mental life. No abiding mental life is at all needed here. Sensations by their mere conjunction with each other,bring about in conscoiusness a knowlege of their relation to each other and to the mental self..It will not be necessary to our purpose to relate in detail how out of these elementary sensations, and the perceptions to which they give rise, he deduces the whole machinery of the mental life. It is clear, however , that it is all due to these sensat ions, and that with no aid from an activity on the part of the mind itself.

Lamettrie carried this doctrine out to its materialistic conclusions. All psychic activities he finds sufficient explanation for, in the mechanical processes of the brain. There is properly no "mind", but only brain. Thoughts then are due to

movements in the brain.

Diderot carried out this thought still more in detail. In the "System de la Nature", he works out the genetic processes of thought by a detailed scheme of motions in the nerves.

Cabanis goes one step farther and finds thoughts due not to movements in the brain, but to chemical changes.
Destutt de Tracy left his imprint by the creation of the name "Ideology", to designate this line of thought. This is enough of the "Encyclopaedists".

Before we leave the French school,we need to note two more men whose work took a better course. They are Bonnet and Rosseau.

Bonnet held that the single fact of the unity of consciousness was sufficient to disprove the extreme views of the "Encyclopaedists". He held that the mental mechanism was but the channel through which the mind manifested itself.
Rosseau accepted this principle of unity, and dependence on the bodily mechanism. For him, however, the feeling of individuality, the unshaken conviction that it was he through all the various stages through which he passed,- this was his addition to the total disproof of crude sen sationalism.

The English School.

In our treatment of the English school, we are obliged to select a few of the most representative men. Thus we pass over with no word Peter Brown, Tooke, and in a more recent period certain ones as Belsham, Combe, Harriet Martineau, etc.

Eleven years after Humes great work "Human Nature", came Hartley's "Observations on Man". In this work he set out to try to correlate thoughts with movements in the brain. As he was a physician by profession, he thought he was to do wonders by the study of the vibratory movements of the nerves. He carried it to an exreme, however, for his followers dropped his views and re-acted from them. It is to him that we owe the introduction of the word associationalism into common use. We quote one of his sentences;" Any sensations A, B, C, by being associated with one another a sufficient number of times, get such power over the corresponding ideas a, b, c, etc., that any one of the sensations A, when impressed alone, shall be able to excite in the mind b, c, etc., the ideas of the rest. "

Joseph Priestly carried on Hartley's work, but took a still more materialistic turn. He advocated the giving up of the distinction between nerve processes and thought, and the surrender of psychology to nerve physiology. He let go any abiding mental self.

Thomas Brown, for the application of the theoty of association to the field of sense perception, and for his new terminology of suggestion instead of association(because it avoided any suggestion of previous relations) has a place in the history of this movement. He also brought reminiscenceand imagination within the range of the principle.

James Mill approached the problem from the psychological point of view, in his "Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind". For him the fundamental law is that of frequency. Upon frequency and vividness of impression, he thought the strength of the association lay. Into this he tried to resolve the more commonly accepted laws of similarity and contrast. His language on the combination of these mental states may be quoted; "Some ideas are by frequency and strength of association so closely combined that they can not be seperated; if one exists, the other exists along with it in spite of whatever effort we may make to disjoin them".

John Stuart Mill is perhaps as famous as any other exponent of the theory of recent years, unless it be Mr. Spencer. He approached the problem from the point of view of logic, in his"System of Logic". In this he seeks to explain the objective conditions of knowlege by reference to the associational theory. In the "Examination of the Philosophy of Sir W. Hamilton", he

gives the theory philosophical standing. He thought to make the associations"inseperable"by making them cumulative in the race, either as hereditary latent intelligence, or as nervous connections.

Alexander Bain has the distinction of having greatly enlarged the psychological point of view, and broadened it as far as our generation is likely to carry it. He holds to both similarity and contiguity as distinct principles.

Herbert Spencer is the last contributor whom we have need to mention. As one could guess he approaches the problem from the view point of his all illuminating theory of evolution. Though a prolific writer upon it, he has left no very definite addition to the literature of our subject. He represents a return toward a more materialistic, and physical explanation of the mental life. His only law for the mental life is that sensations cohere with their like in past experience. So contiguity,etc., are for him unnecessarry and cumbersome details.

This in a brief way is the history of associationalism. We have omitted to speak of the Germans, as Wolf and Lambert, because their views are more or less complicated with other problems, and those that we have set forth are quite sufficient to give us a fair insight into the theoty and the way in which it has come to be what it is, This makes a fair basis for criticism.

A Criticism of Associationalism.

In our criticism of the position of the associationalists, we shall offer words upon the main position, which is at the base of the theory, under all these manifestations that we have traced. Incidentally we shall have occasion to refer to some of the details, which we have noted,- and have our vengeance upon them. It will not be our purpose though to follow each of the details we have enumerated to offset them. The general argument will be quite sufficient to our purpose.

The decisive difficulty in associationalism is that it makes the mind passive in knowlege. In this theory the mind begins as an unwritten sheet of paper,"a tabula rasa", and all that comes to it is impressed upon it from without. Thus, we have seen Hobbes made all ideas have their origin in the activity and mechanism of the senses. Locke invented the term "tabula rasa", and thought that all ideas arose out of experience, the complex out of the simple. Berkeley held that particular sensuous ideas exist and that abstract ideas are a fiction. Hume under his new terminology of impressions and ideas held the same truth as we have seen and gave to it its clearest expression We have also seen how the French school carried this to making

the brain secrete thought. Here then is the insuperable difficulty in the theory; it makes the mind passive not active in knowing. It is necessary that we somewhat enlarge upon this thought, to give adequate reasons for the faith that is in us, and to shew the utter impossibility of even the simplest sensation arising, without the constructive activity of an abiding mental self.

A sensation as such, affects only the sensibility. Before it can be anything for thought, it must be worked over into rational and mental forms. Four facts reveal this activity of the mind in thought. They are as follows;1. A sensation can have no unity unless it is given under the temporal form of an abiding mental self. Without this we should have but a perishing flow and flux in the sensibility. The sensations would come and go and even the front end of one of themwould know, could know absolutely nothing of the rear of itself. 2. Recurring experiences are possible only on the plane of the universalizing intellect. To have the impression of this paper three times is to make of it three papers, unless these three actions can be grasped by the logical unitary intellect and so synthesize the three impressions and make them one. 3. The interpretation of impressions reveals the same activity. Impressions left to themselves are absolutely nothing. They must be worked over into mental forms

4. A reference to the judge ment makes this yet more clear. The "mind" erects "the special to me", into "the common to all" and makes its thought universally valid. No one knows how it does this, but there can be no doubt but that it does. This is explicable only on the supposition of an active mind. This objectivity of thought, which means not so much metaphysical existence as validity, is the complete overthrow of associationalism. For a sensation produced from without can never be anything but a sensation , and there can be only associated sensations, but never the sensation of association.

A word as to the general conditions of thought makes the contention yet more clear. The subjective condition is that there can not be the least judgement, unless there be an abiding unitary self which can grasp and hold within itself, two sensations and so make a comparison. Again, the logical condition, by which our conceptions have fixed meanings, is troublesome to the associationalists. But the objective condition, whereby a rational and systematic connection is provided among the elements of that independent order which thought must assume, to make objects of thought and not mere mental events, is entirely unexplainable by associationalism. From a consideration of the unity of a sensation, of recurring experiences, of the interpretation of impressions, and of the conditions of the judgement, we conclude that the mind knows only what it thinks for itself. In other words, the mind is active in knowlege,- a fact which

overthrows the basal claim of associationalism.

The associationalists have always tried to make a way around the difficulty mentioned by trying to get sensations to recognize each other. Thus we saw Locke getting complex ideas out of simple ones; Hume handling his impressions and ideas; and so we might go through the list.. As the proposition gets into philosophy, it takes the form of declaring that abstract thought and the categories can be derived from experience by the process of abstraction. Leibnitz showed, however, that "eternal truths" inhered already as involuntary relating forms within sense experience, to be raised and brought into clear consciousness on experience. Kant completed this work , and showed that this virtual innateness amounts to this,- that these metaphysical truths lie in the soul as the laws of its activity, and enter into active function on experience, and then become the object and content of the knowlegeof the understanding. Kant's contention seems to be the truth. The categories can not be derived from experience. They have been so thought to arise by the associationali ts, but they really underlie experience, and make it possible. Inasmuch as they are reached by abstraction from the experience which they make possible, it is not strange that they should be confused with experience, and be thought to be derived from it. Our reflections compel us to

set aside, however, the associationalists claim as to their origin, which makes another bad hole in that theory.We conclude then, from the above considerations, that the mind is active and constructive in knowlege, and that the evasion that the associationalists resort to by trying to make the sensations recognize each other , is futile, and can by no means be maintained.

A reference to the temporal form also puts the theory into a warm place. Sensations occur in succession, and so are known in succession, and thus are supposed ao be related in succession, and to recur in succession. But succession in experience is not experience of succession; indeed the one destroys the other. There can be no time element in consciousness. If we are to have any experience of succession, the mind must first give the temporal form to the experience, and by relating its objects under the temporal form, make the distinction of past and present possible. In order, then, to have any knowlege of succession, there must be first the organizing activity of the mind to give it the temporal form.

The notion of a mechanical system also underlies the position of the associationalists. We have seen that it assumed this position in its crudest forms among the Encyclopaedists of France. But the tendency of the entire school is to think of thought under mechanical terms, and to make thoughts determined by mechanical forces. Thus one of this school of our own day has a chapter in his famous psychology, on"The stream of Consciousness". If one took this too literally, he might get into trouble and slip off the bank, if indeed he could find a thought bank. Here then as "Aids to Reflection", we point out such facts as;

1. Objects, when they come to-gether, as for instance a couple of balls, are so subject to laws that one can determine their direction both of motion and of force. But no one ever yet ahs got hold of a thought, to weigh it and to calculate its force and direction.

2. A mechanism has to have space, and to be in space; but thoughts are not spatial, and do not exist in space.

3. If all our thoughts are but the impression of an outer order upon us, and we have no way of determining that order, then , of course, there is no freedom of the will. More than that, there is no trustworthiness of the reason. Truth and error exist on the same foundation, the one with as good a right to have its way as the other.

4. It might be well to ask if it is not a fluid that the brain secretes(comparable to bile, if you please?) ? But this is a long ways from thought.

A little reflection on these facts is like a summer shower.

The conclusion of the whole matter is(1) that the mind can not be passive in knowlege, and (2)that ideas can not have attractive or repulsive forces in themselves, whereby they move or seperate; but that all their movements, so far as they are due to volition, result from the mental tendency to reproduce past forms of activity, when some factor of those forms is given. This is the truth in association. That there is this much of truth no one can doubt, so it seems to me. As a law of proceedure if you do not hypostasize the law, it has its place in the explanation of the mental life.

Association is more than this,however. A simple experience alone has little suggestive power. There must also be added such factors as "the interest, the attention, the general current of thought, and type of feeling, and our physical conditions." Thus alone is explained, how beyond the real order in which the sensations occurred, there is the added play of odd ideas, which really spring from our own past mental life. Here we may rest the discussion.

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