

PART I

*The Nature of Mind*

## CHAPTER I

## What Personal Idealism Is

To be a Christian is to believe that the human person of Jesus of Nazareth is the revelation, in and through a human person, of the nature of God as self-giving love. Jesus is believed to be the vehicle of God's action to liberate humans from the power of greed, hatred, and ignorance and unite them in love with God forever. Jesus is the incarnation – the embodiment – of God in human form and the saviour of the world from sin.

This is a very simple faith, in that all it requires is devotion to Jesus as the human expression of God's love and trust that, through Jesus, God will bring humans into an unbreakable fellowship with the divine life. Millions of people throughout the world require no more than a love of Jesus and a trust in God as their saviour from evil in order to live a full and often heroic Christian life.

Yet the Christian faith is also an intellectually profound vision of human nature and destiny. It is by no means a leap from reason to some sort of wish-fulfilling fantasy. The Gospel of John begins by saying that the creation of the universe was brought about through the Word (*Logos*, the Reason or Wisdom) of God (John 1, 1), and Christians have always insisted that the wisdom of God really is wisdom, not arbitrary whim. God is love, but God is also wisdom, and if philosophy is the love of wisdom, then philosophy should be a form of devotion to divine wisdom.

It cannot be said that all modern philosophers see philosophy that way. For many of them, philosophy is indeed the pursuit of wisdom, but what wisdom shows them, they think, is the weakness of the human mind and its inability to resolve deep questions about human life and destiny. So many modern philosophers do not think that there is a creator God of love and wisdom, and therefore they are bound to see Jesus as a deluded prophet, not the supreme human form of divine love.

Obviously, then, not all philosophical thought is devotion to divine wisdom. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that many of the greatest philosophers have seen philosophy as an enquiry into the nature and purpose of the intelligible mind which underlies the physical universe. Plato and Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza, Locke and Berkeley, Kant and Hegel all saw philosophy in this way. Their views were of course not identical, but they all thought that the most acute human enquiry would show that the heart of reality lay in something akin to intelligence and intellectual beauty – something hard to define and describe, but hard only because it was greater than, not less than, the human mind and the limits of human language.

Not all these philosophers have been Christians, but Christianity is clearly a major philosophical attempt to state the ultimate nature of reality and of human life. Christians therefore, whether they know it or not, are standing in a great tradition of philosophical reflection which can reasonably claim to bear comparison with the most profound philosophies in human history. I want to explore a tradition of Christian philosophy – one that has ancient roots but came into prominence in Europe, particularly in Germany and Britain, in the early nineteenth century. It is the tradition sometimes known as personal idealism: an analysis of the idea of the God of Christianity – a God who creates the physical universe, who is

incarnate in a particular human being, and who saves humans from evil and gives them a share in the divine life. As a philosophy, Christianity tries to show that this idea of God is rationally coherent, that it is consistent with the best modern scientific and moral beliefs, and that it gives a strong intellectual foundation to the simple faith of devotion to and trust in Jesus that all Christians share. I do not pretend that this is the only Christian philosophy. I am content to claim that it is a proper and profound philosophy (not an irrational leap of faith) and that it is properly Christian.

Idealism in general is a philosophical position that holds that mind is the only primordial reality and that the whole material universe is a product of mind. The material universe would not exist at all without mind, and the true nature of the universe is that it is an expression or appearance of a basically mental reality. Believers in God should have no difficulty with this, but not all Christians would call themselves idealists.

One reason for this is that some people think idealists deny the existence of a material world altogether. Bishop Berkeley, the best-known eighteenth-century idealist, calls his own view ‘immaterialist’<sup>1</sup> and gives the impression that the whole material world is constructed by human minds or that sense impressions are put directly into human minds by God, without the mediation of an external material world. Most idealists, however – like Hegel – do not hold this sort of extreme idealism. They believe that there is a material universe but that it could not exist without one supreme, primordial mind. Human minds may be emergent parts of the material universe, and they may be essentially material and social beings, but the universe of which

<sup>1</sup> See George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), dialogue 3. This certainly gives the impression that God inserts ‘ideas’ directly into finite minds. But earlier in the third dialogue he speaks of ‘creation’ as God making the ideas of the universe in the divine mind such as to be perceivable by finite minds. This allows a place for the universe existing in the divine mind in such a way as to be perceivable by finite minds even when not actually perceived by them.

they are part is wholly dependent upon the one supreme mind or Spirit for their existence.

What is the difference of personal idealism, then, from theism, which seems to say exactly that? The fact is that many apparently quite different world views are only really different in their extreme forms. The boundaries between them are rather fuzzy, and at the edges they merge or overlap.

Mind-matter dualism, for instance, in its extreme form, holds that mind and matter are quite different sorts of things or ‘substances’, each of them existing independently and only coming into contact in accidental or not very positive ways. Thus Plato held that souls were imprisoned in matter but would be better off if they escaped from matter altogether and lived in a disembodied state. More moderate forms of dualism, however, might acknowledge a difference between mind and matter, and yet hold that in humans the two are essentially connected. Moreover, they may insist that matter is essentially dependent upon the one supreme mind of God. This seems to have been Descartes’ view, despite the fact that he is often referred to as the founder of dualism.

A world view that appears very different, extreme philosophical monism, holds that mind and matter are two aspects of the same unitary reality and that those aspects are inseparable, so that minds cannot exist without matter (without brains). The philosopher John Searle seems to hold such a view of ‘double-aspect monism’, and he thinks that the material aspect is the primary causal component in this monistic unity.<sup>2</sup> Less-extreme double-aspect monists, however, may think that the mental aspect also has an important causal role and that each aspect could exist without the other. It is open to such moderate monists to assert the existence of a God (a mind with no

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John Searle, ‘The Rediscovery of the Mind’, 1992. Searle argues for the irreducible existence of consciousness but maintains that it is caused by and dependent upon the physical brain.

material aspect), and even of a disembodied existence of humans after death.

Idealism, dualism, monism, and theism thus all, in their moderate forms, agree that the whole material universe may depend upon one supreme mind. Why, then, should I wish to defend idealism in particular?

As I shall go on to show, idealism does not see God as a person ‘outside’ the universe, only occasionally interfering in it, and it does not see God as a changeless ‘Pure Form’ which the universe cannot affect in any way – both of them fairly common versions of theism. It sees the universe as the progressive and developing self-expression of God (the supreme mind or Self), and God as being changed by the inclusion of created things in the divine being, either now or in the future. God and the material universe thus form a unity, though one in which the mental or spiritual aspect has ontological and causal priority. That is the sort of view I hold. Such an idealism is ‘personal’ insofar as it holds that the supreme Self has the personal characteristics of knowing, feeling, and willing, even though this being may be much greater than anything we would ordinarily call a ‘person’.

Idealism was, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the dominant philosophy in the United Kingdom. Berkeley, Hume, and the other earlier classical British empiricists were also idealists, though they interpreted idealism in very different ways. In India, forms of idealist philosophy have always been present. Sankara and Ramanuja are idealists, and so are many other Indian philosophers who think that the ultimate reality is Brahman, which we can think of as a reality of intelligence and bliss, not just lumps of unconscious matter. Most Buddhists, too, are idealists insofar as they think that reality consists of various conscious states – like perceptions, feelings, and thoughts – and not of material particles. Even though

the Buddhist ultimate state of liberation, nirvana, is often said to be beyond description, it is also often spoken of as a state of knowledge and bliss, which implies that it is mind-like in some sense.

There are not so many idealists in modern analytical philosophy, though there are some. And strange as it may seem, some quantum and mathematical physicists are idealists also, thinking that the apparently common-sense world we perceive by means of the senses is not ultimately real and that something like observation (consciousness) is necessary to the very existence of lumps of matter.<sup>3</sup>

So idealism is very much a live option in the world of philosophy, even though it is not very fashionable at present in Europe and North America. There are many varieties of idealism. Some (many Buddhists and some British empiricists) think that there are mental entities (like thoughts and perceptions) which are not reducible to physical entities but that there are no such things as continuing minds (mental substances) which have those properties. Others think that there are minds, but no God or Supreme Mind, on which the universe depends. Still others think that there is an all-including Absolute Reality which is mind-like or intelligent but that it is not properly described as a personal God. And some think that there is one supreme personal mind – that is, the ultimate reality is God.

I belong in this last group, whose members may reasonably be called personal idealists,<sup>4</sup> and I try to explain why I think this is a

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the sustained argument in *The Non-Local Universe*, Robert Nadeau and Menas Kafatos (Oxford University Press, 1999), esp. ch. 10. I am delighted that Menas inscribed my copy of this book with the words ‘with my best regards for our common view’ – just to confirm that there is convergence between idealism and at least some positions of quantum physicists.

<sup>4</sup> There are various forms of personal idealism, but there are two main schools, commonly known as the Californian and the Bostonian. My view is not identical with either but is nearer to the Boston school of Borden Parker Bowne. The California school of George Holmes Howison rejects the idea of one supreme personal creator God.

very reasonable sort of idealism. For personal idealists, the philosophy of idealism is closely connected with the practices of religion, because if there is a God, it makes sense to try to relate consciously to God if possible, or to be prepared to find disclosures of God's nature and purpose in the created universe. It is particularly closely connected with Christianity, because Christianity speaks of a supreme personal God who relates in love to finite creatures.

Idealists do not, in general, attempt to prove the existence of God. That is, after all, a rather odd enterprise, which supposes that the material world is obviously real, whereas God is some sort of unknown entity whose existence we have to prove by some process of inference. Idealism is an attempt to offer a rational interpretation of human experience. The concept of 'God' emerges as a general concept of a mind-like reality which is meant to integrate various sorts of human experience, and it succeeds to the extent that it provides such an integrating interpretation of experience and proves conducive to living a good and fulfilling human life.

God is not an inference from what we know to be real. God is the implicit reality which we know in all our knowing. The philosophical task is to spell out what it means to say that mind is the basis of reality.

Philosophers, almost as a matter of honour, disagree among themselves. So it is no use pretending that personal idealism is seen by philosophers as obviously true. Philosophical reflection on the nature of reality can lead to a number of different conclusions. Partly, this is because of the different interests and starting points that philosophers have. Those who are impressed by the success of the natural sciences, and think that in principle scientific methods can answer every sensible question, feel the attraction of materialism. Those who prefer a more common-sense approach may feel that ordinary language is in order as it is and that there is no need to

seek a special, totalising view of ‘the nature of reality’. Then there are those who feel that all knowledge begins with experience but that experience does not license any intellectual theories of ‘underlying substances’ or ‘selves’, and they incline towards a rigorous sort of minimalist empiricism. Some, however, like me, think that there are important experiences of transcendence and value, and they tend to be attracted by idealism or theism.

None of these philosophical views are clearly more rational than the others, and none of them are matters of ‘blind faith’. One thing that philosophy can teach is that reality is ambiguous and its nature is difficult to discern. Humans are just basically diverse, and the best they can do is make their beliefs as coherent and well informed as they can. Thus the first lesson of philosophical reflection is that absolute theoretical certainty is not achievable; that those who are wisest are those who, as Socrates said, know that they know little; and that there is no such thing as the one totally rational view that all intelligent people are bound to accept. Life is more complex than that, and in the end we may all find ourselves having to commit to some beliefs in practice without making claims to final theoretical certainty. That is not irrational. On the contrary, it is supremely rational to see the limits of human intellect and to accept that practical commitment without theoretical certainty is a human necessity.<sup>5</sup> This is especially so if such commitment involves a response to the perception of something that is both morally demanding and personally fulfilling.

Christians may say that their faith is not founded on speculative philosophy but on a passionate response to the experience of encountering a morally demanding and personally fulfilling God

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, sec. 2, ch. 2, writes of ‘an objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness’. If the ‘uncertainty’ is also of immense moral or human importance, it is indeed worthy of such passionate commitment.

in the person of Jesus. That may well be so, but it is important to see that Christian faith is no more a ‘leap beyond reason’ than any other matter of great importance in human life – like marrying a loved one, choosing a job, or making a serious moral commitment. What personal idealism can do is show the deep reasonableness of Christian faith and help provide answers to some of the problems about faith that Christians may meet as they go through life.