PART ONE

Historical–critical

Prologue

This essay on the nature, function and truth value of theology, and on the very prospects for theology in this very self-confidently proclaimed postmodernist era, is based upon two assumptions, and it makes use of a particular investigative hypothesis; and each of these had better be declared openly at the outset.

The first assumption concerns an intrinsic and essential link that binds theology to philosophy. This link can be explained and expressed from a variety of perspectives. From the perspective of the genesis of Western philosophy, explained as a move from *mythos* to *logos*, where *logos* named the rational investigation of the *physis ton onton* (the nature or dynamic centre of the things that are), theology was simply the name for that same rational investigation of all reality, at the point where it managed to meet the deepest entity that seemed to be the central source of all the moving universe. At that point, whenever and however it was thought to be reached, philosophy, without break in its nature or process, became the *logos* of *theos*; and by Plato's time had actually been named theology. From the perspective of those Fathers of Western Christian theology who borrowed not merely the method but so much of the content of this earlier Greek theology and put it at the service of the teaching of their own faith, we have this remark of Augustine about the Platonists: 'change a few words and propositions and they might be Christians'.

Even from the perspective of those Reformed Christians who are most hostile to any connection with philosophical or 'natural' theology, we expect, and normally find, not just a critique of this rival – even if the critique at times amounts to little more than an attempt to sustain a charge of idolatry, or to reveal the corruption of 'unaided' human reason – but also an intelligible, rational account of the truth which Reformed theologians proclaim. Indeed in that last exercise deeper links with prevailing philosophies can often be detected. For example, Barth's

central concept of God is that of a Supreme Divine Subject subsisting in three modes of being, rather than the older concept of a Supreme Divine Substance subsisting in three persons; and the contrast between a post-Hegelian and a Neoplatonic philosophical climate can scarcely be thought irrelevant to this exposition of a central doctrine of Barth's Christian faith.

Finally, from the perspective of philosophy itself: in any age philosophy invokes reason in its most expansive mode; searching as wide and as deep and as high in reality as possible, and looking beyond present fact to both remote origin and furthest prospect. Further, there is no set border between science and philosophy, any more than there is between philosophy and theology, so that philosophical development from the beginning has felt the spur of the most impressive scientific development. Except in the case of the most self-imposed reductivist views of science (or, of course, the most anti-metaphysical views of some philosophers), physics will always invite metaphysics as a natural extension of deeper and broader inquiry; and metaphysics always reveals, if not a theological dimension, then at least some important implications for any theology. From any and all perspectives, then, the intrinsic link that binds theology to philosophy seems obvious and inevitable; and that holds as well for the postmodernist era as for any other. One cannot ignore postmodernism as some Christian theologians would wish to do, not even on the basis of the hearty hope they express that it will deconstruct itself and disappear.

The second assumption is well caught in Heidegger's phrase 'the genesis of meaning' (*Sinngenesis*), particularly as that phrase is applied to a formed philosophy, a philosophical (or theological) system, a 'teaching' (or a doctrine), an 'ism'. The full and precise meaning-content of any such distinctive and named philosophical system, the phrase suggests, in addition to the most balanced assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, is available only through a study of its origins in its own time and place. It must be a matter of prudence to decide how far back one must try to trace the progenitors of any relatively well-formed or finalised and named philosophy; but in all cases it is as important to investigate how the earliest chosen progenitor's seed was modified by successive transmitters as it is to study that originary genetic formula in the progenitor's own *corpus*. In the case of prevailing postmodernism – and it has now prevailed to the point of supplying the chattering classes with their most common cliché – it would not be prudent to go back beyond Descartes; but it would be foolish to fail to pay the closest

attention to the fate of Cartesian philosophy, as of any other contributory philosophy, in the time that intervened between the progenitors and the present. If one wishes, that is, to come to a competent understanding of the inherited strengths and weaknesses of postmodernism at this time.

The investigative hypothesis is also made up of two parts. In its first part, the hypothesis entertained after much thought on the subject is this: that the most significant feature of postmodernism is not the apparently rampant relativism it is thought to entail, but the loss of the subject (to which some would add, the loss to view also of the rest of reality). To those worried about relativism, one can respond in words similar to those of Jesus about the poor: relativism you have always had and always will have with you. For every age has been threatened by relativists, and has felt the cold consolation of the logical incoherence of absolute relativism. Each age has found its own answers, with varying degrees of satisfaction; and if relativism is decreed to be that which is most seriously significant about postmodernism, then there is ample precedent for adopting past answers and adding new ones. But the hypothesis here is that it is the loss of the subject that is most seriously significant about postmodernism, together with the much more radical consequences for concepts of truth and the nature and knowledge of reality which are then entailed. And if the unworthy suspicion should arise that this choice of the most seriously significant feature of postmodernism is made because of its obvious relevance to prospects for theology, then a brief perusal of books on the death of the author by scholars of literature should help to allay any such suspicion.

The second part of the investigative hypothesis, formed once more after much thought about modern philosophy, is more elaborate, and forms the investigative analysis of the first two chapters. Briefly, it is to the effect that the loss of the subject (and of reality) resulted from an insidious and rapidly developing mind–body dualism; a very strong form of mind–body dualism which can be called Cartesian, not because it is found as such in Descartes's own *corpus*, but because its long genesis goes back to him through influential transmitters who followed him. This genesis through the intervening centuries can be traced through two separate streams – though they do at times intertwine: the predominantly phenomenological stream which found increasing difficulty in relating to any realities beyond them the mental entities with which it seems initially to be exclusively concerned. And the more materialist stream, which was soon thought by its most radical admirers to be

singing on its merry way, a song of reality as a historical process without a subject. When these streams did coalesce, and were swollen by certain other 'scientific' methods of studying signs, both subject and reality tended to disappear from view, and language seemed all that was left, as Beckett's *Unnameable* put it: 'I'm in words, made of words, others words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceilings, all words'; language playing with itself, precariously, infinitely precariously, in the intrusive and voracious void.

If this is the most significant feature of postmodernism, it is also its most extreme implication, and the question inevitably arises as to what to do about it – a question, surely, that is not just for theologians. Two things can be done. One is to observe that the subject never wholly disappeared from the dominant postmodernist texts, even in the texts that most stridently announced its death. What disappeared was a subject in the form of a divine *Logos*, a subject 'sitting above the ever-changing world', always already replete with all the intelligible content which ever was, is or will be. And what might be seen to emerge from the grave of that one is a subject that always creatively transcends all current content; and as a consequence a reality in unceasing evolution and, yes, a language that is correspondingly and literally marginless. For postmodernism has retained the best of its philosophical inheritance also, no matter how much it might seem to have betrayed it in some of its more excessive posturing.

The second thing that can be done is this: to realise that one does not have to single-handedly remodel postmodernism so as to relieve it of its excesses and restore to it the best of its own inheritance, even if one had the philosophical ability to do this. The coffers of philosophy have been replenished not only by the gathering and mutating inheritances of the past, but by new gold of knowledge mined in each and every age by the intense investigators of *ta onta*, the things that are. The continuity between science and (the love of) wisdom, between physics and metaphysics, does still obtain, even if the modern era has seen more denials of it than the past ever saw. And so the third chapter of this part considers two scientific movements, both with quite self-conscious philosophical interests, one more focussed on the psychological and the other more on the physical side of reality – just to keep the symmetry going – and these singly and together reveal a picture of ever evolving reality at the heart of which is indeed a very knowledgeable and, yes, even a moral kind of subjectivity. Postmodernism too, if it itself is to have much of a future, must keep in contact with such elemental growing points of humanity's

knowledge of itself and its world. But, whether it does or not, the question of the nature, function and truth value of theology, and of its prospects in a postmodernist era, is best answered by wedding the best of what postmodernism has inherited to the best that the current questers after knowledge of our multivarious universe have to offer us. The prenuptial interrogation both of the philosophical genetic pool from which postmodernism developed, and of the most ambitious advances of contemporary science, will be regularly focussed on implications for theology. And any more detailed and constructive proposals for a future for theology that may come as the fruit of that wedding are the business of Part Two.

CHAPTER I

The status quo: genesis

CARTESIAN PHILOSOPHY TODAY

The most common assessment of the legacy of Descartes is that he left us with a picture of mind–body dualism more clearly drawn and more deeply and widely influential than Plato had produced, or Plato's less sophisticated followers had managed in the centuries between. Two examples of such an assessment must suffice. The first is from a piece on neurophysiology by Peter Fenwick. 'Descartes, in the seventeenth century, maintained that there are two radically different kinds of substance, the *res extensa* – the extended substance, that which has length, breadth and depth, and can therefore be measured and divided; and a thinking substance, the *res cogitans*, which is unextended and indivisible. The external world of which the human body is part belongs to the first category, while the internal world of the mind belongs to the second.'

Fenwick goes on from this general account of Descartes's legacy to a brief survey of the philosophies of mind that dominate the current scene. At one extreme he places Dennett's neurophilosophy: consciousness and subjective experience are just the functions of neural nets, and nothing is required to explain these except a detailed knowledge of neural nets. At the other extreme stands Nagel: subjective experience is not available to scientific method, as it is not in the third person and cannot be validated in the public domain. Searle, he argues, occupies an intermediate position: for Searle regards subjective experience as being a property of neural nets, but he does not think that a full understanding of neural nets is sufficient to explain subjective experience; indeed Searle awaits another Newton to provide a means of understanding, in some verifiable manner, the subjective substance. Subjective experiences, then, in the dual connotation of the experiences of being a subject and the experiences distinctive of subjects, are private, inner entities

which cannot (as yet) be understood or explained in any publicly verifiable manner. In this they differ radically, as a different kind of substance, from external entities available to public investigation, explanation and verification – such as neural nets. Hence the point of the reductionist approach, which maintains that subjective experiences are nothing other than neural nets, their properties and behaviour.

Of course, the dualism does not often appear to be quite as dichotomous as Fenwick's and other such brief accounts of it as that adopted here might suggest. On the Dennett side of the argument there is commonly said to be more than merely neural processes. There are said to be rule-governed systems of symbols, like computer programs, or some such systems composed also of causal connections; and these are described as epiphenomena with respect to neural states and processes. However, since these bear little resemblance to our actual experience of on-going consciousness and its procedures, and since they are in any case as difficult to establish in reality as anything other than the ever developing results of the latter's continuous investigative creativity, they can scarcely function to relieve us of the dichotomously dualist choice between merely physicochemical processes and something called mind or consciousness, particularly when we try to choose between the Dennett and the Nagel side of the current argument. In a phrase of Ted Honderich's, from his review of Searle's latest book, proponents of these rule-governed systems 'aimed at rescuing consciousness from being ghostly stuff, and turned it into yet less'.[1]

Just such a simple mind–body dualism of dichotomously distinct kinds of substance is assumed, in fact, by many of those engaged in cognitive science today, and not only by those who specifically study the brain and nervous system. The common linguistic currency of this dualism is that of internal or inner, private, subjective, for the substance variously named mind, soul or spirit; and external or outer, public (as in publicly verifiable) and hence objective, for bodily or physical substance. And much the same linguistic currency is used by philosophers; indeed it is most likely philosophers who put it into circulation, as it was philosophers rather than scientists who in the modern era attributed it to Descartes. D. Z. Phillips, to take but one example from contemporary philosophy, in his challenge to the very existence of such an entity,

[1] Peter Fenwick, 'The Neurophysiology of Religious Experience', in Dinesh Bugra (ed.), *Psychiatry and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 168. John Searle, *Mind, Language and Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999); and Honderich's review in *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 June 1999, pp. 1–2.

describes a Cartesian self as an inner and necessarily private subject, whose very existence, not to say its nature, we must infer from publicly observable bodily behaviour.[2] Hence we have in contemporary discourse the widespread assumption of a simple dichotomous dualism of inner, private, subjective mind-self and outer, extended, public, objective body. This assumption governs a very great deal of the contemporary discussion of selfhood and personhood and of its place and prospects in the whole range of reality. In fact, until Searle's Newton of neurophysiology comes along, it rather favours those who either deny the existence of mind-self in any sense exceeding that which the most physical of sciences study as the extended substance of body. Or, at the very least, it restricts views about mind-selves to the realm of private, subjective opinion – a realm to which religion (and morality?) may then also be restricted – and debars these in any case from expression in verifiable or falsifiable propositions.

This state of affairs is commonly fathered upon Descartes. Now, it undoubtedly represents a most common caricature of Descartes, even if there are features of Descartes's philosophy which still invite the caricature. But does that matter any longer? Is it worth even a small expense of time attempting to rehabilitate Descartes? Would it not be better to criticise the status quo as we find it? Descartes is long dead.

Well, there is a case for a brief revisit of Descartes. On such a visit it is possible to discover larger perspectives and more promising developments in Descartes's own philosophical investigations of human nature, perspectives and developments which dominant impressions of too dichotomous a dualism serve to hide from view. It is also possible that, had these larger perspectives been followed further by himself or his successors, Descartes and his followers might well have left us today with more adequate philosophical views, and with more adequate philosophical underpinnings for the progress of science. A revisit of Descartes, then, can throw some light upon the critical role of those who followed him in the company of Western philosophers: including those who resisted his influence, those who shaped it more crudely and those who, in response perhaps, then tried for a greatly improved version. For then one can review the present state of the Cartesian inheritance with some real prospect of recovering some lost and better parts of it, and of deciding to move forward with it or from it.

[2] D. Z. Phillips, *Death and Immortality* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 5. See also Ilham Dilman, *Philosophy and the Philosophic Mind* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992).

CARTESIAN PHILOSOPHY ACCORDING TO DESCARTES

Descartes made much reference to 'primitive notions'. These are foundational ideas in our knowledge of reality, which could be critically analysed and deployed, certainly, but could neither be substituted for nor produced by any prior process of reasoning. In this matter of current concern, these contemporary references to Descartes which we have just seen seem to assume that he operated with but two primitive notions, namely, that of inner mind and that of extended matter. But this is not so. Descartes's investigation into human nature begins in fact from three primitive notions: the two just named are followed or, perhaps better, preceded by a third, the notion of the one united human being, 'une seule personne, qui a ensemble un corps et une pensée'. This is quite clear from the *Meditations* of 1641. It is also quite clear to the attentive reader of Descartes that from 1641 to the publication of the *Traité des passions* in 1649, later to be called *Les Passions de l'âme*,[3] he became increasingly preoccupied with the issue of the one united person, viz., the union of body and soul, and with the best means of investigating and describing this. His correspondence, and particularly his correspondence with Elizabeth, shows this preoccupation.

In the sixth of his *Meditations* Descartes makes it clear that he did not accept the 'pilot in the ship' analogy, or any similar analogy which would suggest the 'ghost in the machine' idea so often employed in his name. The kind of analogy he does use is that of weight which is distributed throughout the whole body, while not itself being an extended entity, though it can be brought to bear through any particular point of a body.[4] And as far as the implications of talk of two substances are concerned, he does say that spirit and body are incomplete substances with respect to the human being they compose; but when they are taken separately they are considered complete substances.[5] As if the three primitive notions were interlocked in ways which analysis would at first threaten, and only further analysis would restore.

He came to believe that it is in the investigation of the emotions, *passions*, that the unity of the person, the union of soul (or spirit, or mind) and body, could best of all be seen and described. In his *Principia Philosophiae* (pt 1, paras. 66, 75) of 1644, when he is occupied with the nature and enumeration of clear and distinct ideas, he names three

[3] R. Descartes, *Les Passions de l'âme* , ed. G. Rodis-Lewis, (Paris: J. Vrin, 1955).
[4] R. Descartes, *Oeuvres*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: L. Cerf, 1897–1913), vol. 9a, p. 240. [5] Ibid. p. 173.