CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Comme donc il est clair que je pense, il est clair aussi que je pense à quelque chose, c'est-à-dire, que je connais, et que j'aperçois quelque chose. Car la pensée est essentiellement cela. Et ainsi, ne pouvant y avoir de pensée ou de connaissance sans objet connu, je ne puis non plus me demander à moi-même la raison pourquoi je pense à quelque chose, que pourquoi je pense.

ARNAULD, *Des vrayes et des fausses Idées.*

THERE is no best way of beginning a book, but journeys have to start somehow, and intending travellers expect to be apprised of certain matters before they set out. If you would go with us, gentle reader, you have the right to ask what we intend to discuss, and what our chief assumptions are. You will not ask more than this from an introductory chapter; for you are discerning and experienced, dear sir or madam, and we would not address you if you were not. But you cannot ask less, and we cannot do less than comply.

No philosopher wants to talk about words more than he can help doing in the ordinary way of business, and the retort that philosophy is a wordy business at the best is far too cheap to be worth a glance. There would be some excuse, it is true, and perhaps some little interest, in discussing the various senses in which critics and philosophers have used the word realism. It is a hard-used drudge of a word in art and philosophy (it would turn if a word could), and that is not surprising, for reality is a difficult thing to get away from. Those who try to turn their backs upon it set their faces towards another reality, and those who desert the actual for the ideal soon bestir themselves to prove that this ideal is the only genuine fact. Realists by profession, therefore, are very apt to assume a virtue to which others are equally entitled, and the end of this thing is confusion. If everyone is a realist

after his own fashion, and if the fashions differ, how can the word realism always mean the same thing?

Plainly it has not always meant the same thing in the mouths of philosophers. In mediaeval times, as we all know, realists disputed with conceptualists and nominalists concerning the logical preeminence and the dynamic potency of Universal Forms. There is so little affinity, however, between the mediaeval and the modern usage of the term realism that even the ghost of this ambiguity has ceased to haunt the word. On the other hand the modern usage is amazingly and uncomfortably protean. If the shade of Reid could visit these regions to-day it would greet Mr Prichard of Oxford, but it would be startled by Mr Alexander, bewildered by Mr Russell and distressed by Mr Holt. Indeed one is tempted to think that any realism defined to the quick becomes nothing but the definer's private philosophy, and that the term itself cannot signify more than an attitude and a tendency.

Realism in modern philosophy is born in controversy, and its foe is idealism in some form. History repeats itself in this matter, and there is a very clear similarity between Arnauld's reply to Malebranche, Reid's reply to Berkeley and Hume, and Mr Moore's criticisms of Mr Bradley. On the other hand, the three idealisms thus attacked were, after all, very different philosophies, and the Greek rule that a thing is best known by contrast with its opposite has a very precarious value when the 'opposite' does not remain the same. The choir of heaven and furniture of earth, as Berkeley saw them, look like a cockle-boat on the ocean of the Absolute, and Reid's cudgels use a ruder science than Mr Moore's rapier.

If anyone were to write a history of realism (and there is room for this enterprise) he would have to take Arnauld very seriously. The 'great doctor,' 'le plus savant mortel qui jamais ait écrit' as Boileau's stately epitaph puts it, had too little leisure in his tempestuous career to become a great philosopher. Still, he was eighty-two when he died, and he never understood how anyone could need repose 'when he had all eternity to rest in'; so he found time to take the lion's share in the *Port Royal Logic*, to write the best set of objections to the *Medita-*

tions of Descartes and to correspond doughtily and lengthily with Leibniz. His greatest achievement in philosophy, however, was his criticism of Malebranche in a book which he described (perhaps sincerely) as a 'bagatelle,' and entitled *Des vraies et des fausses Idées.* Even those who, like Sainte Beuve[1], maintain that Arnauld was no philosopher because they detest his *terre-à-terre* methods and love the beauty and polish of Malebranche, have to admit that the rigour, strength, and sureness of Arnauld's logic made him an easy victor. His relentless pursuit of Malebranche's doctrine of representative knowledge is still the classic exposure of that theory and would have killed it if philosophers had learned to avoid the mistakes of their ancestors. What is more, Arnauld laid the foundations of a comprehensive theory of knowledge, all the more interesting on account of its Cartesian assumptions, and on account of the formal precision of its statement.

We must hurry on, however, and avoid history except when we need it. But we shall be the better of a little history, and we may approach our subject by a short consideration of Reid's philosophy.

Reid's earliest and most interesting book was his *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense.* It was a treatise on the problem of perception, and Reid claimed that all previous philosophers had espoused a most vicious fallacy. They all supposed that we perceive, not things themselves, but their representatives; and Reid tried to show that the *rerum simulacra tenuia* of Lucretius, the *species* of the Greeks and the schoolmen, and the 'ideal theory' of Descartes and Locke, Malebranche, Berkeley and Hume were only variants of this radical misconception. According to Reid, every one of these philosophers believed that perception is a kind of contact between mind and thing, so that anything directly perceived must touch the mind in space, and be present with it at the same moment of time. If so, it is clear that what we call the external world cannot be directly perceived. The

[1] Cf. his *Port Royal*, vol. v. p. 449, "Allons! on peut faire d'Arnauld un grand logicien, on en peut faire un cartésien disciple, et le premier entre les disciples; on n'en fera jamais un philosophe."

sun affects our bodies (and perhaps our minds) when rays from it reach us, but the sun itself does not wander into the optic nerve, and there cannot be any instantaneous compresence between the mind and the sun since the rays take time to travel. It follows that the plain man is mistaken when he supposes that he can see the stars and the hills, or feel the support of good shoe leather; and the ancients, Reid argued, failed to notice their total disagreement with common sense simply because they corrected one bad hypothesis with a worse one. They supposed that the circular yellow patch which we see when we look at the sun is the copy or representative of that orb. But the moderns, and especially Berkeley, easily proved that this correcting hypothesis was utterly baseless, and then they were left without any world at all.

These reflections of Reid's go to the heart of the question, and they might well have proved more disturbing to common sense than Reid supposed. The plain man believes, it is true, that he perceives the sun and the earth, but he also believes that the cause of his perceiving is the fact that the sun and the earth affect his eye and his hand. If he believes further, as in fact nine men do out of ten, that all causal action is by contact, he has a very pretty problem on his hands, quite hard enough to gravel most philosophers.

The problem was certainly too hard for many members of the Scottish school which Reid founded. So many Scottish clergymen knew that Hume was wrong, so many Englishmen of Dr Johnson's type found Berkeley's immaterialism absurd, and so very few of them were able to support their convictions by argument that any attempt at a reasoned defence of common sense fell on very quick ears. There is no other explanation for the immediate success of Oswald's ponderous invective or of Beattie's shallow elegance in his *Essay on Truth*. On the other hand, Reid himself was neither a furious zealot nor a plain man in enormous blinkers, and Priestley showed little penetration when he arraigned the whole 'triumvirate' composed of the Glasgow professor, the author of *The Minstrel*, and the minister of Methven. One can sympathise, indeed, with Priestley's annoyance at 'this sudden torrent of nonsense

and abuse that is pouring down upon us from the north' threatening to overturn the sciences and to lead to a state of affairs in which 'the whole business of thinking will be in a manner over, and we shall have nothing to do but to see and believe[1],' for most of the partisans of the new philosophy understood it no better than Burns did when he wrote:

> Philosophers have fought and wrangled
> And mickle Greek and Latin mangled,
> Till, wi' their logic jargon tired
> And in the depth of science mired,
> To common sense they now appeal,
> That wives and wabsters see and feel

and that interpretation is unfair, even to Beattie. Indeed, a grand jury of women and weavers would have been too sophisticated for some of the arguments given in the name of common sense; and some of Reid's appeals to the constitution of human nature are liable, in principle, to the same condemnation. In their essence, however, Reid's investigations were of a wholly different order from this crude acceptance of everyday beliefs, and there is really no excuse for identifying his philosophy, or any realism, with a blind belief in the existence of matter. The theme of his *Inquiry* was restricted, it is true, but the *Inquiry* itself, as Hume said in a letter to Reid, was 'deeply philosophical[2],' and Reid's survey of the mind and the world in his *Intellectual Powers* was both penetrating and comprehensive despite its limitations and its occasional inconsistencies on points of detail.

It is unlikely, indeed, that Reid's influence would have endured so long had there been no salt of philosophy in it. The *Inquiry* was published in 1764, and as late as 1857 Cousin distinctly stated that any radical departure from Reid's philosophy in Aberdeen, Glasgow or Edinburgh would be a European calamity[3]. The great influence of Reid's ideas in France during the first half of the nineteenth century began

[1] *An Examination of Dr Reid's Inquiry, etc.* p. 200 and p. 202.

[2] Hill Burton's *Life and Correspondence of David Hume*, vol. II. pp. 153—154.

[3] In the preface to the third edition of his *Philosophie Écossaise*. Cousin omitted St Andrews from the list because Ferrier was there!

with the chance which led M. Royer-Collard to purchase a copy of the *Inquiry* at a book-stall near the Seine in 1811, and was stimulated both by Hamilton's ostensible discipleship of Reid, and by the desire of the French people to avoid 'quelque importation de la mauvaise métaphysique de l'Allemagne dégénérée[1].' This Franco-Scottish alliance, however, could not have been built wholly upon sand and prejudice, and since Cousin's *Philosophie Écossaise* is still the best commentary on the movement, there is good reason for considering what Cousin said of it.

Cousin claimed that Reid's discoveries in metaphysics were of the same fundamental importance as Adam Smith's in political economy[2], and he found the essence of Reid's discovery and method in a passage at the end of the *Inquiry*. In this passage Reid contrasted the 'way of reflection' with the 'way of analogy.' All previous philosophers, he maintained, chose the 'way of analogy.' They tried to interpret the mind in the light of inappropriate analogies ultimately derived from the contact of bodies in space, and so they went to their destruction. The 'way of reflection,' Reid continued, avoids this initial fallacy. Its beginnings are set in 'reflection,' and that, in its turn, is just accurate attention to the mind itself. When our mental processes are carefully discriminated without prepossessions, and particularly without the prejudice that results from supposing that explanations of the mind must conform to causal and spatial canons which in fact are wholly inapplicable, the chief problems of knowledge solve themselves

[1] Cousin's phrase, *ibid.* There is a curious irony in reading these statements nowadays, and the reader may be interested in the similar attitude of Scottish theologians in those times. "For those who are not inclined to study German philosophy" Dr Chalmers said a few years earlier "I do not recommend that they should suspend for it their ordinary readings. Their very ignorance of the German idealism, the very confinement of their mental philosophy to the doctrine and metaphysics of the Scottish school, are guarantees in themselves against the deleterious influence of these outlandish speculations" (Fraser, *Biographia Philosophica*, p. 74). Chalmers, for his part, preferred 'plain Scottish boluses'; he was convinced that 'the unintelligible does not always imply the solid or even the profound'; and of much more to the same effect. He preferred *Kale* to *Sauerkraut*.

[2] *Philosophie Écossaise*, Avertissement, p. II.

in the sense that accurate observations followed by careful reasoning give an answer that can neither be impugned nor rejected. "When the operations of the mind are exerted, we are conscious of them, and it is in our power to attend to them, and to reflect upon them, until they become familiar objects of thought. This is the only way in which we can form just and accurate notions of those operations[1]."

In itself, this account of the spirit of Reid's enterprise, does not differ importantly from the programme of Locke's *Essay*; and Reid's hint, later on in the same chapter, that this method of direct deduction from the phenomena without analogy or hypothesis had been attended by great success in the domain of physics is thoroughly characteristic of the eighteenth century. The glamour of Newton's achievements led all the philosophers of that age to have great hopes of experimental inquiries into human nature. When Reid was a student in Aberdeen he learnt as much as that from his master Turnbull[2], and the subtitle of Hume's *Treatise* declares it in so many words[3]. There is nothing peculiarly distinctive, therefore, in Reid's conception of his task. His merit lies in the tenacity with which he clung to the phenomena he found, and in his refusal to be fobbed off with anything else.

What, then, are these phenomena? It would seem from the above quotation that Reid took them to be the operations of the mind, or, rather, those mental operations which are specifically concerned with the business of knowing. If so, he deserved great credit for his thorough and searching survey of these complex and varied operations in his *Intellectual Powers*, and for his courage in insisting, to the point of tedium, on the fundamental doctrine that these operations should be studied for themselves alone and should not be supposed to have the characteristics of other things unless and until they

[1] *Inquiry*, Hamilton's edition, p. 201.

[2] George Turnbull (1698—1748) was a regent of Marischal College, Aberdeen, from 1721 till 1727. Reid's name was on his roll in 1726. Turnbull wrote many books, and his *Antient Paintings* is one of the unfortunate tomes which the porter found too heavy in Hogarth's picture.

[3] "A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects."

have been proved to have them. On the other hand, the bays which he rightly earned on this account would make but half a diadem. The operations of the mind that is bent on knowing are only a part of the relevant phenomena. While there is remembering, supposing and believing of the one part, there are the things remembered, supposed or believed of the other part. Anyone, that is to say, who sets himself to reflect upon the operations of the mind in knowledge, has also to reflect upon the objects before the mind, and anyone who distrusts specious analogies concerning the process of knowing should also distrust elusive and figurative descriptions of the objects which in fact are known. He must examine and consider most scrupulously what it is that we apprehend in any given instance, instead of arguing that we *must* apprehend this or the other kind of thing because our theories of the universe, untested by observation, have it so.

Reid's detailed investigations (and the concluding chapter of the *Inquiry*, for that matter) show that he had grasped this double aspect of his problem very firmly indeed, even if some of his definitions incautiously omit it. If this be allowed, Reid's work as a whole is a sane and resolute application of the fundamental principle of any realism. For realism is a theory of knowledge whose essence is to supply a complete phenomenology of knowing and of things known, or, in other words, to make an accurate and thorough survey both of the processes of knowing and of the objects directly known through these processes.

The trouble is, of course, that so many philosophies make precisely the same claim. Did not Hegel write his *Phenomenology*, and do not James or Bergson or Avenarius give us a philosophy of pure experience, each in his several way? All these philosophers, it would seem, want the same thing and they attain something very different. There must therefore be something peculiar and distinctive in realism to explain its difference from these other philosophies.

This distinctive thing, I suppose, is an affair of assumptions, and, perhaps, of hopes and expectations. The main assumption of realism is that things can be known as they really are. The

secondary, but scarcely less important assumption, is that anything is precisely what it appears to be when sufficient precautions have been taken to avoid confusion between the actual genuine appearance and spurious though very plausible glosses upon it. It follows, of course, that these genuine appearances cannot contradict one another; for things cannot contradict one another. It also follows that true knowledge of this or the other thing need not logically imply the knowledge of all its conditions. To say that things can be known means, of course, that they can be known by us. We, however, are finite beings, and so we cannot hope to know more than a very small part of the infinitude of existence. *Per contra*, we have no right to deny the usual, and, in all probability, the very just belief that everything in the universe has strictly infinite ramifications, so that, if we were sagacious enough, we might pass from cats to clover and from clover to the stars. Similarly we have no right to deny the orthodox assumption of psychology that any piece of thinking is a subtle web whose pattern, perhaps, was woven long before the days of our eolithic ancestors, and whose yarn, even now, is three parts spun in a blind loom of miles of branching nerves. Thus if we know anything as it really is we must be able to know it despite the fact that we do not know much that pertains to it in the way of conditions and connections.

These assumptions distinguish realism very sharply from the Anglo-Hegelian idealism which was lately dominant and still is fashionable in these islands. Even the Oxford idealists, however, might find a meaning for them which they would consider tolerably innocuous and moderately true; and the pragmatists or M. Bergson might contrive to accept them *totidem verbis*. Some further explanation is needed, therefore. The statement that things can be known as they really are is simple in appearance only. We need not stay, it is true, to consider what is meant by a 'thing,' for 'things' in this general statement must clearly be understood in the most general sense possible. Any entity whatsoever that can be apprehended by the mind is a 'thing' in this sense, so that rainbows, dream castles, a yearning for Nirvana, and the null-class are included

in the statement as well as the ships and the rifles which take part in the executive order of the physical world. On the other hand, two points at least require special discussion.

To say that things may be known does not tell us what their reality is. That is a problem for investigation, not something that can be defined in advance, and, of course, there is no implication that knowledge can be satisfied in all its enterprises. There may be many things which we cannot begin to apprehend. A being like Voltaire's Micromégas, for example, with his thousand senses, would be acquainted with more than nine hundred and ninety kinds of sensible qualities from which we are cut off. Again, there are many things of which we know only *that* they are, not *what* they are. The meaning of the statement, then, is only that there is nothing in the relation between the mind and things which, of itself, makes anything inaccessible to knowledge. To put it otherwise, the reason for ignorance never lies in the ineptitude of knowledge. It is due, when it occurs, simply to the empirical fact that the mind either does not apprehend these things, or, for some reason of fact, is not in a position to apprehend them. A blind man should blame his eyes and not his mind when he cannot see the sunset.

What, then, is this knowledge for which so much is claimed? According to M. Bergson, true knowledge is intuition[1], and that, in its turn, is a process of union and becoming. The man who grasps anything by intuition worms his way into the very being of that thing until it is incorporated into him and he into it. We know a thing by becoming it, and it is known by becoming us. Others, again, maintain that knowledge of a thing is the possession of an image or representative of it, so that we know anything when we possess certain pictures or tokens, and not otherwise. The pragmatists, for their part, are shy of such theories because they do not take knowledge very seriously. They consider it a temporary adjustment between ourselves and our environment, a useful compromise which enables us to get along; and from that point of view

[1] See his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, *passim*.