

THE
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THE ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF PSYCHOLOGY¹

THERE is little doubt that in the minds of those specially skilled in the handling of psychological mysteries, as well as those who look at such subjects from the more remote and popular points of view, one or more of the following three questions will arise at the mere announcement of the theme I am proposing briefly to discuss. The first of these questions may take the form of a more or less scornful objection to the whole subject of ontology. Are there any real human interests, whether scientific or ethical, that can be served by the further consideration of ontological problems? Is not all metaphysics, in the narrower meaning of ontological speculation, a worn-out and hopelessly unfruitful affair, and thus devoid of claim upon the resources of the human mind, which, indeed, shows itself as not unlikely soon to be unable to keep pace with the demands made upon it by the most imperative so-called 'practical affairs'?

The second of these three questions, while not denying all value to ontological speculation, and even making the languid concession which I once heard of as made to the sermonettes of a certain preacher—"Such things sometimes do some good"—deprecates the admission of metaphysics within the sacred precincts of a scientific psychology. Now I trust I have in the past made myself sufficiently clear on this point. It is, in my judgment, possible and profitable for the attempt at a science of psychology to take the same attitude toward ontological problems as that assumed, in general, by the physico-chemical

¹ This paper was one of a series of addresses on "The Problems of Psychology," delivered last spring in Columbia University.