

**LIVE QUESTIONS IN PSYCHOLOGY  
AND METAPHYSICS. SIX LECTURES  
SELECTED FROM THOSE DELIVERED  
TO THE CLASSES IN CORNELL  
UNIVERSITY**

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Live Questions in Psychology and Metaphysics. Six Lectures Selected from Those Delivered to the Classes in Cornell University by W. D. Wilson

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**W. D. WILSON**

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*Geo. S. Monis.*  
*From the Author.*  
*Oct. 4, 1877.*

LIVE QUESTIONS

IN

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PSYCHOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS.

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Selected from those delivered to the Classes in  
Cornell University,

BY PROFESSOR W. D. WILSON.

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# LECTURE I.

## *SENSATION.*

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[PREFATORY NOTE.—These Lectures occur in the Courses on Psychology and Metaphysics with the History of Philosophy. As they are intended chiefly for the use of the students in my classes, and for distribution among private friends, and persons specially interested in such subjects, they are printed as they were written for delivery; the first three occur in the Course of Lectures on Psychology; the last three are the conclusion of the Course on the History of Philosophy.]

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Good definitions are the best part of any science, and without them there is no accuracy or scientific comprehension anywhere.

It seems to me that there are just now several subjects in the department of Psychology, which are especially in need of somebody's services in this line.

I propose in the following Lectures to do what I can to aid the cause of science, and the cause of religion and good morals also, in so far as they depend upon these subjects, by an effort at a more clear and satisfactory explanation of some of these fundamental facts and phenomena, than I have yet anywhere met with in the books that have fallen under my notice. Among them Sensation is perhaps the first in order.

The two doctrines with regard to Sensation from which I dissent, and to which I wish to call attention in this Lecture, are, (1) that it is a state of the *mind* or soul, and, (2) that it is an *objective* something that can be treated as a concrete reality. The first doctrine is taught, I believe everywhere; the second has, perhaps, never been avowed or expressly taught by anybody. It is merely assumed in some discussions, and more especially in those with regard to "the transmission of sensations" along the different nerves and to the hemispheres of the brain.

The two doctrines are not necessarily connected. In fact, they sustain a sort of opposition and incompatible contrariety to each other. If we regard a sensation as a mere *state* of the mind, and keep this view in our thoughts, we shall not be likely to speak of it, as being "carried along" the nerves from the organs of sense to the encephalon. In such a juxtaposition of the definition of the word and the statements made concerning the object which it is used to denote, the absurdity becomes too apparent to be seriously maintained. In those cases, however, it is not probable that the fallacy—the mere metonymy of using an abstract term for a concrete one,—has done any real harm to the cause of scientific truth.

There is, however, one case quite distinctly in my mind, in which it seems to me that this assumption has misled a very prominent authority, and through him and his influence, the whole world of thinkers and writers on the physiology of the nervous system.

Some years ago, Dr. Brown-Sequard made a series of experiments for the purpose of testing the, then-received theory "that sensations are conveyed up the posterior column of the spinal cord to the brain." He published an account of these



researches in his "*Lectures on the Physiology and Pathology of the Central Nervous System.* 1860.

Without pretending to give an account of these experiments in detail, or in the order in which he made them, I will speak of them as of two classes. In the one, he severed the posterior column, and applied an irritant to the hinder limb of the animal; the section of the cord having been made quite a distance nearer the head of the animal than the entrance of the nerve which goes from the place where the irritation was applied into the spinal cord. In these cases he found, that "sensations were carried up to the brain" as before the operation, from which he inferred that the sensations are not carried up by the posterior column as had been supposed.

In the next class of cases he severed the gray matter within the cord, and left the posterior column untouched. On applying irritants as before, he found that "the sensations were not carried to the brain"—from which he inferred that the gray matter does "carry the sensations to the brain." Later experiments have led, I believe, to the general adoption of the doctrine that the "sensations are carried up by the posterior part of the central gray column and not by the posterior white column at all."\*

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\*It should be noticed, however, that these experiments and the inference from them can be understood as relating only to the sensations of the general subjective-sense—the sensations of pain, etc., which appertain to all the tissues of the body, and not at all to the object-sense of touch—by which we perceive the presence and properties of objects external to the cuticle. Brown-Sequard made no discrimination in his experiments between the two classes of sensations; and my belief is, that all the more recent writers on Physiology do regard the posterior column as the channel and conductor of the tactile sensations to the brain.

Now as proving that "sensations are not carried up by the posterior column," these experiments are conclusive and final. But do they prove that "sensations are carried up" by the gray matter?

It would certainly be pertinent to remark from an ontological point of view, that "sensations" are not *things* that can be *produced* anywhere, and transmitted from one place to another, as we send packages by express, or letters by mail. And yet, Dr. Brown-Sequard's interpretation of his experiments, and his inferences from them, imply this view of their nature. If the question were asked him, I do not, for one moment, suppose, that he would say that he so regarded them at the time, or that he so regards them now. He had, doubtless, been led, unconsciously, into this error, by what the logicians call the fallacy of *figura dictionis*. Sensations are spoken of as though they were concrete substantial entities that can be conveyed or transmitted from place to place; and therefore without stopping to consider whether they are so or not, he acquiesced in that view, and proceeded to interpret his experiments accordingly.

However, if this were all I have to say of his experiments it would hardly be worth the while to have said so much. But it seems to me that they point to another theory of sensation, which I am inclined to adopt on other grounds as well as on this.

In any view, Brown-Sequard's interpretation of his experiments assumes that sensations are produced at the distal end of the nerves—at the periphery of the body—and carried up by the afferent nerves to the spinal cord; and thence along up the cord—some part of it—to the brain. But suppose "the sensation is produced"—whatever the expression may mean—in *the spinal cord itself*, and we shall have a very different inference from his experiments.

What I mean can be easily illustrated. We stop at a friend's door and ring the bell. What we do at the door is a "*pull*;" what we produce in the house is a "*ring*" or a noise. Or again: suppose we send an electric current along a copper wire into a piece of platinum; the platinum not being a good conductor, becomes heated. Now what we "produce" at the electric machine or the battery, is electricity; and what we "send along" the wire is electricity but when it reaches the platinum it becomes heat. The platinum will not "transmit" the *electricity* at all, as such, nor yet will it "transmit" the heat in the sense we are now using the word. But becoming heated, it will heat anything that is in contact with it; and will especially "conduct the heat" into any substance with which it may be connected at the end opposite to that at which the electricity is "conducted" into it.

Now suppose we have an irritation produced in any sensory tissue in which afferent nerves terminate:—this answers to the battery or electric machine. The current is conducted along the afferent nerves,—which answer to the copper wire in the electric experiment referred to, and whenever it reaches the nerve cells in the gray matter of the spinal cord, they are set into a state of unusual activity, which we may call a sensation: this coincides with the heat of the platinum. The case of the electricity being converted into heat is not an argument. It is neither claimed nor used as such. It is merely an illustration of what I mean, and as an illustration it seems to me to be particularly good.

And it corresponds exactly with Brown-Sequard's experiment. When the white fibres of the posterior column were severed, this fact could make no difference with the sensation if we only admit that the sensation was a state of the nerve cells in the