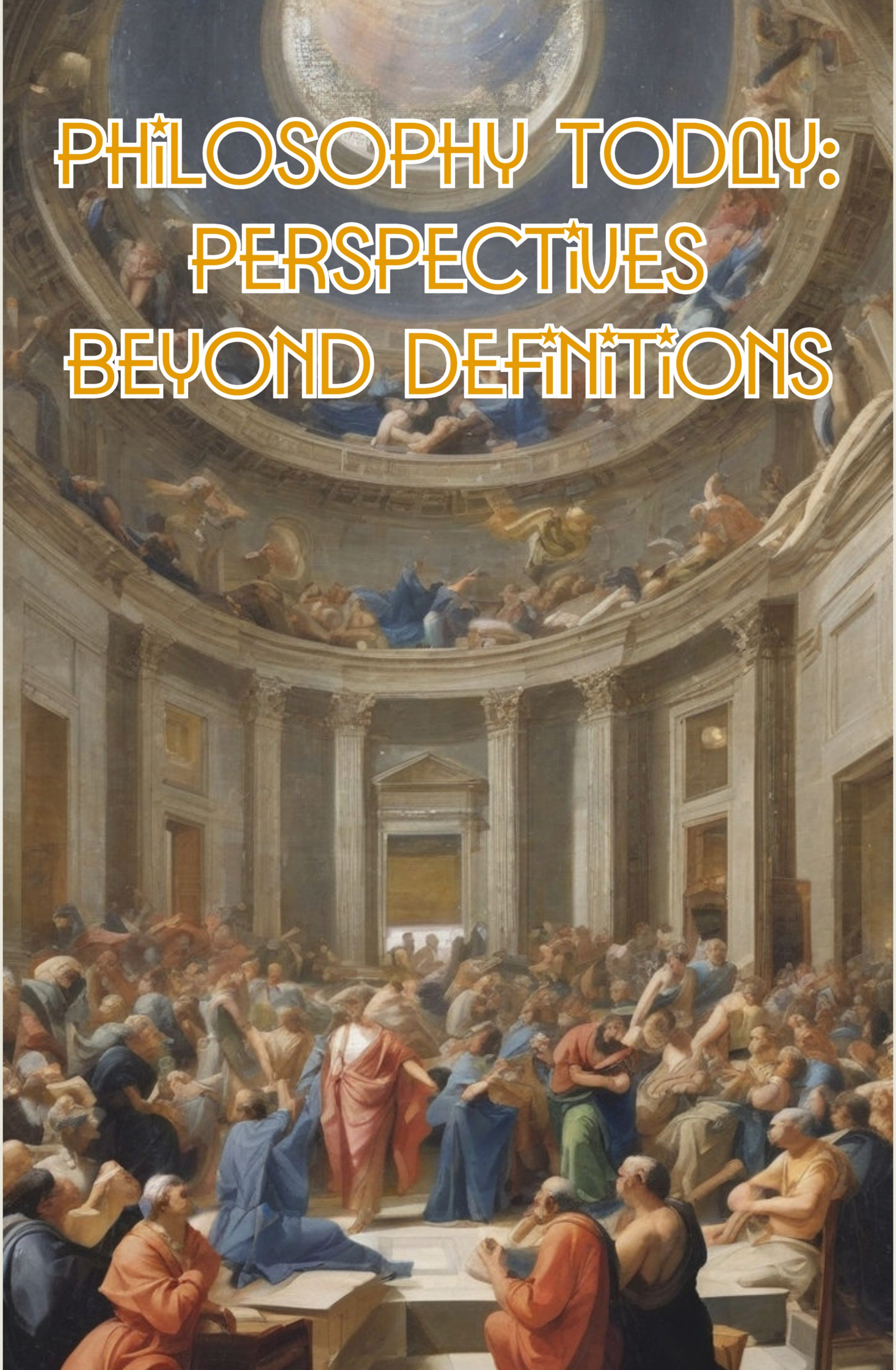

PHILOSOPHY TODAY: PERSPECTIVES BEYOND DEFINITIONS

Perhaps the most just way to get a preliminary idea of what philosophy means to the men of our time is to turn away for the time being from the definition of any one man or group of men, and to ask ourselves what a professor of philosophy in an American or European university is actually supposed to teach. It is quite clear that he is not supposed to be an. He does not represent all the sciences, and no one expects him to lecture on mathematics, mechanics, physics, chemistry, zoölogy, botany, economics, politics, and various other disciplines.

There was a time when he might have been expected to teach all that men could know, but that time is long past. Nevertheless, there is quite a group of sciences which are regarded as belonging especially to his province; and although a man may devote a large part of his attention to some one portion of the field, he would certainly be thought remiss if he wholly neglected the rest. This group of sciences includes logic, psychology, ethics and aesthetics, metaphysics, and the history of philosophy. I have not included epistemology or the "theory of knowledge" as a separate discipline, for reasons which will appear later; and I have included the history of philosophy, because, whether we care to call this a special science or not, it constitutes a very important part of the work of the teacher of philosophy in our day.

Of this group of subjects the student who goes to the university to study philosophy is supposed to know something before he leaves its walls, whatever else he may or may not know. It should be remarked, again, that there is commonly supposed to be a peculiarly close relation between philosophy and religion. Certainly, if any one about a university undertakes to give a course of lectures on theism, it is much more apt to be the professor of philosophy than the professor of mathematics or of chemistry. The man who has written an "Introduction to Philosophy," a "Psychology," a "Logic," and an "Outlines of Metaphysics" is very apt to regard it as his duty to add to the list a "Philosophy of Religion." The students in the theological seminaries of Europe and America are usually encouraged, if not compelled, to attend courses in philosophy. Finally, it appears to be definitely accepted that even the disciplines that we never think of classing among the philosophical sciences are not wholly cut off from a connection with philosophy.

When we are occupied, not with adding to the stock of knowledge embraced within the sphere of any special science, but with an examination of the methods of the science, with, so to speak, a criticism of the foundations upon which the science rests, our work is generally recognized as philosophical. It strikes no one as odd in our day that there should be established a "Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods," but we should think it strange if some one announced the intention to publish a "Journal of Philosophy and Comparative Anatomy."

It is not without its significance that, when Mach, who had been professor of physics at Prague, was called to the University of Vienna to lecture on the history and theory of the inductive sciences, he was made, not professor of physics, but professor of philosophy. The case, then, stands: a certain group of disciplines is regarded as falling peculiarly within the province of the professor of philosophy, and the sciences which constitute it are frequently called the philosophical sciences; moreover, it is regarded as quite proper that the teacher of philosophy should concern himself with the problems of religion, and should pry into the methods and fundamental assumptions of special sciences in all of which it is impossible that he should be an adept.

The question naturally arises: Why has his task come to be circumscribed as it is? Why should he teach just these things and no others? To this question certain persons are at once ready to give an answer. There was a time, they argue, when it seemed possible for one man to embrace the whole field of human knowledge. But human knowledge grew; the special sciences were born; each concerned itself with a definite class of facts and developed its own methods. It became possible and necessary for a man to be, not a scientist at large, but a chemist, a physicist, a biologist, an economist.

But in certain portions of the great field men have met with peculiar difficulties; here it cannot be said that we have sciences, but rather that we have attempts at science. The philosopher is the man to whom is committed what is left when we have taken away what has been definitely established or is undergoing investigation according to approved scientific methods. He is Lord of the Uncleared Ground, and may wander through it in his compassless, irresponsible way, never feeling that he is lost, for he has never had any definite bearings to lose.

Those who argue in this way support their case by pointing to the lack of a general consensus of opinion which obtains in many parts of the field which the philosopher regards as his own; and also by pointing out that, even within this field, there is a growing tendency on the part of certain sciences to separate themselves from philosophy and become independent. Thus the psychologist and the logician are sometimes very anxious to have it understood that they belong among the scientists and not among the philosophers. Now, this answer to the question that we have raised undoubtedly contains some truth. As we have seen from the sketch contained in the preceding pages, the word philosophy was once a synonym for the whole sum of the sciences or what stood for such; gradually the several sciences have become independent and the field of the philosopher has been circumscribed.

We must admit, moreover, that there is to be found in a number of the special sciences a body of accepted facts which is without its analogue in philosophy. In much of his work the philosopher certainly seems to be walking upon more uncertain ground than his neighbors; and if he is unaware of that fact, it must be either because he has not a very nice sense of what constitutes scientific evidence, or because he is carried away by his enthusiasm for some particular form of doctrine. Nevertheless, it is just to maintain that the answer we are discussing is not a satisfactory one. For one thing, we find in it no indication of the reason why the particular group of disciplines with which the philosopher occupies himself has been left to him, when so many sciences have announced their independence.

Why have not these, also, separated off and set up for themselves? Is it more difficult to work in these fields than in others? and, if so, what reason can be assigned for the fact? Take psychology as an instance. How does it happen that the physicist calmly develops his doctrine without finding it necessary to make his bow to philosophy at all, while the psychologist is at pains to explain that his book is to treat psychology as "a natural science," and will avoid metaphysics as much as possible? For centuries men have been interested in the phenomena of the human mind. Can anything be more open to observation than what passes in a man's own consciousness?

Why, then, should the science of psychology lag behind? and why these endless disputes as to whether it can really be treated as a "natural science" at all? Again. May we assume that, because certain disciplines have taken a position of relative independence, therefore all the rest of the field will surely come to be divided up in the same way, and that there will be many special sciences, but no such thing as philosophy? It is hasty to assume this on no better evidence than that which has so far been presented. Before making up one's mind upon this point, one should take a careful look at the problems with which the philosopher occupies himself.

A complete answer to the questions raised above can only be given in the course of the book, where the main problems of philosophy are discussed, and the several philosophical sciences are taken up and examined. But I may say, in anticipation, as much as this:—Philosophy is reflective knowledge. What is meant by reflective knowledge will be explained at length in the next chapter. The sciences which are grouped together as philosophical are those in which we are forced back upon the problems of reflective thought, and cannot simply put them aside. The peculiar difficulties of reflective thought may account for the fact that these sciences are, more than others, a field in which we may expect to find disputes and differences of opinion. We need not be afraid that the whole field of human knowledge will come to be so divided up into special sciences that philosophy will disappear.

The problems with which the philosopher occupies himself are real problems, which present themselves unavoidably to the thoughtful mind, and it is not convenient to divide these up among the several sciences. This will become clearer as we proceed. COMMON THOUGHT, SCIENCE, AND REFLECTIVE THOUGHT .

COMMON THOUGHT.—Those who have given little attention to the study of the human mind are apt to suppose that, when the infant opens its eyes upon the new world of objects surrounding its small body, it sees things much as they do themselves. They are ready to admit that it does not know much about things, but it strikes them as absurd for any one to go so far as to say that it does not see things—the things out there in space before its eyes.

Nevertheless, the psychologist tells us that it requires quite a course of education to enable us to see things—not to have vague and unmeaning sensations, but to see things, things that are known to be touchable as well as seeable, things that are recognized as having size and shape and position in space. And he aims a still severer blow at our respect for the infant when he goes on to inform us that the little creature is as ignorant of itself as it is of things; that in its small world of as yet unorganized experiences there is no self that is distinguished from other things; that it may cry vociferously without knowing who is uncomfortable, and may stop its noise without knowing who has been taken up into the nurse's arms and has experienced an agreeable change.

This chaotic little world of the dawning life is not our world, the world of common thought, the world in which we all live and move in maturer years; nor can we go back to it on the wings of memory. We seem to ourselves to have always lived in a world of things,—things in time and space, material things. Among these things there is one of peculiar interest, and which we have not placed upon a par with the rest, our own body, which sees, tastes, touches, other things. We cannot remember a time when we did not know that with this body are somehow bound up many experiences which interest us acutely; for example, experiences of pleasure and pain. Moreover, we seem always to have known that certain of the bodies which surround our own rather resemble our own, and are in important particulars to be distinguished from the general mass of bodies.

we seem always to have been living in a world of things and to have recognized in that world the existence of ourselves and of other people. When we now think of "ourselves" and of "other people," we think of each of the objects referred to as possessing a mind. May we say that, as far back as we can remember, we have thought of ourselves and of other persons as possessing minds? Hardly. The young child does not seem to distinguish between mind and body, and, in the vague and fragmentary pictures which come back to us from our early life, certainly this distinction does not stand out.

The child may be the completest of egoists, it may be absorbed in itself and all that directly concerns this particular self, and yet it may make no conscious distinction between a bodily self and a mental, between mind and body. It does not explicitly recognize its world as a world that contains minds as well as bodies. But, however it may be with the child in the earlier stages of its development, we must all admit that the mature man does consciously recognize that the world in which he finds himself is a world that contains minds as well as bodies. It never occurs to him to doubt that there are bodies, and it never occurs to him to doubt that there are minds.

Does he not perceive that he has a body and a mind? Has he not abundant evidence that his mind is intimately related to his body? When he shuts his eyes, he no longer sees, and when he stops his ears, he no longer hears; when his body is bruised, he feels pain; when he wills to raise his hand, his body carries out the mental decree. Other men act very much as he does; they walk and they talk, they laugh and they cry, they work and they play, just as he does. In short, they act precisely as though they had minds like his own. What more natural than to assume that, as he himself gives expression, by the actions of his body, to the thoughts and emotions in his mind, so his neighbor does the same? We must not allow ourselves to underrate the plain man's knowledge either of bodies or of minds.

It seems, when one reflects upon it, a sufficiently wonderful thing that a few fragmentary sensations should automatically receive an interpretation which conjures up before the mind a world of real things; that, for example, the little patch of color sensation which I experience when I turn my eyes toward the window should seem to introduce me at once to a world of material objects lying in space, clearly defined in magnitude, distance, and direction; that an experience no more complex should be the key which should unlock for me the secret storehouse of another mind, and lay before me a wealth of thoughts and emotions not my own. From the poor, bare, meaningless world of the dawning intelligence to the world of common thought.

A world in which real things with their manifold properties, things material and things mental, bear their part, is indeed a long step. And we should never forget that he who would go farther, he who would strive to gain a better knowledge of matter and of mind by the aid of science and of philosophical reflection, must begin his labors on this foundation which is common to us all. How else can he begin than by accepting and more critically examining the world as it seems revealed in the experience of the race? SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE.—Still, the knowledge of the world which we have been discussing is rather indefinite, inaccurate, and unsystematic.

It is a sufficient guide for common life, but its deficiencies may be made apparent. He who wishes to know matter and mind better cannot afford to neglect the sciences. Now, it is important to observe that although, when the plain man grows scientific, great changes take place in his knowledge of things, yet his way of looking at the mind and the world remains in general much what it was before. To prevent this statement from being misunderstood, I must explain it at some length. Let us suppose that the man in question takes up the study of botany. Need he do anything very different from what is done more imperfectly by every intelligent man who interests himself in plants? There in the real material world before him are the same plants that he observed somewhat carelessly before. He must collect his information more systematically and must arrange it more critically, but his task is not so much to do something different as it is to do the same thing much better.

The same is evidently true of various other sciences, such as geology, zoölogy, physiology, sociology. Some men have much accurate information regarding rocks, animals, the functions of the bodily organs, the development of a given form of society, and other things of the sort, and other men have but little; and yet it is usually not difficult for the man who knows much to make the man who knows little understand, at least, what he is talking about. He is busying himself with things—the same things that interest the plain man, and of which the plain man knows something. He has collected information touching their properties, their changes, their relationships; but to him, as to his less scientific neighbor.

They are the same things they always were,—things that he has known from the days of childhood. Perhaps it will be admitted that this is true of such sciences as those above indicated, but doubted whether it is true of all the sciences, even of all the sciences which are directly concerned with things of some sort. For example, to the plain man the world of material things consists of things that can be seen and touched. Many of these seem to fill space continuously. They may be divided, but the parts into which they may be divided are conceived as fragments of the things, and as of the same general nature as the wholes of which they are parts.

Yet the chemist and the physicist tell us that these same extended things are not really continuous, as they seem to us to be, but consist of swarms of imperceptible atoms, in rapid motion, at considerable distances from one another in space, and grouped in various ways. What has now become of the world of realities to which the plain man pinned his faith? It has come to be looked upon as a world of appearances, of phenomena, of manifestations, under which the real things, themselves imperceptible, make their presence evident to our senses. Is this new, real world the world of things in which the plain man finds himself, and in which he has felt so much at home? A closer scrutiny reveals that the world of atoms and molecules into which the man of science resolves the system of material things is not, after all, so very different in kind from the world to which the plain man is accustomed.

He can understand without difficulty the language in which it is described to him, and he can readily see how a man may be led to assume its existence. The atom is not, it is true, directly perceivable by sense, but it is conceived as though it and its motions were thus perceivable. The plain man has long known that things consist of parts which remain, under some circumstances, invisible.

When he approaches an object from a distance, he sees parts which he could not see before; and what appears to the naked eye a mere speck without perceptible parts is found under the microscope to be an insect with its full complement of members. Moreover, he has often observed that objects which appear continuous when seen from a distance are evidently far from continuous when seen close at hand.

As we walk toward a tree we can see the indefinite mass of color break up into discontinuous patches; a fabric, which presents the appearance of an unbroken surface when viewed in certain ways may be seen to be riddled with holes when held between the eye and the light. There is no man who has not some acquaintance with the distinction between appearance and reality, and who does not make use of the distinction in common life. Nor can it seem a surprising fact that different combinations of atoms should exhibit different properties.

Have we not always known that things in combination are apt to have different properties from the same things taken separately? He who does not know so much as this is not fit even to be a cook. No, the imperceptible world of atoms and molecules is not by any means totally different from the world of things in which the plain man lives. These little objects and groups of objects are discussed very much as we discuss the larger objects and groups of objects to which we are accustomed. We are still concerned with things which exist in space and move about in space; and even if these things are small and are not very familiarly known, no intellectual revolution is demanded to enable a man to understand the words of the scientist who is talking about them, and to understand as well the sort of reasonings upon which the doctrine is based.

MATHEMATICS.—Let us now turn to take a glance at the mathematical sciences. Of course, these have to do with things sooner or later, for our mathematical reasonings would be absolutely useless to us if they could not be applied to the world of things; but in mathematical reasonings we abstract from things for the time being, confident that we can come back to them when we want to do so, and can make use of the results obtained in our operations.

Now, every civilized man who is not mentally deficient can perform the fundamental operations of arithmetic. He can add and subtract, multiply and divide. In other words, he can use numbers. The man who has become an accomplished mathematician can use numbers much better; but if we are capable of following intelligently the intricate series of operations that he carries out on the paper before us, and can see the significance of the system of signs which he uses as an aid.

We shall realize that he is only doing in more complicated ways what we have been accustomed to do almost from our childhood. If we are interested, not so much in performing the operations, as in inquiring into what really takes place in a mind when several units are grasped together and made into a new unit,—for example, when units are thought as one dozen,—the mathematician has a right to say: I leave all that to the psychologist or to the metaphysician; every one knows in a general way what is meant by a unit, and knows that units can be added and subtracted, grouped and separated; I only undertake to show how one may avoid error in doing these things.

It is with geometry as it is with arithmetic. No man is wholly ignorant of points, lines, surfaces, and solids. We are all aware that a short line is not a point, a narrow surface is not a line, and a thin solid is not a mere surface. A door so thin as to have only one side would be repudiated by every man of sense as a monstrosity. When the geometrician defines for us the point, the line, the surface, and the solid, and when he sets before us an array of axioms, or selfevident truths, we follow him with confidence because he seems to be telling us things that we can directly see to be reasonable; indeed, to be telling us things that we have always known. The truth is that the geometrician does not introduce us to a new world at all.

He merely gives us a fuller and a more exact account than was before within our reach of the space relations which obtain in the world of external objects, a world we already know pretty well. Suppose that we say to him: You have spent many years in dividing up space and in scrutinizing the relations that are to be discovered in that realm; now tell us, what is space? Is it real? Is it a thing, or a quality of a thing, or merely a relation between things? And how can any man think space, when the ideas through which he must think it are supposed to be themselves non-extended? The space itself is not supposed to be in the mind; how can a collection of non-extended ideas give any inkling of what is meant by extension?