

The book cover features a complex marbled pattern in shades of brown, tan, and black. A central rectangular area is highlighted with a double-line border in a dark brown color. Inside this border, the author's name and the title are printed in a dark brown, serif font.

P. D. OUSPENSKY

THE
PSYCHOLOGY
OF MAN'S
POSSIBLE
EVOLUTION

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THESE lectures, originally entitled *Six Psychological Lectures*, were privately printed in 1940 for the Historico-Psychological Society in London. One hundred twenty-five copies were printed and fifty were bound, but none were sold. The lectures were first published in New York in 1950, three years after Ouspensky's death, by the Hedgehog Press, Inc., under the title *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*. The book consisted of five lectures as the second and third lectures of *Six Psychological Lectures* were combined into one, but the text was identical with the 1940 printing in England; only the spelling was Americanized. In 1954 Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., took over publication from the Hedgehog Press, and, in 1974, produced a second edition of *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*. This included "Notes on the Decision to Work," which has since been published with its two companion essays, "Notes on Work on Oneself" and "What Is School?," in *Conscience: The Search for Truth* (1979).

The present edition contains the verbatim account of a

meeting of one of Ouspensky's London groups on 23 September 1937. Ouspensky's answers to the questions raised at this meeting deal with some of the difficulties in understanding the fundamental ideas of a system belonging to "The Fourth Way," the principles and methods of organization of schools, and the importance of rules. The original account of this meeting, corrected and amended in Ouspensky's own handwriting, is in the P. D. Ouspensky Memorial Collection in the Manuscript and Archives Department of Yale University Library, and is published here for the first time by permission of the Librarian.

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INTRODUCTION



SOME years ago I began to receive letters from readers of my books. All these letters contained one question: *what I had been doing after I had written my books*, which were published in English in 1920 and 1931, and had been written in 1910 and 1912.

I could never answer these letters. It would have needed books even to attempt to do this. But when the people who wrote to me lived in London, where I lived after 1921, I invited them and arranged courses of lectures for them. In these lectures I tried to answer their questions and explain what I had discovered after I had written my two books, and what was the direction of my work.

In 1934 I wrote five preliminary lectures which gave a general idea of what I was studying, and also of the lines along which a certain number of people were working with me. To put all that in one, or even in two or three lectures, was quite impossible: so I al-

ways warned people that it was not worth while hearing one lecture, or two, but that only five, or better ten lectures could give an idea of the direction of my work. These lectures have continued since then, and throughout this time I have often corrected and re-written them.

On the whole I found the general arrangement satisfactory. Five lectures were read, in my presence or without me; listeners could ask questions; and if they tried to follow the advice and indications given them, which referred chiefly to self-observation and a certain self-discipline, they very soon had a quite sufficient working understanding of what I was doing.

I certainly recognized all the time that five lectures were not sufficient, and in talks that followed them I elaborated and enlarged the preliminary data, trying to show people their own position in relation to the *New Knowledge*.

I found that the chief difficulty for most people was to realize that they had really heard *new things*; that is, things that they had never heard before.

They did not formulate it for themselves, but in fact they always tried to contradict this in their minds and translate what they heard into their habitual language, whatever it happened to be. And this certainly I could not take into account.

I know that it is not an easy thing to realize that

one is hearing *new things*. We are so accustomed to the old tunes, and the old motives, that long ago we ceased to hope and ceased to believe that there might be anything new.

And when we hear new things, we take them for old, or think that they can be explained and interpreted by the old. It is true that it is a difficult task to realize the possibility and necessity of quite new ideas, and it needs with time a revaluation of all usual values.

I cannot guarantee that you will hear new ideas, that is, ideas you never heard before, from the start; but if you are patient you will very soon begin to notice them. And then I wish you not to miss them, and to try not to interpret them in the old way.

New York, 1945

First Lecture



I SHALL speak about the study of psychology, but I must warn you that the psychology about which I speak is very different from anything you may know under this name.

To begin with I must say that practically never in history has psychology stood at so *low a level* as at the present time. It has lost all touch with its *origin* and its *meaning* so that now it is even difficult to define the term "psychology": that is, to say what psychology is and what it studies. And this is so in spite of the fact that never in history have there been so many psychological theories and so many psychological writings.

Psychology is sometimes called a new science. This is quite wrong. Psychology is, perhaps, the *oldest science*, and, unfortunately, in its most essential features a *forgotten science*.

In order to understand how psychology can be de-

finer it is necessary to realize that psychology except in modern times has never existed under its own name. By one reason or another psychology always was suspected of *wrong or subversive tendencies*, either religious or political or moral, and had to use different disguises.

For thousands of years psychology existed under the name of philosophy. In India all forms of *Yoga*, which are essentially psychology, are described as one of the six systems of philosophy. *Sufi teachings*, which again are chiefly psychological, are regarded as partly religious and partly metaphysical. In Europe, even quite recently, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, many works on psychology were referred to as philosophy. And in spite of the fact that almost all subdivisions of philosophy such as logic, the theory of cognition, ethics, æsthetics, referred to the work of the human mind or senses, psychology was regarded as inferior to philosophy and as relating only to the lower or more trivial sides of human nature.

Parallel with its existence under the name of philosophy, psychology existed even longer connected with one or another religion. This does not mean that religion and psychology ever were one and the same thing, or that the fact of the connection between religion and psychology was recognized. But there is no doubt that

almost every known religion—certainly I do not mean modern *sham religions*—developed one or another kind of psychological teaching connected often with a certain practice, so that the study of religion very often included in itself the study of psychology.

There are many excellent works on psychology in quite orthodox religious literature of different countries and epochs. For instance, in early Christianity there was a collection of books of different authors under the general name of *Philokalia*, used in our time in the Eastern Church, especially for the instruction of monks.

During the time when psychology was connected with philosophy and religion it also existed in the form of art. Poetry, drama, sculpture, dancing, even architecture, were means for transmitting psychological knowledge. For instance, the Gothic cathedrals were in their chief meaning works on psychology.

In the ancient times before philosophy, religion, and art had taken their separate forms as we now know them, psychology had existed in the form of *Mysteries*, such as those of Egypt and of ancient Greece.

Later, after the disappearance of the *Mysteries*, psychology existed in the form of *Symbolical Teachings* which were sometimes connected with the religion of the period and sometimes not connected, such as as-

trology, alchemy, magic, and the more modern Masonry, occultism, and Theosophy.

And here it is necessary to note that all psychological systems and doctrines, those that exist or existed openly and those that were hidden or disguised, can be divided into two chief categories.

First: systems which study man *as they find him, or such as they suppose or imagine him to be*. Modern "scientific" psychology, or what is known under that name, belongs to this category.

Second: systems which study man not from the point of view of what he is, or what he seems to be, but from the point of view of what he may become; that is, from the point of view of his *possible evolution*.

These last systems are in reality the original ones, or in any case the oldest, and only they can explain the forgotten origin and the meaning of psychology.

When we understand the importance of the study of man from the point of view of *his possible evolution*, we shall understand that the first answer to the question, what is psychology, should be that psychology is the study of the principles, laws, and facts of man's possible evolution.

Here, in these lectures, I shall speak only from this point of view.

Our first question will be, what does evolution of man mean, and the second, are there any special conditions necessary for it.

As regards ordinary modern views on the origin of man and his previous evolution I must say at once that they cannot be accepted. We must realize that we know nothing about the origin of man and we have no proofs of man's physical or mental evolution.

On the contrary, if we take historical mankind, that is, humanity for ten or fifteen thousand years, we may find unmistakable signs of a higher type of man, whose presence can be established on the evidence of ancient monuments and memorials which cannot be repeated or imitated by the present humanity.

As regards *prehistoric man* or creatures similar in appearance to man and yet at the same time very different from him, whose bones are sometimes found in deposits of glacial or pre-glacial periods, we may accept the quite possible view that these bones belong to some being quite different from man, which died out long ago.

Denying previous evolution of man, we must deny any possibility of future *mechanical evolution of man*; that is, evolution happening by itself according to laws of heredity and selection, and without man's conscious efforts and understanding of his possible evolution.

Our fundamental idea shall be that man as we know him *is not a completed being*; that nature develops him only up to a certain point and then leaves him, to develop further, *by his own efforts and devices*, or to live and die such as he was born, or to degenerate and lose capacity for development.

Evolution of man in this case will mean the development of certain *inner* qualities and features which usually remain undeveloped, *and cannot develop by themselves*.

Experience and observation show that this development is possible only in certain definite conditions, with efforts of a certain kind on the part of man himself, and with *sufficient help* from those who began similar work before and have already attained a certain degree of development, *or at least* a certain knowledge of methods.

We must start with the idea that without efforts evolution is impossible; without help, it is also impossible.

After this we must understand that in the way of development, man must become a *different being*, and we must learn and understand in what sense and in which direction man must become a different being; that is, what a different being means.

Then we must understand that *all men* cannot

develop and become different beings. Evolution is the question of personal efforts, and in relation to the mass of humanity evolution is the rare exception. It may sound strange, but we must realize that it is not only rare, *but is becoming more and more rare.*

Many questions naturally arise from the preceding statements:

What does it mean that in the way of evolution man must become a different being?

What does "different being" mean?

Which inner qualities or features can be developed in man, and how can this be done?

Why cannot all men develop and become different beings? Why such an injustice?

I shall try to answer these questions and I shall begin with the last one.

Why cannot all men develop and become different beings?

The answer is very simple. *Because they do not want it.* Because they do not know about it and will not understand without a long preparation what it means, even if they are told.

The chief idea is that in order to become a *different being* man must want it very much and for a very long

time. A passing desire or a vague desire based on dissatisfaction with external conditions will not create a sufficient impulse.

The evolution of man depends on his understanding of what he may get and what he must give for it.

If man does not want it, or if he does not want it *strongly enough*, and does not make necessary efforts, he will never develop. So there is no injustice in this. Why should man have what he does not want? If man were forced to become a different being when he is satisfied with what he is, then this would be injustice.

Now we must ask ourselves what a *different being* means. If we consider all the material we can find that refers to this question, we find an assertion that in becoming a different being man acquires many new qualities and powers which he does not possess now. This is a common assertion which we find in all kinds of systems admitting the idea of psychological or inner growth of man.

But this is not sufficient. Even the most detailed descriptions of these new powers will not help us in any way to understand how they appear and where they come from.

There is a missing link in ordinary known theories, even in those I already mentioned which are based on the idea of the possibility of evolution of man.

The truth lies in the fact that before acquiring any *new* faculties or powers which man does not know and does not possess now, he must acquire faculties and powers he *also does not possess*, but which he ascribes to himself; that is, he thinks that he knows them and can use and control them.

This is the missing link, and *this is the most important point*.

By way of evolution, as described before, that is, a way based on effort and help, man must acquire qualities which he thinks he already possesses, but about which he deceives himself.

In order to understand this better, and to know what are these faculties and powers which man can acquire, both quite new and unexpected and also those which he imagines that he already possesses, we must begin with man's general knowledge about himself.

And here we come at once to a very important fact.
Man does not know himself.

He does not know his own limitations and his own possibilities. He does not even know to how great an extent he does not know himself.

Man has invented many machines, and he knows that a complicated machine needs sometimes years of careful study before one can use it or control it. But he does not apply this knowledge to himself, although

he himself is a much more complicated machine than any machine he has invented.

He has all sorts of wrong ideas about himself. First of all, he does not realize that he *actually is a machine*.

What does it mean that man is a machine?

It means that he has no *independent movements*, inside or outside of himself. He is a machine which is brought into motion by *external influences and external impacts*. All his movements, actions, words, ideas, emotions, moods, and thoughts are produced by external influences. By himself, he is just an automaton with a certain store of memories of previous experiences, and a certain amount of reserve energy.

We must understand that man can do nothing.

But he does not realize this and ascribes to himself the *capacity to do*. This is the first wrong thing that man ascribes to himself.

That must be understood very clearly. *Man cannot do*. Everything that man thinks he does, really *happens*. It happens exactly as "it rains," or "it thaws."

In the English language there are no impersonal verbal forms which can be used in relation to human actions. So we must continue to say that man thinks, reads, writes, loves, hates, starts wars, fights, and so on. Actually, all this *happens*.

Man cannot move, think, or speak of his own ac-

cord. He is a marionette pulled here and there by invisible strings. If he understands this, he can learn more about himself, and possibly then things may begin to change for him. But if he cannot realize and understand his *utter mechanicalness*, or if he does not wish to accept it as a fact, he can learn nothing more, and things cannot change for him.

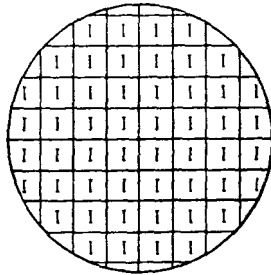
Man is a machine, but a very peculiar machine. He is a machine which, in right circumstances, and with right treatment, *can know that he is a machine*, and, having fully realized this, he may find the ways to cease to be a machine.

First of all, what man must know is that he is not one; he is many. He has not one permanent and unchangeable "I" or Ego. He is always different. One moment he is one, another moment he is another, the third moment he is a third, and so on, almost without an end.

The illusion of unity or oneness is created in man first, by the sensation of one physical body, *by his name*, which in normal cases always remains the same, and third, by a number of mechanical habits which are implanted in him by education or acquired by imitation. Having always the same physical sensations, hearing always the same name and noticing in himself the same habits and inclinations he had before, he believes himself to be always the same.

In reality there is no oneness in man and there is no controlling center, no permanent "I" or Ego.

This is the general picture of man:



Every thought, every feeling, every sensation, every desire, every like and every dislike is an "I." These "I's" are not connected and are not co-ordinated in any way. Each of them depends on the change in external circumstances, and on the change of impressions.

Some of them mechanically follow some other, and some appear always accompanied by others. But there is no order and no system in that.

There are certain groups of "I's" which are naturally connected. We will speak about these groups later. Now, we must try to understand that there are groups of "I's" connected only by accidental associations, accidental memories, or quite imaginary similarities.

Each of these "I's" represents at every given mo-

ment a very small part of our "brain," "mind," or "intelligence," but each of them means itself to represent *the whole*. When man says "I" it sounds as if he meant the whole of himself, but really even when he himself thinks that he means it, it is only a passing thought, a passing mood, or passing desire. In an hour's time he may completely forget it, and with the same conviction express an opposite opinion, opposite view, opposite interests. The worst of it is that man does not remember it. In most cases he believes in the last "I" which expressed itself, as long as it lasts: that is, as long as another "I"—sometimes quite unconnected with the preceding one—does not express its opinion or its desire louder than the first.

Now let us return to two other questions:

What does development mean? And what does it mean that man can become a different being? Or, in other words, what kind of change is *possible* in man, and how and *when* does this change begin?

It has already been said that the change will begin with those powers and capacities which man *ascribes to himself*, but which, in reality, he does not possess.

This means that before man can acquire any *new* powers and capacities, he must actually develop in himself those qualities which he *thinks* he possesses, and about which he has the greatest possible illusions.

Development cannot begin on the basis of lying to