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We believe that not only those who were present at the 1952 Summer School "Sound Barrier" session, but many other readers of the "Quarterly" too, will value this opportunity to study the important discussion then initiated by these two papers contributed by Harold Walsby and Seton Pollock.

The Sound Barrier—1 **Harold Walsby**

THE THEME of this Summer School is "Freedom and the Discipline of Reality", This discussion may well be a test showing how far we are able to reconcile our own freedom with that of others. In asserting our own truth, we must guard against losing sight of a higher, more embracing, and more general truth. We may be disposed to exaggerate our differences. In being engrossed in our own aspect of the truth, we may tend to disown the higher truth which includes the truth of others, that unity which binds different and complementary, even opposite, ideas together. There is always the possibility of reconciliation in a more general, unified, integrated truth which includes the particular truths as special cases.

The more general truth is like a large umbrella under which all our special little interpretations can be embraced. It is no aid to reconciliation blandly to assert that what the other person says is both meaningless and useless. If we are to attain that more comprehensive general truth, it baulks our progress to say that where we see no unity, reconciliation, integration, meaning, value, therefore there is none. If we do not see the "umbrella", let us by all means say so and thus get help from those who do; but let us not assert dogmatically there is no umbrella.

Of necessity, the "umbrella" of unified, general truth is difficult to see: it is tenuous, nebulous, and even vague, because (apart from all the particulars, the widely different special truths) it can only contain that nebulous element

they all have in common. Moreover, the wider and more different the special truths it is to embrace, and the less these have in common, the more nebulous, vague, tenuous, and abstract will our "umbrella" be.

But if this so-called higher truth is going to get more and more vague, nebulous and abstract, how is it going to get more and more real? Will it not get so increasingly unreal that, if we continue the process, we shall be left with nothing at all, having lost all meaning and significance?

That is so, only if you have lost sight of the purpose and function of the "umbrella", of which the object was primarily to bring together widely divergent (and even apparently contradictory) truths of a more particular and special kind. The function of our more general and highly abstract truth is not to have concreteness and reality for itself but, by contrast and relation with all the particulars embraced, to make these much more real, more concrete, more definite, and therefore better understood, related, and unified.

Thus our highly abstract and general truth, in providing the unification and integration of all the special and particular truths it contains, provides them, by contrast and relation to itself, with greater reality and definiteness. By so doing, it acquires a greater reality itself. Divorced and abstracted from relationship with all its particulars, it is empty of meaning; it acquires meaning and reality only in relation to what it really embraces and includes within itself. When we regard it as excluding all that it really does contain, we are depriving it of all reality; we have lost everything which gives it reality.

To use religious symbolism for a moment: in order to gain that highest insight, in order to attain to God, it is necessary to lose everything, to abstract to the highest degree, in which everything, all meaning, the whole world of finite things and meanings is lost—only for these to be regained in greater richness and variety and unity, when we realize that God, divorced from his universe, isolated from everything, is meaningless and empty nothing. He is that "umbrella", that highly abstract and unifying principle, that integration of all things, that universal synthesis.

But the necessary forerunner of synthesis is analysis; of unity, difference; of integration, differentiation; of peace, conflict. That is why, in order to find God, you have first to lose everything, to separate out—as it were—the unifying principle from all that it unifies. When you perform that dissection, the unifying principle, by itself, unifies nothing, and you have lost everything. You have lost the whole world, only to regain it in fuller measure, so soon as you complete the process of separation and abstraction by the complementary process of synthesis and unification.

Then the differences between things have a richer meaning, because they are brought into a deeper relation with each other. The widest differences and antagonisms take on greater significance because they are reconciled in a higher or deeper unity. That unity in itself is nothing; in relation to all that is unified, it is everything—everything, that is, as a united whole.

The way to the concrete is through abstraction. As A. N. Whitehead says: "The paradox is now fully established that the utmost abstractions are the true weapon with which to control our thought of concrete fact." I stress that he says "the utmost abstractions."

In many of our discussions during the first week of this Summer School dealing with the theme "Freedom", we were brought up against what seemed an impassable barrier. The discussions would get into deeper and deeper issues, and as we approached this nameless barrier, this THING, so we observed ourselves becoming more and more emotionally differentiated; some getting more fidgety, showing definite signs of anxiety lest we approach too near; others looking and feeling a little smug, as if they were suppressing a feeling of pleasurable excitement and anticipation as we drew near this queer thing, this nameless barrier.

Whatever the difference in our reactions, we were all in a slightly higher emotional key. When we came right up against the barrier, the suggestion was usually made that it was fruitless to continue. We must retreat. There was no profit to be derived from continuing. The human mind was limited, and it was useless to pursue beyond the bounds where the mind could no longer cope. Discussion would be barren; let us get on to another tack.

Self-observation, however, made us aware of the lurking and ubiquitous presence of the barrier. And to this nameless barrier someone gave the primitive and pre-logical symbol "The Sound Barrier."

I first became aware of this "barrier" as a psychological phenomenon about fifteen years ago. Seton Pollock is another who is interested in it, approaching it from a somewhat different angle. From the nature of his thought I judge that he, too, must have been interested in it for some considerable time.

Before we hear him, I want to comment on the commonly accepted view that the human mind is limited and conditioned, and therefore unable to grasp what is unlimited and unconditioned, so that when we arrive at that boundary of the mind, the only sensible thing to do is to halt because we can't go on. Trying to know the unknowable is a futile game. Let us be sensible and leave it alone. We cannot pretend to omniscience, and we imply that anyone who dares to continue the discussion is presumptuous, claiming omniscience, trying to enter a realm forever unknowable and beyond mortal ken.

That sounds so "down to earth", and so full of sound commonsense, that it is difficult not to be carried away with sympathy and solidarity. But let us look below the surface of that comfortable feeling of unassuming modesty which this claim appears to possess.

When I recall the history of human thought (the history of science, for example), I seem to hear more than a faint echo, ringing down the ages, of that "modest" dogmatism that has placed and defined the limits beyond which the intellect cannot trespass. Fortunately, time and again, there have been thinkers who have questioned the omniscience of those modest ones who laid down these limits, asserted that these were for all time irrevocable and insurmountable.

That being so, we can feel less diffident about going forward. The next step is to see that in being conscious of a limit, we have already to some extent defined it; and if we can define the limit to some extent, we have already taken the first step in transcending it. To define is to limit, and if we can define the limit, we can limit the limit; and it is in the process of limiting our limitations that we achieve our freedom from them.

When I spoke last week on the nature of our anxiety about abstract freedom, I related it to the universal human experience of the illusory freedom of infancy, at which stage we appear to be the manipulators of our environment—our whole world, in fact, since then our whole world is limited to a very tiny range of experience. The infant is unconscious of being limited; it cries and is ministered to; it does not distinguish an outer world from itself. Thus it must organize its mental material on the unconscious assumption that its wishes and desires are geared to the movements of the things of which it is aware, not in the sense of being apart from itself, or outside itself (and therefore capable of limiting it), but aware in a sense in which self and not-self are still confused.

The new-born human infant is a most helpless creature. It needs the shield of human society between itself and its environment to protect it and to save it from perishing. This intervention, of human society, a kind of buffer state, is of first-class importance in our psychological and ideological development.

As infants, the first things we have to cope with are not human beings: we can already cope with those; for we are born with a suitable but simple reflex mechanism which does the job perfectly well. We yell and cry. Adult humans are unable to withstand this. We don't so much mind children making a noise if they are happy and laughing and gay; but we can't bear the sound of a crying child. We develop an anxiety, sooner or later, and feel ourselves compelled to go to the crying infant, and try to give it what it wants. This anxiety relates to our own babyhood, and to conflicts we have long ago forgotten—the conflict between our feeling of being unlimited, our illusory feeling of freedom on the one hand, and on the other the dim but growing feeling of dependence on human adults, of being limited and dependent.

In his "Trauma of Birth", Otto Rank says; "Every child has anxiety, and from the standpoint of the average healthy adult one can, with a certain amount of justification, designate the childhood of individuals as their normal neurosis. Only, this may continue into the adult life in the case of certain individuals, who therefore remain infantile, or are called infantile." And, later: "But we wish to dwell for a moment on the indubitable analytic fact that just as the anxiety at birth forms the basis of every anxiety or fear, so every pleasure has as its final aim the re-establishment of the intra-uterine primal pleasure."

Thus my thesis is that our anxiety connected with abstract and unlimited freedom is the same kind of anxiety we feel when we come up against our so-called "sound barrier", and that both anxieties are connected with our infantile assumption of unlimited freedom, which, by painful conflict, we have long ago learnt to renounce, in favour of the more realistic awareness that we are limited and determined.

But that process in which we renounce a fancied freedom, an illusory freedom of mere feeling, that process in which we accept the limitations the world imposes on us, that process is the very means of realizing our real freedom.

In accepting our limitations, in making them our own, they become self-limitations, and freedom is the nature of self-limitation. Again, in defining our limitations, and making them more clear to ourselves, we limit them, we transcend them. Whatever the vicissitudes of the human spirit, the human mind, of one thing we can be sure in the long run: the human mind is determined to be free, and it is by being determined, and by accepting determination (and defining, and limiting, and understanding), that it transcends its limitations. Once we have grasped that, we have broken down the initial barriers to further progress and insight into our own natures.

The Sound Barrier—II

Seton Pollock

THERE are certain words which, however imperfect or even objection-able they may be in themselves, express a real experience known to every one of us. Socrates' "daemon", Wordsworth's "intimations", the religious folk's "inspiration" or "mystical sense", and the scientist's "hunch". The Quakers have two particularly pleasant terms: "an opening" and "being moved by the Spirit". Hunch is, perhaps, the best word, because it is unpretentious and is easily intelligible. Not to have lived by that experience is not to be human at all,

But immediately this experience is discussed we run into difficulties. The theologians bear down upon us—not all of them religious theologians—and explain the experience in theoretical terms. The psychologist, the scientist and the artist have their "theologies". The psychological "theologian" reduces the experience to terms like Id, Unconscious Mentation, Collective Unconscious, Herd Instinct, or whatever term fits in with his outlook. The scientist prefers such terms as Universal Process or Blind Forces of Nature. One artist has coined the term Middle—painting from one's middle.

The trouble begins when these imperfect modes of expressing the experience are regarded as being themselves the truth. This leads to disputation, and the experience itself is lost in argument as to how it should be accounted for and described. Words from which the WORD has departed are dead words. It is in the realm of the dead words that the confusion takes its rise.

The experience with which we begin is essentially feeling—the feeling shared by artists, poets, judges, scientists, mystics, musicians and mathematicians. At this level all can join hands in a common experience. But feelings are never bare feelings; they emerge clothed in words, symbols, pictures; in musical works, in thoughts and patterns of thought, in words and in theories (which are also works of art). This is the level at which the initial experience is communicated, the level of communion in the diverse group. The important point is that it is the initial, original experience that is communicated, but this can only be achieved by the medium of words, symbols, metaphors, theories, hypotheses, and works of art, by principles and generalizations. If the artists, scientists, lawyers, psychologists, and the rest mistake these means of communication for the experience they communicate, they must necessarily quarrel. If, however, they use the means of communication to evoke in each other, and then share, their original experiences, they come to understanding. When "thinker" and "artist" maintain contact with the "middle"—the original feeling- experience out of which their diverse works spring—the barrier between them disappears with a bang.

Turning now to Harold Walsby's statement of this problem and its solution, there are five points he made which bring into the open the important difference that seems to exist between his approach and my own.

1. Harold claims to begin at nothing. I regard this as a false start. In fact, we begin with the experience of "being moved". The game begins with something happening, something that is experienced and, therefore, felt.

2. He speaks of "the loss of the finite" which leads to what he is prepared to call God—God being a "principle". But, I would maintain, a principle is an artefact of the human mind and is itself derived from experience. To convert God into a principle is to make a god with the hands of one's own intellect—which is idolatry in the modern style. This can be illustrated from the analogy of gravitation. Gravity is often treated as though it were a "fact". The facts are, however, what actually happens—that stones fall, that dust settles, that the stars are bound together. Gravity is the generalization that man makes to draw sense and meaning out of the observations of fact. As these observations are extended and correlated the doctrine of gravity is modified. So, too, the doctrine of God grows as our range of experience is extended. To equate gravity, (i.e., the reality that is perpetually clothed in facts) with the doctrine or

principle that we call gravity is an error. To equate God with the principle that we call God is where Harold's fallacy seems to me to lie.

Harold quoted with approval Whitehead's doctrine that the way to the concrete is through the abstract. But this statement is only half of the truth. The whole truth is that we come to the abstract from experience of the concrete, returning to the concrete again with sharpened apprehension of its meaning. To split this intellectual adventure, tearing away from it the initiation of the whole process, is the serious point of objection to Harold's formulation.

4. [*Sub – para. 3 is not identified in the original. Ed*] Harold insists that to declare that the mind is limited absolutely at any point may seem to be modest but is, actually, arrogant. I cannot agree, because neither modesty nor arrogance come into the picture at this point. It is purely a question of ascertaining and accepting the facts of the situation. We all admit we have bodily limitations. Surely the mind is limited, too, and we do well to observe and accept that fact. The ultimate limit of the mind must lie at the point where feeling comes to birth. If we forget this limitation, we are claiming that we can go back behind the experience of feeling; but we forget that this would itself be an experience involving feeling. We may theorize as to what lies behind feeling, and we can coin words like God, Unconscious Mentation, the Id and so forth, but all these terms derive from facts of intellectual experience and involve a "feeling about experience".

5. With reference to Harold's thesis of the baby coming from the womb, I would suggest that although the baby may have an illusion of omnipotence, the midwife standing by knows how completely illusory the assumption of omnipotence is. Life seems to involve above all the steady collapse of this primal illusion. To divert attention from this experience of the collapse of illusion (in the passage to maturity) by making "Nothing" the starting-point, is really an invitation to return to the illusion by way of a symbol. The symbol is man-made, and "the concept of nothing" must not be mistaken for **Nothing**.



An apology is due to all Members and Associates for the long delay in the publication of this issue of the Quarterly. This has been entirely my responsibility, and I am indeed sorry. It is hoped to produce the next Programme within a very short time, and meanwhile details of weekends during April and May are available from the Secretary,—EVE FISK.