

On Definitions and Debates

Author(s): Josiah Royce

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ON DEFINITIONS AND DEBATES

THE American Philosophical Association has lately devoted much attention to an earnest and most important effort to render its general discussions more unified, more profitable, and more conducive to the furtherance of agreement among students of philosophy. There is no doubt that both the Executive Committee of the Association and its "Committee on Definitions" have labored most self-sacrificingly to further this effort, so far as they could. Where the spirit shown has been so serious and so unselfish, criticism may appear ungracious. But the members of the committee have asked for criticisms. The issue involved is not as to their unquestionable sincerity and devotion, but as to the future policy of the Association, and as to the best way of securing, in the discussions at our meetings, the right sort of philosophical communion and community amongst the members. Our committees consist of valued and honored friends. But the Association itself is the "greater friend." We all wish it to find the best way of doing its work. We hope that it will long outlive our own generation. We want to initiate methods of cooperation which, as they come to be improved by experience, will continue to grow more and more effective as the years go on. To this end, we must be ready to criticize freely the first efforts to organize such methods of cooperation. I cheerfully submit to the severest scrutiny this my own effort at such criticism.

I

In the report of the Executive Committee, printed before the last meeting of the Association and used during the meeting, a brief statement leads to the announcement of the subject selected for debate. Those who were appointed to lead the debate, as we are told in this report, "decided to limit themselves to the discussion of 'The Relation of Consciousness and Object in Sense Perception.'" Nobody ought to doubt, I think, that this selection was a good one. Acting under the power conferred upon the Executive Committee by the

previous meeting of the Association, the Executive Committee hereupon voted "to have the selection of debaters carry with it the appointment to the committee on definitions,"—the President of the Association acting as the fifth member of that committee. The committee in question, with the assistance of the Secretary of the Association, undertook, under the authority of the original vote of the Association, "the analysis and preparation of the problem for discussion," and "definitions of terms pertaining to" the "subject, for the use of those participating in the debate." That the "analysis," "the preparation of the subject," and the "definitions of terms," were, in the main, satisfactory to the leading debaters who had been appointed by the Executive Committee of the Association, was thus secured by the fact that the subject was prepared for discussion by a committee consisting of these debaters themselves with the assistance of the President and the Secretary. In their report, the Executive Committee, still acting, of course, under the authority of the Association, invited "members at large" to participate in the debate, by written papers, or otherwise, and, in doing so "to use, as far as possible, the definitions and divisions made by the committee."

The report of the Committee on Definitions, printed along with the Executive Committee's report just cited, begins by emphasizing the importance of the enterprise which the Association had thus, through the Executive Committee, assigned to its care. "Such an extensive attempt," it said, "at an organization of cooperative philosophical inquiry, has not hitherto been made by this Association." "The committee believes such organized and cooperative inquiry to have important possibilities for the future of philosophical study. It therefore ventures to express the hope that members will make a special effort to enter into the spirit of the undertaking, to review the recent literature of the subject, and, in their participation in the discussion, to conform, for the time being, to the general plan of procedure here suggested."

II

It would have been indeed a very ungracious task for any member to take part in the general discussion to which all members of the Association were thus invited, unless he could feel cordially willing to accept all the essential features of the "preparation" and of the "definitions" which, in its report, the Committee on Definitions hereupon proceeded to set forth. Of the competency of the Committee to determine the rules of the proposed debate, so far as its own members were concerned, there could be of course no doubt. Of its authority, by virtue of the original vote of the Association, and under the conditions of its appointment, to ask members to follow its rulings with scrupulous care, in case they chose to participate in the

general discussion at all, there could again be no doubt. The Executive Committee added its express request, as we have seen, to that of the Committee on Definitions; and hereby reasonably bound all who wanted to debate to do their best to confine their usage of terms and their definition of the issues to the forms prescribed by the Committee on Definitions. The experiment in cooperative philosophical inquiry thus for the first time tried, could not fairly be interfered with by any voluntary participant through an expression of his unwillingness—if he felt such unwillingness—to accept the Committee's analysis and definitions of the problem as sufficient for the purposes of the debate. The Committee defined certain terms: *a*, *b*, *c*, etc. It proposed certain questions for debate relating to matters defined in these terms. Such a question might take the form: "Are all the members of the class *ab* members of the class *c*?" It asked the members who took part in the debate to accept these definitions and formulations of questions as the topics of inquiry. Nobody could meet the express wishes of the Committee, and discuss the topics which it wanted to have discussed, unless, accepting for the time the definitions proposed, he was ready to answer such questions as "Is every *ab* a member of the class *c*?" in the spirit of one who considered the question at issue important, and the issue well taken. If he thought the issues to be ill defined by the Committee, and unworthy of the sort of attention that the Committee required, he had no proper place in this particular experiment in cooperation. It was in that case his duty to leave the general debate to other members. For nobody was asked to debate in the meeting the question whether the Committee had well formulated the issues. Members were asked to cooperate under the rules laid down by a body authorized to restrict the field of inquiry for the sake of ensuring cooperation. Nobody could attempt the cooperation, unless he was willing to abide by the restrictions.

The responsibility of the Committee was of course as great as its authority. Its duty was—and no doubt its intention was—so to state the issues for debate that any or all of the philosophical opinions about those issues which are worth discussing, could be discussed. And of course a proper discussion of the issues could not include, at the meeting, such objections to the Committee's report as I now offer. The debater was required to follow the assigned rules of the game. He was not to discuss their value. He was to play under these rules. Hence, if his views about the issues were worth discussing at all, the Committee's formulas ought to have left him unhampered.

My present question is: How did the Committee accomplish this duty? Whose cooperation did it make possible, in case the one who cooperated was understood to accept the plan of debate as printed?

I am sorry that the somewhat elaborate "preparation" of the question set forth by the Committee will force me to make my answer to these questions tedious. But I can hardly be blamed for taking the Committee's formulas seriously, and, in consequence, analyzing them with care.

III

After a study of the possible issues, the Committee presented, as the first of its questions for debate, the following: "In cases where a real (and non-hallucinatory) object is involved, what is the relation between the real and the perceived object with respect (a) to their numerical identity at the moment of perception, (b) with respect to the possibility of the existence of the real object at other moments apart from any perception?" This question was to be understood, by all who were to cooperate, as determined by the meanings assigned by the Committee to the terms "object," "perceived object," and "real object."

The definitions of these terms, as printed in the Committee's report, are as follows:

By *object* in this discussion shall be meant any complex of physical qualities, whether perceived or unperceived and whether real or unreal.

By *real objects* is meant in this discussion such objects as are true parts of the material world.

By *perceived object* is meant in this discussion an object given in some particular actual perception.

It appears, from the context, and from the formulation of the question for debate quoted above, that the Committee very naturally laid some stress upon the fact that what it meant by "some particular actual perception" involved an occurrence at some "moment of time," called also "the moment of perception"; or, again, involved some determinate set or sequence of such momentary occurrences, "in some particular individuated stream of perceptions," that is, in the mind or in the experience of some person.

The Committee did not define what it meant by the adjective "given," used in the above-cited definition of "perceived object." Of course the participants in the discussion would seem to be in so far left free to understand and to use that word in any reasonable and customary fashion that is consistent with the context of the report; and it is plain that the members of the Committee were entirely unaware that by their use of this word they in the least restricted the reasonable liberty of anybody. As a fact, however, their definition of the term "perceived object," taken together with their formulation of their question, and the context in which they used the word *given*, involved a very serious interference with the range of the cooperation which they invited. For what is "given" in a

“moment of perception,” and what is not “given,” and the sense in which anything can be “given at a particular moment,” and the sense in which what is “given” can also be an “object”—all these are not topics of a merely pedantic curiosity about words. They are matters which have been lengthily, frequently, and momentously discussed, both in the controversies about perception and in other philosophical inquiries. Let us see how far and how profitably such questions could be discussed by any one who was ready to be guided, in the debate, by the rules laid down by the Committee.

IV

The word *given* has a wide range both of popular and of technical usage. Amongst its more technical meanings, *three* very readily occur to mind as possibly in question when the word is employed in a philosophical discussion.

In a very wide sense, which is rendered in special cases more determinate by the context, *given* means: “Assumed, presupposed, agreed upon, accepted, taken as if it were known—but always *with reference to* some specific purpose, inquiry, undertaking, discussion, or plan of action.” This sense is of course a very elastic one, and is often convenient, just because the context which further defines the plan or inquiry in question so easily specifies the conditions *subject to which* something is declared or agreed to be *given*. But, for this very reason, *given*, if used in this first sense, means *conditionally given*, subject to the agreements or presuppositions in question, and, in this sense, does not mean: “present in some particular actual perception.” In this wide sense of *conditionally given*, the Sherman Act is *given*, when legal controversies about certain combinations in restraint of trade are in question. And, for the purposes of the discussion, or of the present paper, the Committee’s report, with its definitions, requests, statements of the issue, and so on, is itself *given*, to any one who wants to engage in the proposed discussion, or to read this paper. Any conceivable real or ideal object, principle, abstraction, fact, or fabulous invention, any portion of the universe, or the whole of it, could be *given*, in this sense, to somebody for some purpose. Yet the word *given* would not hereby be rendered hopelessly vague, because, each time, the context or other connections of the plan or inquiry that was to be undertaken would enable one to specify the conditions which made the object or principle, in this sense, hypothetically or conventionally *given*.

A second and also wide sense of the term *given* introduces the word into one’s ontological vocabulary, and employs it as equivalent to *existent, actual*. God or an atom, Herbart’s reals or Leibniz’s monads, the events of history or the interior of the earth, anything

believed by anybody to be a fact or a reality, may by that person be declared, in this sense, to be a *given* fact in the world, or simply to be *given*. This meaning is of course specified, on occasion, by naming the place, time, or other definable region of being, in which the fact in question is asserted to be a fact. This signification of the word *given* is frequent in usage, but is often inconvenient, because of the danger of confusion between this and the third meaning of *given*—a danger which occasionally arises.

In a third sense, *given* means *present to or in* the “experience” or “perception” or “feeling” or “state of mind” of somebody. I put in quotation marks the words and phrases that specify how or wherein the *given* is, in this sense, *present*, merely to indicate that, in any effort to specify this sense, one deals with matters which are amongst the most obvious and at the same time most problematic topics that philosophy has to consider. In order fully to explain *what* it is which in this sense is, for somebody, or at some time, *given*, that is, *present* or *immediately known*, or *directly experienced*, you need to face *all* the problems about “immediacy” and about “experience” and about the “self” and about “time” and about the relation of the relational aspect of the *given* to its non-relational aspect—all the problems, I say, which have most divided the philosophers. These are also the problems that have disturbed the seekers after some sort of “intuition” or of religious “faith,” ever since the Hindoo seers first retired to the forests (or in other words “took to the woods”) in their own vain effort to solve that most recondite of human mysteries, the mystery regarding *what* it is that is *given* in this third sense. From Yajnavalkya to Bergson this problem of the *given* has troubled men.

This sense of the word *given* is frequent in discussion. It is extremely useful in attempts at defining the various problems whose nature and variety have just been indicated. But unless one bears in mind how difficult and recondite these problems are, he is likely to employ the term *given*, in this third sense, rather to escape from facing the greatest issues of philosophy than to prepare the way for further reflection upon them. Of course an important part of the task of anybody who calls anything *given*, in this third sense, is to specify what sort of presentation it is upon which he is insisting.

Of these three senses of the word *given*, it seems plain, from the context, that the Committee intended some specification of the third sense to be in question. For their report uses the phrases: “at certain times present in a given individuated series of perceptions”; “given in some particular actual perception.” Even if *given* were here supposed to be used in the second of the above-mentioned senses, *this* account of the “locus,” *i. e.*, of the place and time wherein some-

thing is for the purposes of the definition of a *perceived object, given*, would make the second sense (specified so as to apply to the case here in question) identical with some specification of the third sense. For even if the word *given* meant "is a fact," is "actual," the "perceived objects" of which the Committee speaks are here specified simply as "figuring" or as "present" "in some particular actual perception." That, then, is the way, or at least one way, in which those "perceived objects" are to be, just then, facts. And in this way the Committee means *given* to be understood.

As to the first sense, the Committee is not defining its "perceived objects" as *given* to the percipient in the sense in which the Sherman Act is given as the agreed presupposition of a legal controversy. Of course, I repeat, *all* of the Committee's definitions, topics, objects, and problems are to us members *given*, in our first sense of the word *given*, for the purpose of the proposed discussion, and as its agreed or at least supposed basis. But the "perceived objects" are said by the Committee to be *given* in "some particular actual perception," at one or at several moments of time, and in the individuated "stream" of some percipient's perceptions. The sense of *given* in the Committee's definition of *perceived object* is, therefore, some specification of the third of the senses above indicated. Hereby, then, the debater who can cooperate seems to be bound in advance by the Committee's report. In so far the wording and the context leave him *not* free to interpret the word *given* as he pleases.

What is the result? The committee has certainly *not* left the cooperating debater free as to his definition of the word *object*. An *object*, in this discussion, is a "complex of physical qualities." It is of course left to the debater to hold whatever view he holds as to what a "complex of physical qualities" actually is and involves. But this latter view will no longer be a matter of merely verbal conventions. Of course such "complexes" as "*yellow, hard, and extended,*" or "*brown, smooth, and solid,*" will be amongst the physical "objects" denoted by such phraseology. The debater will have his opinion as to what such "physical" "complexes" are, and as to what conditions they must meet in order to be "physical" at all. These views will no longer be reducible to definitions of terms. The debater's metaphysics or epistemology or perhaps just his opinions as a student of some physical science, will now come into play. If he is to cooperate, he must indeed accept the Committee's definition of *object*. But his doctrine about what makes a "complex" a "physical" complex, will concern issues no longer verbal, but most decidedly "material." Let us still try to see what follows from this restriction of the meanings of *object* and of *given*, when taken together.

Suppose that some philosopher should be asked to cooperate whose views about what a "complex of physical qualities" is, and especially about what such a complex is when it is a "true part of the material world," required him to say: "Such an object, such a complex, however *real* it is (and also in case, in the Committee's sense, it is *unreal*), *never* is, and by its very nature never can be, for any human being, 'present in some particular individuated stream of perceptions,' at any moment of time; and (at least for a human being) never can be *given* in some particular actual perception." Suppose the philosopher held this view, not because he was disposed to favor or to dwell upon verbal controversies, but because this was his opinion as to a material issue, namely, as to what a physical "complex" is, and as to what in this sense is *given*. Suppose, namely, that he had inquired into what is or can be *given* at any moment, in any human perception, or to any human being. Suppose that he had considered, with such care as he could use, why we believe in any physical facts whatever, and what is the essential truth about the very nature of such facts, as we believe in them. Then his views would be his own, and would not depend upon his terminology. Nevertheless, when asked to cooperate, he would be bound to accept the Committee's definitions. Accepting them, what would this philosopher be obliged to say about the class of *perceived objects* as defined by the Committee (not, of course, as he himself would have preferred to define what *he* calls perceived objects) ?

Such a philosopher could only say: "For a man of my opinions there exist no *perceived objects* (in the Committee's explicitly stated sense of that term), whether *real* or hallucinatory. For physical 'complexes of qualities' are of such nature as forbids their being *given*, at any moment, in any human being's stream of perceptions. Therefore, for me, the Committee's class of 'perceived objects' is a 'zero-class' (in the sense of modern symbolic logic). It is an 'empty' class. Herein it resembles the class of 'horses that are not horses.' "

Since the problem of the present paper principally relates to the question: What part could a philosopher who held such views properly take in the debate, under the Committee's rules and definitions? I shall very properly be met, in my turn, at this point, by the counter-question: Are there any such philosophers? If so, are their views worth discussing?

V

In answer to this counter-question I may first cite the words of the Committee itself. On page 11 of its report, in enumerating the various current definitions of "consciousness," it refers to the following view: "Consciousness is the instrumental activity of an organism with respect to a problematic or potential object. Thus the

nature of consciousness is such as to imply the artificiality of the first question, and accordingly of its several answers." *Such* an opinion, then, exists. We all think it worthy of careful discussion.

I am far from defending this reported definition of consciousness; and I am very far from attempting to speak on behalf of the distinguished representative of this view to whom the Committee here refers. I can only say this: *Were* the reported view my own view of the nature of consciousness, I should be obliged to say that the "problematic or potential objects" to which my "instrumental activity" had "respect," were *not* the Committee's "perceived objects" at all; and also that *if* my "problematic objects" were what I supposed to be identical with the "complexes of physical qualities" which the Committee asked me to call "objects," then whatever was *given* in my "individuated stream of perceptions" would *not* be such an object. So that, in this case, the first question would be for me not only "artificial," but a question about a zero-class. And the Committee's second question, that about consciousness, would require me, if I also accepted the Committee's own definition of consciousness, to explain how this "instrumental activity" of my own organism was "that by virtue of which" the members of this zero-class—that is, the *objects* which for me would be no *objects* at all—were "numerically" or otherwise distinguished from something else. Hereupon I should indeed be at a loss how to discuss the Committee's second question any more usefully than the first question, unless, indeed, I in one way or another declined to accept the rulings of the Committee as to the conduct of the discussion, either by ignoring or by setting aside their definitions and requests. I should be sure that in any case the Committee had *not* succeeded in so stating the two questions as to make my opinions a natural part of the inquiry that they defined. I should feel myself excluded from profitable cooperation under the rules.

But this is no place to expound in detail the views of any one thinker. Let me next simply point out theses which every one will find more or less familiar and which, in various contexts, enter into known doctrines about perception. Let me point out that whoever holds these theses ought to regard the Committee's definition of a "perceived object" as the definition of a zero-class.

Suppose, for instance, that one holds, with J. S. Mill, that a physical object, such as any "complex of physical qualities," is essentially "a permanent possibility of sensation" in case it is "a true part of the material world" at all, while, in case of hallucinatory or illusory physical objects, the object *seems* to be such a "permanent possibility" when it is not so. One who takes this view seriously, holds a doctrine which concerns not verbal definitions, but

assertions as to what the *object* (in the Committee's sense of the term) actually is.

But a "permanent possibility of sensation," whatever else it is, is never any one sensation or group of sensations; nor yet is it any set of events in the individuated streams of perceptions of any human percipients. These events, the *given* facts of sensation, come and go. The "permanent possibility" is no one of them. But it is what, for Mill, the "complex of physical qualities" essentially is, and for Mill, if his doctrine were taken quite seriously, there would be no other physical objects to consider, whether real or hallucinatory. But to speak of a *perceived object*, in the Committee's sense, would be to speak of a fleeting sensory event, in "some given actual perception." That is, the Committee's "perceived objects" would be "permanent possibilities" that are not permanent, or, once more, horses that are not horses.

Mill's account of the object of perception has often been accused of a false abstractness of formulation. Some have attempted to render his account more precise, or to deal with his arguments in another way, by asserting, with greater or less definiteness of phraseology, that the very being of a "complex of physical qualities" *essentially consists in the truth of certain propositions*. This doctrine, which, as it stands, is of course a metaphysical doctrine, has numerous representatives in modern discussion. Many, both before Mill's time and later, have been led to such an opinion, by considerations not wholly identical with those which Mill emphasized.

It is notable, furthermore, that, whenever such thinkers attempt to define their *objects* (that is, their "complexes of physical qualities" in the Committee's sense of *object*), with precision, they include amongst the propositions which define the being of the *object* certain *universal* propositions. Thus, for Mill, a bell to which a wire is duly attached is a "complex of physical qualities" whose being is partly defined by the truth of the proposition: "If I pull the wire I shall hear a ringing." Now any *if*-proposition is, in its logical sense, an universal proposition. And we are not here concerned with the material question whether this or that one amongst a set of such universal propositions is actually true, or again with the question: Subject to what conditions is it true? It is enough for our present purpose that, *if* a percipient is led to believe that the being of his object is in some respect defined by such a universal proposition, and if this proposition is *not* true, then his object is in this respect illusory. The being of the object is defined by the truth of propositions, some of which are universal, whether it is a real object or an unreal one.

In case, however, the truth of some universal proposition is essential to the constitution, to the very being, of a "complex of physical qualities," it is, once more, a contradiction in terms to talk of the truth of such an universal proposition as ever, or at any time, or to anybody, "*given* in some particular actual perception," such as any mortal ever has.

For any one who holds this view of what an *object* is, the Committee's definition of *perceived object* is, therefore, equivalent to the definition of a horse that is not a horse.

Now some who hold such views about physical objects are metaphysical realists. Some are Kantians; and one very important aspect of Kant's whole theory of the nature of the "phenomenal objects" which he so sharply distinguished from the sensory data, consisted in his identification of the very being of a physical object with the truth of propositions, some of which are, in his opinion, *a priori* and universal, while all of them are true propositions in a way that only the "spontaneity of the understanding" and the relation of the object to the transcendental "unity of apperception" could warrant or determine. Whatever the variations of Kant's own phraseology—variations easily explainable in the light of his own development—there should be no question that what his fully developed doctrine defines as the true *Gegenstand* of perception, and as the phenomenal, yet still perfectly objective actual "complex of physical qualities," is nothing whose nature permits it to be *given* to *any* human perceiver, in *any* particular actual perception. Many Kantians have come to emphasize these aspects of the Kantian theory of what a "complex of physical qualities" essentially is. For all such, the Committee's definition of a "complex of physical qualities *given* in some particular actual perception" is a definition of "perceived objects" such that it requires some universal truth to be *given* as true in a particular actual moment of perception, and is also a definition which requires a permanent somewhat to be *given* as permanent *in* that which flits. The result is once more a zero-class. All such thinkers are, in my opinion, excluded from profitable participation in the Committee's discussion.

Finally, amongst those to whom the very being of a "complex of physical qualities" consists in the truth of certain propositions, whereof some are universal propositions, there are students of philosophy who are metaphysical idealists. Of these students I am one. My views are not here in question. But perhaps I have a right to say that all such metaphysical idealists, whatever their other varieties of opinion, get to their results by interpreting the truth of these propositions in terms which they suppose to be concrete and reasonable enough, but which do not permit them to admit that such truths

as constitute the being of such a "complex" could be, at any moment of time, *given* in the stream of anybody's particular actual perceptions.

I submit that, for all such thinkers, the Committee's formulations of the issue depend upon the definition of a zero-class. All such are, in my opinion, excluded from profitable cooperation in the discussion as defined by the Committee.

In sum, whoever emphasizes the fact that what he means by a "complex of physical qualities" is something that perception brings to his notice, but that, once brought to his notice, is, in his opinion, essentially an object of *interest*, of *belief*, of *intention*, of *faith*, or of *rational assurance*, or of *categorized conceptual structure*, may well ask himself what place he has in the Committee's undertaking. For to him what is "given in a particular actual moment of perception" is simply *not* what he means by an object at all, whether he is a mystic or a pragmatist or a realist or an idealist.

VI

There are, then, such philosophers as I have defined, in general terms, by the assertion: *For such philosophers the Committee's class of perceived objects is a zero-class.* But just *why*, after all—so one may reply to me—why are such philosophers excluded from the inquiry proposed by the Committee? Why may they not take part if they please?

My answer has to be in terms familiar to every student of modern formal logic.

If a "zero-class" is to be the subject of an assertion, what predicates may with truth be asserted of that zero-class? The answer of modern formal logic of the prevailing neo-Boolean type is well known, and, for logical purposes, is useful. A zero-class is not only subsumable, but is actually subsumed, under every class in the universe of discourse. Hence of any zero-class *all* universal propositions, whatever their predicates, are *true*. All particular propositions, however, which have the zero-class as their subject, are *false*. Hence the fortunes of a zero-class are easily to be foreordained. Thus the class defined by the term, *a horse that is not a horse*, is, indeed, by definition a zero-class. Hence it is formally correct to say: "All horses that are not horses can trot fast and play the violin at the same time." For the assertion is an universal. But this assertion, whose formal justification, and whose possible importance from certain points of view emphasized by modern logic, I need not here pause to explain, is no contribution to the arts or to the sciences that deal with the trotting-horse. It is an actually valuable formalism, which could indeed better be expressed in symbols. If I were asked

to cooperate in a discussion amongst horse fanciers, and I had only *such* propositions as this to bring to their attention, it would be at once kinder and safer for me not to address the meeting. If they chose to discuss still other classes of horses that I considered to be zero-classes, I could at best only contribute the same logical truisms to their discussion, and so should be excluded from useful participation in their deliberations—*unless indeed they asked me to say whether and why I thought these classes to be zero-classes. That* indeed might become more a valuable and material issue, in whose discussion I might gladly take part. But if they formulated questions for debate that did not include this question, that in fact obviously excluded it, how could I further contribute, unless I undertook something in the form of a criticism of the limitations which they had put upon the debate?

As a fact, the Committee did not ask anybody to discuss the question whether there are any “perceived objects” of the precise type that it defined. Its use of its definitions, its somewhat elaborate formulation of the “logically possible views,” its entire classification of the issues, excluded this inquiry from the recognized field for the debate.

No philosopher of the types illustrated in the foregoing discussion had any proper place in the cooperation which the Committee invited.

VII

Now, is all the foregoing mere “logic-chopping,” mere “carping criticism,” mere “verbalism,” or what James loved to call “barren intellectualism”? I hope not. I intend to insist upon what I suppose to be a practical issue. It was the Committee that offered definitions supposed to be exact. My “carping” is intended only to be a taking of the Committee’s requirements quite seriously. My “verbalism” consists in using their own words as they required. And my practical purpose is constructive. I want to indicate something, however little, about how our future discussions may best be organized if others at all agree with me.

That the whole issue is not merely verbal, but is quite material and of practical importance for the discussion, will appear, I think, if we simply leave out the terms defined, and substitute the definitions. In order to do this, let us consider where we should stand if the Committee had said: “Those who are to take part in this discussion are requested and supposed to assume: That ‘complexes of physical qualities’ may be, and often are, *given* in ‘some particular actual perception,’ at some time, and in such wise as to be ‘present in some individuated sequence’ or ‘stream of perceptions,’ and for some human being.” This would not be a verbal, but a very material assumption.

Had the Committee said just this, we should have known that all whose metaphysical or epistemological opinions led them to hold, concerning physical objects, the views held by those whose otherwise very various doctrines I have just summarized, were expressly excluded from participation. Such an exclusion would have been a perfectly proper plan for the debaters who belonged to the Committee, if it was simply their intention to present their own views. But in that case the plan would not have included a call for the cooperation of members whose views were thus excluded. Now the Committee's definitions, and the preparation of the subject for debate, essentially involved, however unintentionally, just such an exclusion. This is the ground of my criticism. I conceive that hereby the Committee doomed the discussion in advance to be unable to find place in any just fashion for some of the most important views about perception.

And now as to the practical result: The Committee inadvertently excluded people whom of course they never consciously intended to exclude. These people were no small party. Various mystics, scholastics, Kantians, idealists, modern realists, and pragmatists were among the people thus out of place in any inquiry that should be carried on under the restrictions carefully prepared by the Committee. When any such people attempted to enter the actual debate, they could do so only either apologetically or rebelliously or unprofitably or through an ignoring of the restrictions. This was not what the Committee intended; but it was what they brought to pass. This is not the best way to secure general cooperation. This, I think, is not what either the members of the Committee or any others of us desire to have done in our future general discussions, of which, as I hope, there will be many. The plan of having general discussions upon issues sharply defined and directly joined, is a plan that promises great results for the future, if only we learn from our first attempts how to carry out that plan better than at first we did.

What should the Committee have done? In order to answer this question, I need not dwell upon any of my own whims, prejudices, or tastes. The correct mode of procedure was suggested, during the actual general discussion, by one of the members of the Committee, namely, our devoted and highly esteemed Secretary himself. I can not quote his words, although I heard them with approval. In substance he said that one might well consider *that table yonder* (he did not define it in the abstract, but designated it by a perfectly acceptable gesture and wording), that "brown, smooth, solid something"; and that one might then try to tell how he himself considered what he found "present to his senses" (namely, the *given*) to be

related to what he supposed the table (the *object*) really to be. I hope that I fairly represent the Secretary's remark.

Well, *that* is the question about perception, in a nutshell. Let anybody tell (if he can, and so far as he can) *what* it is that he supposes to be *given* in his "stream of perceptions," when he looks at the "table" or "orange" or "inkstand" or whatever else he sees or otherwise perceives. Let him then indicate what this which is *given* leads him personally, *at that "moment of perception,"* to "believe to be there," or "to regard as real," or to view as a "true part of his material world," or, to consider as the object which, in his opinion, he just then knows or believes to be a "physical object." Let him hereupon compare the *given* as it is *given* with the *object* as he just then, in his momentary perception, takes it to be real. Let him still further explain, if he can and will, how this *object* which, at the "moment of perception," he *takes to be real*, is related to what he, as a philosopher, believes to be the *really* real, the genuine fact which lies at the basis both of his perception, and of the *given*, and of his momentary beliefs about "what is there." If the discussion is defined, upon the basis of such a beginning, in such wise as to call for still further comments upon known issues—let the disputant cooperate, if he will and can, by meeting these further issues. A discussion thus defined will indeed, as I firmly believe, actually illustrate the thesis that, for any percipient who wakes up to what he is believing and is doing, the being of the *object* of perception will either consist in or essentially involve *the truth of certain propositions (some of them universal)*, each of which defines this or that aspect of the *object*. Since such truths by their nature exclude the possibility of their ever being *given* at any moment in "the stream of perceptions" of any human being, the *object* of perception will *never* be anything that is *given* in the personal experience of any one of us. Yet the correct result will not be (in my own opinion) what the Committee defines as "epistemological dualism and realism." It will be a result dependent upon one's definition of the *truth of propositions*. Hence, for me, this result will be a form of idealism which here does not concern my reader.

But the essential practical point is that, while a discussion thus initiated would need to be restricted by rules and definitions, so as to keep all concerned close to the issue and in constant cooperation, there would now be no need and little danger of defining the issue or the rules or the cooperation so as to exclude anybody whose views are seriously represented in classic or current philosophical discussion.

Following the Secretary's admirable suggestion, I propose then, for the planning of our future discussions, a mode of procedure that

in its origin goes back at least to Socrates or even to Zeno of Elea, and that, in its more exact and exacting restrictions, is well exemplified in the procedure of some modern mathematical logicians. It is this:

1. Define your problem *as far as possible* by designating typical examples. Socrates did this, and was a model for all of us. Even the Eleatic Zeno did it in his famous discussion of one of the most abstract of problems, and the issue as he defined it still interests us to-day. Our Secretary proposes to do this sort of thing in preparing our future discussions. I second the suggestion. The Committee's report did *not* exhaust this device before proceeding to the more abstract definitions that it had to provide. Hence these definitions were not all well adapted to their own end.

2. When designation by example has done its work, and when you come to the marshaling of the various possible varieties of opinion which you regard as worthy of discussion, it is of course natural to divide some universe of discourse into classes, and then to enumerate the possible views by pointing out the logically possible relations amongst these classes. But, when you do this, do not ignore those most momentous aspects of modern exact theories, namely, the "existence-theorems," or "existential postulates," and their contradictories (the assertions that declare or deny some of your defined classes to be "zero-classes"). Consider carefully, in the light both of formal logic and of the history of opinion, what alternatives regarding such assertions or denials—what questions as to whether one or another of your defined classes has members—are assertions or questions open to reasonable differences of opinion. This is a centrally important rule for every exact inquiry, and is greatly emphasized in the recent procedure of the logical theorists.

These are not all the rules that ought to be followed by a committee on definitions. But they are good rules, and practical rules. The Committee, on this occasion, did not follow them.

May our future discussions be controlled by committees on definitions! That is a wise plan. May the discussions prosper! That is a good hope. May the committees be as successful in practise as the present Committee was earnest and faithful in its intentions and in its toils. My carping words are ended.

JOSIAH ROYCE.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.