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The Interpretation of Religious Experience.[1]

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The public philosophical career of Professor Watson dates from the publication of his first work, *Kant and his English Critics*. This was published in 1881. Ever since that time he has been busy and has written many works which have taken a high place in the literature of philosophy. He has won special eminence as an interpreter of Kant. He has brought Kant within the reach of English students, first by his admirable work *The Philosophy of Kant as contained in Extracts from his own Writings*, and second by the work *The Philosophy of Kant Explained*. These are works of abiding merit. Though one sometimes feels that Professor Watson interprets Kant from the standpoint of Hegel, and sometimes makes Kant speak from a point of view that he never reached, yet on the whole one obtains from the works of our author help towards the understanding of Kant as regards his own system, and towards the understanding of his place in the evolution of philosophic thought. As to his own proper contribution towards philosophy, the most significant of his works until now is *The Philosophical Basis of Religion*, which in a measure is an anticipation of the Gifford Lectures. He has written other works also, notably his contributions to Ethics and to the history of philosophy, and numerous articles in philosophical journals. Thus, when he was appointed Gifford Lecturer by his Alma Mater, he had a high position as a philosophical writer, and his lectures were awaited with expectation. As for ourselves, we say at the outset that we have been diligent in our study of his works from the beginning, and they lie in array before us. We admire his vigorous writing, his wide knowledge of the history of philosophy, his effective advocacy of idealism, and his vigorous criticism of Hedonistic theories. Agreement on many points we felt as we read his works, but whether we agreed or disagreed we always felt that we lay under a heavy obligation to his clear thinking and his vigorous presentation of his own view. Where we began to part company was when we read his work on the *Philosophical Basis of Religion*, but even there and then our dissent was modified by the reflexion that he was writing, not on religion as a whole, but only on the philosophical bases of it.

It was possible to supplement his view by the insertion of factors and phenomena which he had apparently forgotten. Nor did the account of religious experience given in that work appear to us adequate or sufficient. So we waited with patience for the appearance of his Gifford Lectures. We hailed with gladness the title of the Lectures. It is a great title, 'The Interpretation of Religious Experience.' It covers the whole ground. It is no longer the philosophical basis of religion that we have to study, it is the whole field of religious experience. We do not find, however, any advance on the former work. He has still the same inadequate view of religion, the same tendency to regard it as the other side of philosophy. This attitude is indeed common to all idealists, and it affects the whole estimate of religion formed by them. Philosophically one finds that the one is as necessary to God as God is to the world. We find also that God is nothing for Himself, that the ultimate of thought is the whole, and that God, man, and the world are only aspects of the whole. Dr. Watson has his own peculiarities of statement and of exposition, but the underlying principle of exposition is that common to idealism.

We cannot withhold our admiration and appreciation of the ability of the work, of its cogent reasoning, of its acute dialectic power, of its extensive knowledge, and of its incisive criticism of opposing systems. It is a notable production from every point of view. Whether we have regard to the historical or to the constructive part, it is equally worthy of admiration. Yet it must be said that the historical part is more a history of philosophy than a history of the interpretation of religious experience. He takes a wide survey of the history of thought in matters which certainly border on religion, yet the survey is conditioned by the theory of religion which he has formed.

[1] *The Interpretation of Religious Experience.* The Gifford Lectures, delivered in the University of Glasgow in the years 1910–12, by John Watson, LL.D., Professor of Moral Philosophy in Queen's University, Kingston, Canada. Glasgow: James MacLehose & Sons; 2 vols., 10s. 6d. each.

It is a selection from the history of human endeavour to understand himself, the universe, and God, but the principle of selection is drawn from the speculative scheme brought to it by Dr. Watson. Nor do we find that it is adequate to the purpose set forth in the title of the book, except on the supposition of the truth of Dr. Watson's constructive view of religion. We do not regard his account of the Hebrew, or of the origin and character of the Christian religion, as true or adequate. And there are names in the history of religion of no slight importance which do not appear in his historical survey. The historical part is of great value as a contribution to the history of philosophy, it is of less importance as a contribution towards the interpretation of religious experience.

As to the constructive part, we are in the same divided state of mind, and feel difficulties like to those present to us as we studied the historical part. We have learned a great deal from him as we read his lectures. We are at one with him in his criticism of all forms of materialism, and we feel that the principle of his criticism is not dependent on our acceptance of his absolutism. No doubt he contends for a concrete absolute. The concluding sentences of the second volume may be quoted. 'No doubt if we conceive the ultimate principle as one that abolishes all the self-activity or freedom of finite beings, the result must be, not indeed a mechanical conception of things, but an Absolute of which nothing definite can be predicated. But such an Absolute is at the opposite pole from the Absolute for which I have been contending. The former excludes, while the latter includes, all differences. The one denies that our intelligence can define the ultimate nature of reality, the other declares that in spirit or self-consciousness we reach the idea that makes all others intelligible: the first denies the self-activity of man, while our view maintains that without self-activity man could not exist at all. It thus seems to me that with the removal of these misconceptions, it becomes obvious that the religious interests of man can be preserved only by a theology which affirms that all forms of being are manifestations of a single spiritual principle in identification with which the true life of man consists. Living in this faith the future of the race is secured. Religion is the spirit which must more and more subdue all things to itself, informing science and art, and realizing itself in the higher organization of the family, the civic community, the state, and ultimately the world, and gradually filling the mind and heart of every individual with the love of God and the enthusiasm of humanity.' It is a consummation devoutly to be wished, and we are glad that the author was able to finish his courses of lectures with such a hopeful view. We feel that on his system the hope is not likely to be realized.

Apart from its reference to religious experience, we have some difficulties in accepting the idealist account and interpretation of experience in general. Our main difficulty is that when one accepts the principle of self-consciousness as the ultimate and the highest principle of explanation that can be used, how can it be used in order to get the self? Granted that the unity in distinction of subject is fundamental, and that all experience, as we know it, is under that form, how do we get beyond the self, and reach other selves, or reach objectivity at all? This is the difficulty which has beset all attempts to explain the universe on the principle of self-consciousness. The whole of the idealistic scheme of things is a splendid achievement from the point of view of one self. The great achievement of Hegel is splendid as an account of the process in which the self, passing away from indistinct experience, on to more complete articulation of its experience into definite principles, at length arrives at complete self-consciousness, and to complete self-mastery. But in that account it is assumed that this account of the evolution of self-consciousness is also a complete account of the evolution of the universe. The analysis of self-consciousness easily led to a victory over the old dualism of mind and matter, and over all other dualisms of a similar order. But in that victory it was brought face to face with a new dualism, namely, that between one self and another self, or between self and society. How does it surmount that new dualism? Usually we are led away from the story of the evolution by which the self reaches complete self-consciousness to a study of the means whereby the self is able to realize itself. The ground is shifted, and we obtain a discussion of society, of the origin of the individual within society, of the ways in which society equips its children for the warfare of life, —in art, science, philosophy, language, and so forth—and we are told that the individual can

realize himself only in society. All this is very true and very trite, but to what purpose are we told all these truisms? For one thing it helps to obscure the issue. The issue is, How can a history of the evolution of the self, under the rubric, subject-object, help us to unlock the mystery of the universe? It does not help us to have a picture of the achievement of many selves working in harmony, and a description of the work of what is called the 'objective spirit' if we are not shown the bearing of it on the evolution of self-consciousness as the key to the mystery of the universe. Can the passage from the individual self with which idealism begins to the multitude of selves which the second line of thought indicated above be harmoniously taken? Briefly taken, idealism says, subject and object are correlative, every object implies a subject, and *vice versa*; therefore the universe considered as object implies a subject, and a subject great enough to be equal to its mighty task. But there are many steps between, and these are neither explicitly taken nor lucidly explained. We submit that it is not harmonious thinking to start with the one self, and then to pass suddenly to the co-operation of many selves, without an examination of the process of how the experience and the method of the one self, which, as it is all that has been examined, can become the common experience of the many selves which is presupposed in art, science, and so on, and shown to have been operative in the evolution of the one self. The antithesis of the self and society has only been avoided, this dualism remains. The master himself brings us face to face with this antithesis, and he leaves us there. 'The idea of a unit or a One is, to begin with, something wholly abstract: these units get a still deeper meaning when they are expressed in terms of Spirit, since they are characterised as persons. Personality is something which is essentially based on freedom; freedom is its first, deepest, most inward form, but also its most abstract form as the freedom which proclaims its presence in the subject by saying, I am a person, I exist for myself. This is isolation pure and simple, a condition of pure reserve.

'When therefore these differences are defined thus, and each is taken as a unit, or in fact as a person, owing to the infinite form according to which each moment is regarded as a subject, the difficulty of satisfying the demand of the Idea that these differences should be regarded as differences which are not different, but are purely one, and that this difference should be abolished, appears to be still more insurmountable.

'Two cannot be one: each person has a rigid, reserved, independent, self-centred existence. Logic shows that the category of the unit is a poor category, a wholly abstract unit. But when we are dealing with personality, the contradiction seems to be pushed so far as to be incapable of any solution: still the solution is contained in the fact that there is only one person, and this threefold personality which is posited merely as a vanishing moment, expresses the truth that the antithesis is an absolute one, and is not to be taken as an inferior antithesis, and that it is just exactly when it has got to this point it abolishes itself. It is, in short, the nature or character of what we mean by person or subject to abolish its isolation, its separateness.

'Morality, love, just mean the giving up of particularity, or of the particular personality, and its extension to universality; and so, too, is it with the family and friendship, for there you have the identity of the one with the other. Inasmuch as I act rightly towards another, I consider him as identical with myself. In friendship and love I give up my abstract personality, and in this way win it back as concrete personality. It is just this winning back of personality by the act of absorption, by the being absorbed into the other, which constitutes the true nature of personality' (Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion*, vol. iii. pp. 24–25).

Such is the statement of the dualism between the individual and society as it presented itself to Hegel, and such is his way out of the difficulty. It appears to us that he has not overcome the difficulty; he has evaded it. What his argument would require, nay what his system requires, is to discover a consciousness of the community to which love, morality, and so on, would be present, and to confront this object with a subject equal to the strain. He says nothing of this consciousness save in vague and metaphorical terms. Inasmuch as I act rightly towards another, I consider him identical with myself. So be it; but the argument requires that the two should now have common consciousness, and the separate consciousness ought to be abolished. There is thus this great hiatus in the ascent from self-consciousness, as it exists in the individual subject we know, upwards to that absolute self-consciousness which

is subject to the universe as object. It would seem that the idealistic philosophy ought to do its work over again.

As it is with the disciples' master, so it is with his disciples. They all ignore this difficulty. Hegel says in his *Logic* (Sect. 48, Wallace's translation), 'Every actual thing involves a co-existence of opposed elements. Consequently to know, or, in other words, to comprehend an object, is equivalent to being conscious of it as a concrete unity of opposed determinations.' It is profoundly true, as far as regards the world with which we are in interaction; for any object in the world, and the world as a whole consists of elements which exist only as they are related, all these antinomies have been overcome by thought, and the knowing self has been able to hold the object together, the opposition notwithstanding. But there is one field of operation of the conscious mind in which it finds itself under different conditions altogether. We have to think of a different kind of unity. There is an experience alongside my experience into which I cannot penetrate. That self has its own experience, of which by certain signs I may be aware; but that other self thinks its own thoughts, enjoys its own life, and, while we have a consciousness of common aims, hopes, and fears, yet we have not a common consciousness. But each subject is a universal intelligence. Well, that makes the idealistic synthesis all the harder to understand. Dr. Watson's solution of the antinomy, a solution which is often expressed in these lectures, is as follows: 'Self-conscious individuality is the world of spiritual life, which assumes the form of the moral life and the order of society. Freedom is necessarily involved in morality. To be free is not to lead an isolated life, but a life which is most perfectly identified with the ends that reason prescribes. A community of self-conscious individuals, all recognising that each must be a self, and that what is demanded of one is demanded of all under the same conditions, is freedom, because no subject can be free that does not recognise the claims of every subject as equal to his own, and his own as equal to the claims of others. The moral life is thus essentially a social life. Action which proceeds from such a regard for oneself as is inconsistent with due regard for others, is not moral. Thus there is no opposition between egoism and altruism, such as is sometimes affirmed. To realise myself I must attain that which is best for me: but that which is best for me is that which is best for all other selves as well. Thus morality involves the transcendence of immediate impulse, and the setting up of laws that are permanent and universal, existing as it does only through the realisation in the individual of universal self-consciousness.' We read this paragraph, as we have read much in these volumes, without dissent. We agree with it all, and in fact think highly of it. But the leap upward and forward, in the last sentence, took our breath away. Yet we ought to have expected it, from many passages in the lectures. But nowhere have we found a sufficient justification of the statement that morality exists 'only through the realisation in the individual of universal self-consciousness.' The argument of the paragraph would only justify the assertion that a community of self-conscious individuals should itself be self-conscious. Indeed, Hegel goes often far on the way towards this assertion, and his doctrine of the State seems to involve it. Dr. Watson's argument would seem to need it as well, as a step on the upward path towards a universal self-consciousness. For all that he sets forth in the foregoing paragraph can be maintained without that which is added in the concluding sentence. The passage from the individual self to a multitude of selves cannot be taken by the bridge set up by Hegel, and supported in his own way by Dr. Watson. For though the principle of self-consciousness is the highest category we can use, it is impossible by its exclusive use to rise higher than the self. So idealists, consciously or unconsciously, take refuge in considerations similar to those contained in the passage quoted from Hegel, and in the paragraph from Dr. Watson. It seems to be illegitimate without discussion to extend the principle of self-consciousness which undoubtedly holds together the elements of self and not-self in unity to the inclusion of self and other selves in a similar unity. Experience is possible because the self is the ground of all experience. But the opposition of subject and object takes on another colour when the opposition is between one self and another. Here we observe that Hegel and Dr. Watson bring in the impersonal as a bond of unity. But when they do so they have ceased to use the formula of self-consciousness.

Thus we are not able to follow the absolute idealists in their swift ascent to the universal self-

consciousness. And we do not regret it much, because the universal self-consciousness is only a poor and barren category for that which men call God. Even Philosophy as the ultimate interpretation of experience cannot long dwell in contentment with it, and religion must have something greater far than this. Had we space we would try to point out how much of religious experience finds no place in this interpretation of it. Nor do we find that Dr. Watson is always fair in his criticism of other interpretations. We have no interest in defending Deism, nor any other of the *isms* which are criticised by Dr. Watson. We find that Theism is not touched by any of his criticisms. But even his criticism of Deism is somewhat inept, and certainly his criticism of the doctrine of creation is open to criticism. The difficulty involved connected with this view is insuperable. In the first place, it involves the contradiction that 'God is infinite before the creation of the world, and is no more than infinite after its creation.' At first we put this down as a philosophical ineptitude. But it occurs again and again in the course of these discussions. We do not know what the author means when he applies quantitative measures to God, or how he can apply such measures to spirit. But quantitative measurements can apply only to material things, and cannot be applied at all to Spirit. If God is Spirit, and Dr. Watson says so, His infinitude is there irrespective of the world, and the existence of the world has no relation to His infinitude, unless we hold that matter limits spirit, as matter limits matter. We are not afraid to defend on philosophical grounds the sublime saying, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.'

We intended to notice the way in which Dr. Watson deals with the problem of evil, and we had some notes of his treatment of the antinomy of necessity and freedom. But on these we cannot enter. We say this only, that the problem of evil is a problem for all kinds of theology and of philosophy. It does not help a reader when he finds Dr. Watson magnifying the problem when he is criticising Deism, and minimising it when he sets forth his own system. In the one case it is absolutely destructive of the view that a just and good God created the world, on the other hand it is only a stage in the evolution of good. Has it occurred to Dr. Watson that a holy and just God could create a world which should grow, through a process of evolution, towards such an end as would finally justify the process? What if the unity of Creator and created is, not a starting-point, but a goal? Theism is as evolutionary as Idealism is. Says Professor A. E. Taylor (*Review of Theology and Philosophy*, viii. 56):

'I urge, then, that the sound contention that a world in which we can co-operate with one another and with nature must be a systematic unity of itself tells us nothing as to the nature of the constituents of that world, or of the precise way in which they are wrought into unity. To know anything of that you must go to living experience and see how unity manifests itself there. So far as the bare logical principle takes you, a world of absolutely genuine individuals, even a world consisting exclusively of persons, united by community of aim and purpose and by their relation to a common personal Creator, satisfies it just as well as a world which is thoroughly mechanical in its structure, and consists of complex predicates of a single subject.' We, too, believe in a rational world. We believe that the world is systematic, but we also believe that the principles of these Lectures fail in doing justice to this contention.

We look at one more passage of the Lectures as we close. 'The idea of humanity is not a mere abstract conception, formed by elimination of the differences of one man from another, but that of a concrete spiritual being, containing all the perfections of which individual men are capable. Such a conception has been elaborated by the Church in the Person of Christ, and in devotion and love for this concrete realisation of the ideal may be found the living principle by which the evil of human nature can be transcended. In this divine figure is gathered up and concentrated that comprehensive sympathy and love for all men, which is fitted to awaken a corresponding sympathy and love. Here we have the combination of absolute love and of absolute righteousness. When the individual man is possessed by the spirit of which Christ is the perfect embodiment, he is lifted above himself and made one with God. The Christ which operates in and through the spirit of individuals is God himself, present now as he has ever been, in the souls of all men, revealing himself in all that makes for the perfect life. Christ after the flesh, the historic person, has passed away, but the Christ of the spirit remains for ever,

for he is one with the ever-growing life of humanity which consists in the progressive conquest of evil by the living power of goodness.' If that is all that one can say of Christ, then from that point of view the interpretation of Christian religious experience is impossible. Communion with Christ as a living Person is a fact of religious experience, attested by testimony in all the Christian ages. Christ after the flesh, he says, has passed away. Has He? We know that from the time of Strauss and Baur it has become a commonplace of some kinds of criticism that it was through the Messianic conception that Christianity attained to concreteness and universality. Our contention, on the contrary, is that it is through the real historic figure depicted in the Gospels that Christianity became a religion for humanity. There were many forms of Messiahisms in the first century, but these have now only an antiquarian interest. That form of Messiahism which we call Christianity has become perpetual just because at the heart of it is the Man of Nazareth, that gracious thorn-crowned figure who lived and died for men. The abstract Christ of the paragraph would be powerless to effect the ends which Dr. Watson describes so sympathetically. We need the human Christ, who died and rose again, who lives still, and with whom men can hold communion to-day. He lives and works to-day, and the power of Christianity lies just in this that men can truly say and realize that Christ is a person who can help, save, and make men blessed to-day.

The process of turning historic facts and persons into ideas began very early in the Christian Church. One finds the process described and repudiated in the First Epistle of John. We find it in full swing amid the Gnostics; we find it through the ages, and we find it again in full bloom in the lectures of Dr. Watson. But whenever this tendency has obtained predominance in the Church, then the Church's aggressive mission has almost ceased. It was only when men returned to the New Testament, and took the Jesus of the Gospels seriously, that the Church could perform her gracious healing work. For after all has been said ideas are only Ghosts that pass athwart us in their vapour, and leave us untouched and cold. So we cannot accept the idealistic Christ presented to us by Dr. Watson. We think we can justify the reality of Christ on grounds of reason, and certainly we need Him if we are to have an adequate explanation of our religious experience.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ACTS.

Acts x. 34, 35.

And Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him.

I.

1. The place in which the remarkable vision (vv.[10-15]) appeared to St. Peter was peculiarly adapted for its purpose. The outward circumstances most appropriately clothed and expressed the inner meaning of the vision. The harbour of Joppa was the only one on the sea-board of Palestine—the only point of contact between the exclusive Jews and the outlying nations. The difficulty of going in and out—owing to its wild rocks and stormy waters—symbolized, as it were, the difficulties of creed and race which lay in the way of the extension of the Divine kingdom. It was by the way of Joppa that the Gentiles of Syria landed the cedar and the pine-wood which Solomon employed in building the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem. It was by the way of Joppa that similar materials were conveyed, by permission of the Gentile Cyrus, for the rebuilding of the second temple under Zerubbabel. It was by the way of Joppa that Jonah went to preach salvation to the Gentile Ninevites. And now it was by the way of Joppa that the Jews were appointed to convey to the Gentiles the glorious gospel of Him who was typified by the temple, who had tabernacled with men, and by His life and death had united in bonds of brotherly love the estranged nations which He had made of one blood. In this port-