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### Of Knowledge: What Man Knows

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***Consciousness of self and other selves.*** First, as to existences: Man knows himself as existing. He is a self-conscious entity. He knows himself as existing by many manifestations. He knows himself as seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling; as feeling—meaning by that only the sense of touch. But most of all in these manifestations through which man attains self-consciousness, he knows himself as thinking: “I think, therefore I am.” This of a long time now has been the most acceptable formula for expressing self-consciousness—assurance of self-existence. One thinks, and one acts: therefore one is.

And not only is one conscious of one’s self, but he is also conscious of other selves, of other men, such as he himself is, in the main; with the same kind of qualities which he himself possesses, including this self-consciousness arrived at through the exercise of the same faculties and learned by the same series of manifestations. And while he notes these resemblances to his fellows, he notes also the differences as to himself and them—in height and form and weight; the differences also in race and speech; likewise the varying mental qualities. He knows himself as inferior in some things to his fellows, superior in others. And so all in all he is as able to differentiate himself from others, as he is also able to identify himself in common sameness with them.

***Knowledge of external things.*** One’s knowledge is not limited to this consciousness of self and other selves—to the likeness and the difference between himself and other selves. He is conscious of the

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In addition to several specific titles, Roberts recommended for this chapter “any standard work on psychology.” At the bottom of the contents page for this chapter, Roberts commented: “To the class Instructor: The scripture lesson reading should be assigned a week in advance of the lesson treatment that a selection suitable to the theme of the lesson may be obtained, and the reading practiced. As this chapter is rather difficult the writer suggests Ezekiel 18, as the reading lesson.”

existence of a large external world. He knows of the existence of earth: land, water, and air. He knows the earth is divided into islands and continents, seas and oceans, rivers and bays. He knows of the existence of the town or hamlet or countryside where he was born. In time he knows by visitation the capital of his county, of his state, of his country. He knows, at least by report, of the great centers of world population. He has verified so many things reported to him that he has confidence quite generally in what is reported to him, and seems supported by the consensus of opinion of others who have experienced them. By this act of belief he incorporates in his workable knowledge very many things that he does not know by actual personal contact or experience. Indeed, the larger volume of his knowledge is of this kind—knowledge that seeps into his consciousness by faith in the reports of others.

Man knows many objects by form, texture, and quality. He knows objects as round, or square, or cubical; as hard or soft; as solid or liquid, or gaseous. He knows objects as living or dead; as useful or useless (relatively). He knows objects by position, as horizontal or perpendicular or parallel. He knows them as transient or relatively permanent; and can rise to the conception that the mountains, in the light of eternity, are as transient as the clouds. He knows heights and depths, and is conscious even of the great space depths. He knows something of the sun, moon, and the planets, and something also of the stars. The list drawn out of what man knows grows voluminous; though, of course, in comparison with that which lies beyond his ken, what he knows is insignificant.

***Knowledge of mind qualities.*** Nor is man's knowledge confined to material things. He is conscious of qualities, even of intellectual and moral qualities. He is conscious of thought mysteries. He has a mind capable through the imagination of creating worlds and peopling them with creatures of his mind, that may become realities to his thought. He has power to call up states of existence, and postulate conditions in which his mind creations shall live.

Man knows himself as competent to form normal judgments and realizes self-responsibility for his actions. In the first place, he is capable of forming comparisons between moral states and conditions. He can pass before his mind varied states that enter into common, human experiences. He may observe that those whose conduct is characterized by industry, frugality, honesty, temperance, physical skill in doing things, accompanied by steadiness and regularity of deportment, are prosperous, contented and happy, as

happiness goes in this world. While on the other hand, he may observe that those who are indolent, extravagant, dishonest, intemperate, given to knavery, unskilled in useful employments—these are unprosperous, destitute, discontented, untrusted, unloved, without self-respect or the respect of others.

***Conscious of power to form judgments.*** Reviewing these two states in which he may find mortals, man is conscious of being able to pass judgment upon these two classes of persons; and seeing that the industrious, the skilled in the knowledge of honorable employments, and possessed of the positive virtues noted above live in more desirable states or conditions than those do who are unskilled in useful employments, who are dishonest, intemperate and generally reprobate, he forms his judgment that the former state is more to be desired than the latter. The same holds good in other respects: conformity to laws which time and experience approve as just is better than violation or resistance to such laws. Honorable conduct is superior to chicane; and living in harmony with what has been generalized as virtuous, is better than living under a system generalized as vicious.

***Man's free agency.*** So passing things in review and pronouncing judgment upon them as good or evil, better or worse, man becomes conscious of a very wonderful power that he recognizes as existing within himself: the consciousness of will; the power of self-determination; the power to choose which of two or more courses he will take. He can do as he wills to do. While there may be persuasive influences drawing him to the one side or the other, yet he is conscious of the power within himself to determine what his action shall be. He recognizes the truth avowed by the English poet, "It is in our Wills that we are thus or thus."<sup>a</sup> This is not to assert man's power to do impossible things, especially impossible physical things, such as lifting himself over a mountain into an adjoining valley; or creating two mountains without a valley between; or be bodily present in two places at one and the same moment of time; or at any time be himself and somebody else. None of these things have been in mind in the foregoing remarks on the existence and the power in man's will. I have had in mind rather

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<sup>a</sup>This is a paraphrase from *Othello* 1.3.319–20: "Virtue? a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus." This quotation comes from a speech delivered by Iago, one of Shakespeare's most thorough-going villains, a speech designed to encourage a foolish young man to evil acts. The context of the quotation was apparently not important to Roberts; similarly, many writers and speakers (of earlier generations in particular) cite Shakespeare without regard to context.

the fact of free moral agency, man's power to recognize good and evil by their effects in human life, and his power to choose between them—to choose which he will follow.

I am not unmindful of the fact that there is much that modifies the free action of man's will. There is the influence of public opinion upon one brought face to face with the necessity of acting in some given case: "What will people say if I take the step I really desire to take?" may "give him pause";<sup>b</sup> and persuading himself that "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind" may require him to act in a manner different from the promptings of his own desire or judgment. He may find his power to will and to do modified by this consideration. The opinions of an inner circle of his friends may act upon his freedom in the same way. The effect upon his immediate material fortune, or his social advantage or that of his friends, may deter or urge his action one way or the other, and thus modify the action of his will. He will find the influence of his education, home influence, community tradition, national or racial prejudices—all these may rise to modify his judgment and bias his determination. He may be a weakling, lacking the courage to formulate a determination, or the boldness to proclaim it, or the firmness to persevere in it. Such men there be. But after full allowance is made for all these factors that may arise to confuse clear conceptions and to persuade to one side or the other of a given action, after all is said and done, there remains the fact that man does have within him, considering all the factors, the power to form a resolution, of which he looks upon himself as the author, which arises because he wishes it, and which would not arise unless he desired it to arise—in fact bade it arise, and perhaps will order a course contrary to all the influences of environment, or the prejudices of education, or the urging of personal friends. Here the fact of agency is shown. It resides complete in the resolution which man makes after deliberation: it is the resolution which is the proper act of man, which subsists by him alone; a simple fact independent of all the facts which precede or surround it.

So much, in brief, for what we know: our self-consciousness and consciousness of other self; our knowledge of external things; and our knowledge of our mind powers. Our purpose has been to indicate the fact of, and the scope of all this, not to exhaust it by enumeration or by thorough analysis.

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<sup>b</sup>Roberts refers to Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy in *Hamlet* III.i.55-87, specifically lines 65-67: "For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, / When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, / Must give us pause."

*Free agency more than a choice between alternatives.*

When most people talk of believing in moral freedom, they mean by freedom a power which exhausts itself in acts of choice between a series of alternative courses; but, important though such choice, as a function of freedom is, the root idea of freedom lies deeper still. It consists in the idea, not that a man is, as a personality, the first and the sole cause of his choice between alternative courses, but that he is, in a true, even if in a qualified sense, the first cause of what he does, or feels, or is, whether this involves an act of choice, or consists of an unimpeded impulse. Freedom of choice between alternatives is the consequence of this primary faculty. It is the form in which the faculty is most noticeably manifested; but it is not the primary faculty of personal freedom itself. That this faculty of the self-origination of impulse is really what we mean by freedom, and what we mean by personality also, is shown by the only supposition which is open to us, if we reject this. If a man is not in any degree, be this never so limited, the first cause or originator of his own actions or impulses, he must be the mere transmitter or quotient of forces external to his conscious self, like a man pushed against another by the pressure of a crowd behind him. In other words, he would have no true self—no true personality at all.<sup>1</sup>

*Free agency in practical life—literature—history.* In his work on the *Reconstruction of Religious Belief*, W. H. Mallock devotes a chapter to “Mental Civilization and the Belief in Human Freedom,” the tenor of which assumes that in the practical affairs of life, in literature and in history, we proceed upon the assumption that a man is a free agent and can determine, within certain limits at least, both his physical and moral conduct; and argues that without this power, the life of man would be meaningless. In the matter of love he decides with Shakespeare’s Iago that “It is in ourselves that we are thus and thus. Our ⟨bodies⟩ [organisms] are the gardens to the which our wills are gardeners.”<sup>2</sup> That this is true he holds to be “attested not only by the private experiences of most civilized men, but also by all the great poetry in which the passion of love is dealt with.” Such poetry is, in Shakespeare’s words, a mirror held up to nature;<sup>c</sup> and it is only recognized as

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<sup>1</sup>Mallock, *Reconstruction of Religious Belief*, 75–76.

<sup>2</sup>Mallock, *Reconstruction of Religious Belief*, 78.

<sup>c</sup>In *Hamlet* 3.2.21–24, Hamlet refers not to poetry, but to drama, “whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”

great because it reflects faithfully.<sup>3</sup> In the matter of heroism in the face of physical danger, he holds that the same story repeats itself.

A man who, for some great end, undergoes prolonged peril, and deliberately wills to die for the sake of that end, if necessary, is no doubt valued . . . (because such conduct) originates in the man's conscious self, which he has deliberately chosen when he might just as well have chosen its opposite, and which is not imposed on him by conditions, whether within his organism or outside it.<sup>4</sup>

The virtue which arises from forgiveness of sin exists in consequence of recognition of this force we call agency in man. "Forgiveness," says our author,

is an act which, in the absence of a belief in freedom (free agency), not only would lose its meaning, but could not take place at all. To forgive an injury implies that, bad as the offense may have been, the man who committed it was better than his own act, and was for this reason not constrained to commit it; and while it is only the assumption of a better potential self in him that makes him a subject to whom moral blame is applicable, it is only for the sake of this self that forgiveness can abstain from blaming. The believer in freedom says to the offending party, "I forgive you for the offense of not having done your best." The determinist (one who believes that man has not the power of free will) says, "I neither forgive nor blame you; for although you have done your worst, your worst was your best also."<sup>5</sup>

Of the great characters of literature, Mr. Mallock also says:

They interest us as born to freedom, and not naturally slaves, and they pass before us like kings in a Roman triumph. Once let us suppose these characters to be mere puppets of heredity and circumstance, and they and the works that deal with them lose all intelligible content, and we find ourselves confused and wearied with the fury of an idiot's tale.<sup>6</sup>

Historical characters are placed in the same category. All praise or blame only has meaning as we regard these historical characters as free moral agents:

All this praising and blaming is based on the assumption that the person praised or blamed is the originator of his own actions, and not a mere transmitter of forces. Man's significance for men in the whole category of human experiences resides primarily in what he makes of

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<sup>3</sup>Mallock, *Reconstruction of Religious Belief*, 78.

<sup>4</sup>Mallock, *Reconstruction of Religious Belief*, 79-80.

<sup>5</sup>Mallock, *Reconstruction of Religious Belief*, 80.

<sup>6</sup>Mallock, *Reconstruction of Religious Belief*, 81.

himself, not in what he has been made by an organism derived from his parents, and the various external stimuli to which it has automatically responded.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Mallock, *Reconstruction of Religious Belief*, 82.

Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: “Any standard work on psychology”; Guizot, *History of Civilization*, vol. 2, lect. 5; James, *Psychology*, esp. chs. 12 and 26, “not with the view of accepting all Mr. James’s premises or his conclusions (especially in his chapter on ‘Will’), but to become familiar with the subject, and its treatment”; Roberts, *Seventy’s Course in Theology* 2:23–27.