SOME VERBAL PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH CHARACTER NOMENCLATURE.

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I. INTRODUCTION.

THE problem of devising scientific means of assessing and describing the personal characteristics of an individual has been attacked along a number of lines, of which the principal, perhaps, has been the attempt to separate independent variables by the use of *tests*, which, it was expected, might be the subject of progressive refinement through study of the intercorrelations of scores obtained with them. So, starting with the admittedly imprecise categories of common discourse, and the adjectives commonly used in the description of individuals, it was hoped that by degrees it would be possible to disentangle the basic variables to which personality and character are subject, and to provide the means of assessing each by the use of a particular test. It can scarcely be said that these hopes have been realized. The categories in question have eluded the refining power of test score factorization.(1)

A second possible line of approach has been explored in a preliminary manner by Allport and Odbert.(2) This consists in the consideration of the general, linguistic and semantic problems which are involved in the use of words to stand for personal characteristics. These writers were concerned only with their problems of dictionary definition. The difficulties arising from the actual use of the words in relation to their context did not affect them.

The present paper presents the results of the first part of an attempt to view terminology in this field from the standpoint of actual usage. We shall not be concerned, for instance, with the relation which could or should subsist between a word and the character for which it is supposed to stand—nor with the question of whether the characters denoted by the words are truly fundamental psychologically. The problem with which we shall deal in this paper is that of the meaning which is in fact attributed to such words* when a statement of meaning is demanded.

It cannot be denied that some at least of the concepts of present-day psychology are deplorably lacking in precision of meaning; and the purely

* A later report will consider the question of what words are in fact used in the formulation of judgments regarding the character and personality of individuals.

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scientific is not the only sphere in which conceptual inadequacy may cause difficulty. There are a number of quasi-psychological concepts demanded in the discourse of everyday life: notably in the communication from one individual to another of information regarding the personal characteristics of a third. By word and deed we constantly make judgments about the *reliability*, *sociability*, *honesty* and so forth of others. These judgments must often be communicated by the use of language—the usefulness of this procedure evidently resting upon the common acceptance of word-meanings. The precise communication of such judgments has become a matter of enhanced importance in circumstances, now common, where it is sought to render more exact and reliable the assessment of personal quality by the device of employing a number of judges, and comparing their separate impressions, often upon a quantitative basis. Again, if we attempt to determine empirically the degree in which reliance may be placed upon judgments of character, by comparing a number of independent assessments of the same individual by different judges, it is essential to know the degree in which discrepancies found may derive from differences of the meaning of the words used in formulation, or in the concepts lying at the basis of judgment. Practical considerations such as these sometimes escape attention. There have been notable instances in the past where progress has been barred until the necessity of an adequate language for the description of phenomena, and for the communication of theories and facts, was finally recognized.

2. The Method and its Limitations.

On practical and theoretical grounds alike it seemed to be worth while, as a preliminary step in the attempt to devise a fresh systematic terminology for the psychology of personality and character, to find out in two simple cases the range of variation in concept and word-meaning. The method consisted in requesting a number of psychologists to give a statement of what they understood by two words commonly used to describe character and personality. The words chosen were *reliability* and *sociability*. The questions asked were the following:

1. Please write a brief account of what you understand by the term *reliability*, used as an attribute of character or personal quality.

2. Please write a brief account of a concrete incident (real or imaginary) in which the quality of *reliability* is displayed by an individual.

3. As (1), substituting *sociability* for *reliability*.

4. As (2), substituting *sociability* for *reliability*.

The reason for requesting that the subjects should write an account of a concrete instance of the quality in addition to providing an abstract statement of its meaning was as follows: It was thought that the instances given might

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display the degree in which the abstract statement truly represented the conception of the quality entertained by the writer. For there is a tendency, when a definition is demanded, to frame it in such a way that *formally* it is satisfactory, and this tendency may often conflict with the honest intention of the writer to say what he really means by the idea in question. In other words, one of the factors affecting the definition of a conception is a desire to make up a form of words which *could* be a definition of *something*. It was hoped that the effect of this factor might be assessed by the request for concrete instances in addition to statements of meaning. This hope was only in part realized.

The questions were sent to thirty psychologists, and twenty-three were kind enough to send replies. Some of those to whom it was addressed were engaged in academic or pure research work. Some were engaged partly in such work and partly in clinical or other forms of applied psychology, and the remainder wholly in the latter. There was wide variation in the age of the subjects. All the persons to whom the questions were sent were known to the investigator in a greater or less degree.

Before turning to the analysis of the material thus obtained, there is a preliminary point that requires consideration. How far is it in fact possible to find out the sense in which people use a word, or to discover the nature of a concept which they employ, merely by requiring them to give a written statement of the meaning of that word, or of what they understand by that concept? One obvious limitation of such a method of investigation is the fact that the precise meaning of a word is often, in an important degree, a function of the context in which it occurs. In some cases the subjects were able to indicate very broad distinctions of context, and provide different meanings corresponding with each. But in general, we cannot assume more than that the answers obtained indicate only some fairly persistent framework of meaning which, in actual use, reacts with a specific context and gives rise to concrete significance. Again, psychologists are persons who maintain more or less distinct habits of thought to correspond with their different activities. At least three different levels of opinion must be assumed to exist, namely: (1) That of the ordinary person, making judgments and entering into communication with other ordinary persons in the course of everyday life; (2) that of the practising psychologist, compelled for the purpose of his work, whether it be research or clinical practice, to accept *some* fairly clear-cut conceptual stock-in-trade, although it be ultimately unsatisfactory; and (3) that of the theorist concerned to excogitate a consistent and intellectually satisfactory view of the phenomena he observes. One subject only drew my attention explicitly to this point, in a covering letter. But there are a number of indications in the material of these differences of level. No attempt was made to suggest that any one specific role should be adopted by the subjects in answering the questions, since it was felt that simplicity of conditions was important.

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Lastly, in regard to the relation between the concept and the word meaning, there is a further difficulty. The concept, in some sense, is the necessary basis of judgments, but it would be unwise to assume that it operates in the articulate form given to it by verbal definition, or that all the aspects of it which are involved in judgment are susceptible of display in verbal terms. In other words, we must not suppose that, in judging the quality of "reliability" in others, a man will always (or, indeed, ever) act in a manner consistent with his written statement of what he understands by "reliability". All that we are entitled to assume is, that by studying the latter, we may obtain an *indirect* indication of something that lies at the basis of his judgments and his use of words alike. The demand that he judge and the demand that he define are both situations towards which he reacts, and his reactions are, in each case, determined in some sense by the concept. It is in the light of all these considerations that we have to evaluate the results of such an investigation as the present.

3. Analysis of the Material.

It would evidently be impossible to quote at length the material obtained. The analysis of the answers in regard to *one* of the two concepts in question will serve to emphasize the necessity for an extended inquiry. For this purpose *reliability* rather than *sociability* has been chosen, since the answers in regard to the former suggest in more striking form the points at issue.

The concrete instances of the qualities provided by the subjects showed a tendency to consist of a general indication of circumstances rather than in a convincing description of events. Some were confined to a bare extension, in slightly more concrete form, of the abstract statement made. It would seem that the conceptions in question are not susceptible of easy illustration in concrete terms. It was, perhaps, not to be expected that the subjects, having committed themselves to an abstract definition, would be able to produce an instance that was truly concrete and specific, and conformed satisfactorily with what they had just written in abstract terms. The "concrete instances" will not be further considered in this paper.

As regards the statements about the meaning of "*reliability*", the first broad division of types to be noticed is that between those which seek to characterize the quality in terms relating solely to the reliable person, and those which entail reference to the fulfilment of some obligation of external origin. Thus G— writes: "*I regard reliability as a quality which tends to make the person possessing it react in a similar way in many different situations . . .*" This illustrates the first type of statement. I— writes: "*A person is 'reliable' who can be trusted to carry out explicit or implicit obligations*"—an instance of the second type. Of the sixteen statements which fall without strain into one or other of these two classes, six belong to the first and ten to the second.

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It is quite evident that these types derive from some basic cleavage of ideas. The first involves the notion of a certain regularity in the processes within the individual that determine his behaviour, or in his behaviour itself. It is a *consequence* of this characteristic that he will, as a matter of fact, generally fulfil obligations. The second suggests a means of classifying individuals according to their behaviour in a common type of social situation, namely that of obligation. We may conveniently refer to the first of these senses as the *internal*, and to the second as the *external*.

The regularity of behaviour referred to in the internal sense may consist only in mere regularity in respect of *anything*, and in this sense an individual may be regular, or reliable, only in the irregularity or unreliability of his behaviour. This meaning, however, is only referred to by two of the subjects, and one of these suggests it simply as an ironical usage—"... *as when I say 'he can be relied upon to do the wrong thing'*" (J--). More frequently there is reference to the adaptive, or even to the ethical, significance of the regularity. Thus U—: "*Reliability = capacity for highly adaptive behaviour in a number of inter-related social and occupational contexts* ..."; and "*A reliable person* ..." responds "... (*both as regards act and feeling*) *in a uniform and satisfactory manner to repeated situations of a broadly similar character. N.B.—Constancy of inward and outward response is not enough. The response must be a* SATISFACTORY *one* ..." (L—). The underlying feeling in these cases appears to be that for the individual in a social community there are certain demands which he must satisfy by reaction. These may originate in himself, or in his environment, or in both, and they can be defined only loosely, and not without ideas of adaptiveness which, in this context, demand quasi-ethical reference. The reliable person is one who constantly is able to satisfy these demands, but his reliability would seem to lie less in the fact that he does so than in the internal consistency that allows him to. The quasi-ethical reference is involved only in the definition of the sphere of activities within which regularity manifests itself.

We must notice that, while the material and the ethical characteristics of the situations demanding reaction are not easily distinguished, and while many of these situations will certainly be ones of acquired obligation, this internal sense of the word is separate from the external sense. The former attempts to place the personal quality in question directly in the person concerned, and not, as does the external sense, derivatively through his being relied upon by others. Thus he would possess the quality, in the internal sense, *even though obligations formed no part of his environment.* In addition, the internal sense takes a broader view of the circumstances in which reliability is manifested.

Closely bound up with the internal sense is the notion of the *predictability* of the individual's behaviour. Thus A—writes: "*I use this term* ... *to characterize* CONSISTENCY *or* PREDICTABILITY *of behaviour* ..."; and P—:

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"*For me the notion of dependability* (*or reliability*) *is bound up with the notion of 'forecastability'* . . . ." It is not clear in such cases precisely what sense of predictability is intended. It might be used only to refer to a mere empirical law of observed instances, or, on the other hand, to imply knowledge, regarding the internal behaviour-mechanisms concerned, which would allow prediction to be based upon something more general than observed regularity of fact. Certainly in some cases there is a suggestion of the latter sense. T—writes: '. . . *it* (*reliability*) *connotes a consistency of behaviour patterns* IMPLYING *balanced and controlled emotions, and a* CONSEQUENT *possibility of confidently predicting a person's behaviour when confronted by problems old and new.*" (The words in small capitals were not so emphasized in the original.) We may note that the use of the word "predictability" in this connection rather suggests once again that the internal sense of reliability is bound up with the attempt to ascribe to the individual, of whom it is predicted, some internal characteristic which will *result* in his being someone upon whom others may rely. Similar remarks would apply to the notion of *the probability of a given type of behaviour appearing in a given context*, which is also used by some of the subjects.

One subject (A—) writes: "*It should be noted that the predictability need not involve prediction of precise and concrete detail, but may refer only to psychological consistency,*" and the same idea appears in other answers, although in a less explicit form. The essential point here would seem to be that the *mere constant connection of types of response with types of situation* does not necessarily indicate reliability in the sense the writer has in mind. Considerable variation in the connection of actual behaviour with actual situations may be consistent with true "reliability" in the internal sense. Other subjects suggest that "reliability" consists less in the constant connection of *behaviour* with situation than in the ability ". . . *to take up a relatively constant* ATTITUDE *to, or position in, one or more environments or situations* . . ." (O—).

The next question that arises concerns the use of the notion of "context", or inter-related group of situations. This notion appeared in two somewhat distinct ways. In the first place it may be used to limit the range of activities within which the person concerned must exhibit regularity of behaviour in order that he shall properly be called "reliable". Thus a number of subjects pointed out that a man may be "reliable" within one broad context of activities (e.g., his professional work), and yet be very "unreliable" in another (e.g., his social engagements). In the second place, the notion of groups of related situations may be used *positively* in the definition of "reliability". So G— writes: "*I regard reliability as a quality which tends to make the person possessing it react in a similar way in many* DIFFERENT *situations.*" L—, on the other hand, speaks of uniformity of response ". . . *to repeated situations of a broadly* SIMILAR *character*". This apparently striking verbal discrepancy need not be treated too seriously, except in so far as it shows up the extremely

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nebulous nature of the concept of "reliability" in general, our lack of an adequate vocabulary for the description of behaviour, and the pitfalls inherent in the inadequately qualified use of such words as "similar" and "different". The points which G— and L— wish to make are fairly clear. G— is concerned primarily to emphasize that "reliability" demands a similarity between the different reactions of the individual that is not to be accounted for by similarity of the situations in which he reacts, while L— wishes to point out that uniformity need not extend over the whole range of the individual's responses.

These extracts from the answers of G— and L— do, however, raise an important issue. Granting, for the sake of argument, that "reliability" involves uniformity of response to repeated situations of a broadly similar character, in what respect are these situations supposed to be similar? We might suppose, in the first instance, that the similarity derives from the fact that the situations all belong to a single context of activities. Thus a man might exhibit "reliability" by acting consistently in all the different situations that constitute his professional, or his social, or his family life. But if F_1 be a situation in his family life, and P_1 one in his professional life, it may be, and frequently is, the case that in an important respect F_1 is more similar to P_1 than to $F_{2, 3, 4}$, etc., while *mutatis mutandis* the same holds of P_1. So there arise other systems of classification for situations; and, moreover, a man may exhibit "reliability" by his uniformity of response over any one of these classes of broadly similar situations. For instance he may, both in family and professional matters, be very "reliable" in his dealings with things, and not at all so in regard to persons. So it would seem that in ascribing to an individual the quality of "reliability", we ought to specify the respect in which the situations to which he responds uniformly are similar to one another. But to do so is to introduce just that kind of complex reference to, and dependence upon, categories belonging rather to the environment than the individual which cannot fail to increase the difficulties of psychological theory. In addition it is plain that grave difficulties will be found in providing a precise sense in which different individuals may be *compared* in respect of their reliability, if the concept is susceptible of qualitative varieties.

The attempt to rid the concept of "reliability" from theoretically undesirable tinges of meaning deriving from social, environmental and ethical categories, or, alternatively, to provide some fresh concept which is scientifically useful and yet stands in as close a relation as possible to the everyday notion of this quality, must be based upon consideration of the factors internal to the individual which make for the presence or absence of "reliability". Several of the subjects indicated in their answers their opinions about this question. D— and R— suggest that a good memory is essential, but Prof. Freud would perhaps reply that this is rather putting the cart before the horse. H— writes that "reliability" "*seems to depend upon* (1) *regular habits of life*, (2) *continuity and steadiness of interests, implying well-developed sentiments*, (3) *a*

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strong sense of obligation". In this statement we find a mixture of notions proper to psychology with those of external origin.

But perhaps the most interesting suggestion comes from O— and R—. The former writes: "*The essential is, that towards a situation in which reliability is shown, there should be no conflicting tendencies in the reliable person.*" Now the concept of *conflict* has an acknowledged status in scientific psychology. Moreover, the symptoms of conflict may in fact include an unreliability by no means confined to behaviour directly relevant to the conflicting impulses, but spread over a wide field of large and small matters of everyday life. It would seem possible, then, that the psychological counterpart of the everyday concept "reliability" is to be found in the general conditions of equilibrium of impulses or drives.

We have now to consider the *external* sense of the word "reliability". This was the commonest mode of definition suggested in the answers. It is based upon the notion of *reliance upon* persons who habitually fulfil obligations which they have contracted. Within this general framework, however, there is much variation in points of detail. These variations fall broadly into two types: (1) variation in the conception of *obligation* employed; (2) variation in the nature and conditions of the *fulfilment* required.

The simplest conception of obligation is that in which an explicit promise is made to a second individual. If such promises are habitually fulfilled, then the second individual can rely upon the first, who *thereby* acquires the quality of "reliability". But more frequently the writers speak of expectations that have been aroused (suggesting perhaps that "reliability" demands the fulfilment even of obligations that arise through misunderstanding), of obligations both explicit *and* implicit, and, finally, of obligations thrust upon the individual by law and custom. A wide range of conceptions of obligation is thus apparent, giving rise to a considerable source of possible misunderstanding.

With regard to fulfilment, we find the following points made by different subjects:

(*a*) Some subjects make use of the simple idea that the "reliable" person *does*, as a matter of fact, carry out his obligations.

(*b*) The idea that he will carry them out *as far as he is able*.

(*c*) The more stringent condition that obligations will be carried out except in so far as the individual is prevented from doing so by material constraints of an unavoidable nature such as acts of God. (It is to be noticed that this differs from variation (*b*), inasmuch as the latter makes allowance for the possibility that inability to fulfil an obligation might derive from temporary psychological states, provided they are outside the control of the individual.)

(*d*) Obligations will be fulfilled, whether pleasant or unpleasant.

(*e*) With reasonable care.

(*f*) With reasonable speed.

(*g*) By the time appointed.

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(*h*) In spite of temptations to the contrary.

(*i*) Even where the agent is in a position where it is more than usually difficult to fulfil the obligation.

(*j*) Even in circumstances where both law and custom allow a considerable degree of laxity to go unrebuked.

(*k*) Even where obstacles must be overcome.

(*l*) Even where circumstances have arisen subsequently to the undertaking which render fulfilment unpleasant or especially difficult.

(*m*) The "reliable" person will not take up attitudes, or make promises which he will afterwards regret.

(*n*) The "reliable" person will perform tasks within his intelligence level without constant supervision by a superior.

(*o*) The "reliable" person, while doing his best to fulfil the expectation which his undertaking has aroused will, if he find himself unable to do so, take steps to remove that expectation. The essence of his behaviour is not that he always fulfils expectations, but that he will never cause other people to find their expectations unfulfilled.

These various points require no special discussion. They have been quoted all together, not in order to indicate discrepancies between the statements of the various subjects, but rather because every one presents an aspect of the external concept of "reliability" which most people would concede to it. There are, it is true, minor inconsistencies. But taken together, the statements present the picture of something with which we are familiar, although it is impossible to say, in briefer terms, exactly what that something is. This last fact, that we do not seem to be able to extract any basic principle of "reliability", from which all its various aspects necessarily follow, must seriously lessen the scientific value of the concept.

4. Conclusion.

What, then, may be concluded from this brief analysis of the material? In the first place it would seem clear that there exist two tendencies of thought regarding the notion of "reliability". The first is that in which the rough everyday idea of habitual fulfilment of obligations, leading to reliance upon a person, is adopted. The effort is then made to refine this concept by qualifications of the terms *obligation* and *fulfilment*. But there is little attempt to rid it of social and even ethical implications. And the notion that emerges exhibits so many facets that its reflection of empirical fact brings confusing complexity rather than simple order.

The second tendency of thought embodies the attempt to envisage reliability as a property of the individual himself, definable in terms of his behaviour and the mechanisms underlying it, without detailed reference to the environment.

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This tendency would seem to be scientifically the more expedient one. But it possesses manifest difficulties.

These two tendencies can be seen to be ultimately related. In the external sense, the notion of obligation may, as we have seen, become widened until it includes implicit undertakings of all kinds, including those of law, custom and convention. Now for the individual in society these implicit obligations constitute the dominant elements of his environment. Adaptiveness of behaviour, then, will consist in the regular fulfilment of obligations—that is to say, the preservation and well-being of the organism will depend upon "reliability" in the external sense. But the notion of adaptive behaviour is one belonging to the organism itself, even though the particular kind of behaviour which adaptation demands may depend upon the actual environment. And the notion of adaptiveness may be utilized in framing a definition of "reliability" in the internal sense. Thus U— writes: "*Reliability = capacity for highly adaptive behaviour in a number of inter-related social and occupational contexts . . .*"

Both the internal and the external senses do, in the last resort, aim at providing a meaning of the same word. And it will be worth while briefly to retrace the sequence of ideas underlying the use of the word to stand for a personal quality. The initial idea is that of some person relying upon a second, in the general sense of leaning upon him for support with full trust and assurance.(3) The focus of this idea is the person who relies, not he who is relied upon. The next stage is a transition from the idea of assurance to that of justified expectation, and so further to the projection of characteristics upon the person on whom reliance is placed. These characteristics are summed up in the word *reliable*. Thus, by an indirect route we reach the notion of a personal quality of *reliability*. The indirect origin of the concept entails no especial disadvantages so far as its everyday use is concerned. But it can be seen that there is, in its origin, no warrant for employing the term to denote a single unitary quality of the individual, in the sense that the quality is an independent variable, whose relation to other variables is *prima facie* contingent, and a matter for empirical investigation.

There would seem to be a dilemma in this matter. Either we can adopt an external sense of the concept, retaining in legitimate form something of the original sense of the word *rely*, but employing a notion of mixed and indirect origin unsuited to psychology, or we can attempt to frame a definition solely in terms relating to the individual. But if we adopt the latter course, the concept will possess the less claim to be denoted by the word *reliability* the more closely it satisfies the demands of a scientific psychology.

We have briefly examined, then, some of the various meanings that are attached to one of the many terms which psychology has tried to borrow from everyday language, render more precise, and utilize as part of a scientific terminology. It may be suggested that an urgent need is a thorough-going

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reconsideration of the concepts we use in characterizing persons, and an attempt to determine in detail the shortcomings of our present use of words in this field.

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