# Gresham College Main logo

10 February 2015

The Idealist View of Reality

Professor Keith Ward DD FBA

In my first lecture in this short series I argued, in common with the British Empiricist tradition that all knowledge begins with experience. I stressed, however, that experience needs to be interpreted, and suggested that there may be diverse sorts of interpretation. One sort of interpretation that I looked at was the interpretation of various experiences of beauty in nature and in the arts, and of a sense of obligation or demandingness in moral and social matters, as ‘mediating’ experiences of values that exist in objective reality, only capable of being discerned by feeling as well as by thought. These experiences in art and morality can be interpreted as discernments of a spiritual dimension of reality, requiring a disciplined form of sensibility and attention to bring it to light.

Talk of a ‘spiritual dimension’ is very vague, but it does seem to suppose that in addition to the ordinary physical properties of things that can be studied by the natural sciences, there are also some non-physical properties, for which the methods of natural science are not appropriate. The analysis of what such properties are, and how they relate to physical properties, has traditionally been the province of what is often called metaphysics, an account of the sorts of things that exist, and the relation between them. But it is not obvious that there really is such a subject! When I was studying philosophy in the late 1950s, metaphysics was very unfashionable in Britain. Two well-known Oxford philosophers, A. J. Ayer and Gilbert Ryle, disagreed with each other about almost everything, but at least they agreed that metaphysics was impossible. The irony was that they each had a very strong metaphysics, though they would have refused to call it that. Ayer was, for much of his life, a Logical Positivist, and held that the only ultimately real entities of which all things are composed are sense-data, things like red patches, loud noises, or bodily sensations. Things like physical objects were, he thought, just ‘logical constructions’ out of sense-data. That is clearly a belief in what sorts of things are ultimately real, and how we derive our common-sense beliefs from them. It is, in other words, metaphysics.

Gilbert Ryle also thought that philosophers were in no position to say what reality was made of. What philosophers are to do is to analyse the varied uses of language, and show how we can be misled into thinking there are big philosophical problems about free will, or about the nature of mind. The philosophers’ job is to get rid of fictional problems arising from misunderstandings of linguistic usages. Metaphysics is precisely such a fictional answer to a nonsensical question, like ‘How many sorts of things are there in the world?’, and it should be replaced by careful and painstaking analyses of how language is actually used. But, like Ayer, he actually had metaphysics, though it was a rather unexciting one. There are no such things as sense-data, he thought, and there are no such things as minds, private worlds of thought to which no-one else can have access. Humans are middle-sized physical objects, just as they appear to be. Ordinary language, when it is not being torn out of context by philosophers, is very rich and diverse, and is well suited to deal with the rich, diverse, and public physical world in which humans exist. Basically, the world is how it appears to be to plain common sense – and of course that is a statement about how the world really is. It is metaphysics.

There, in the Oxford of the 1950s, were two rival metaphysical views. Defenders of these two approaches to reality would not feel very well-disposed towards my argument that experience can disclose a transcendent dimension of objective values. Ayer would say (he did say) that there are only sense-perceptions. Talk of values is talk of purely subjective attitudes of liking and disliking. He then had to deal with the difficulty that sense-perceptions themselves are ‘subjective’ in not being shared with other people. If there is an objective reality that perceptions disclose, there is little reason why feelings should not disclose values in much the same way that perceptions are thought to disclose facts.

Ryle too would have been very suspicious of any talk of a spiritual dimension. There is just one world in which humans exist, and we do not have to invent another ‘spiritual’ one that is invisible to ordinary perception. Talk about objective values is talk about how people value things in this ordinary natural world, and it only confuses things to reify values in some mysterious supernatural space. But of course someone who experiences a moral demand to do something will probably not be happy with saying that this is really just some sort of practical decision that she has to make, when it seems to her that a demand is made upon her by some reality greater than herself, whether she responds positively to it or not.

The puzzling thing is that these are two very different metaphysical views, or interpretations of experience, and there seems to be no way of reconciling them, or of neutrally showing that one is definitely superior to the other. There are just very basically different interpretations of reality. And there are others.

Since the days of Ayer and Ryle a new metaphysical view has become very widely accepted among professional philosophers. It was once called ‘materialism’, but a more acceptable term is now ‘naturalism’. It is the view that everything that exists belongs to the ‘natural’ world. By this it is often meant that it must belong to the world which science knows and deals with, the world of objects in space and time. Naturalism can get very sophisticated, and it is often said that the natural world contains many emergent properties which result from a combination of simpler physical properties and cannot be reduced just to talk of the behaviour of sub-atomic particles. These emergent properties may include values, states that are worth valuing by sentient agents, but such values are made up of combinations of simpler physical states, and could not exist without those states. Thus the material world is the basic level of reality, but can generate more complex states and behaviours that could not be described in, for instance, the terminology of physics.

There are, then, at least two varieties of materialism. Both agree that there is a basic reality of physical particles and the laws of their interaction, but one – reductive materialism – holds that in the end all talk of feelings, beliefs, and values can be, and will be, reduced to or completely explained in terms of such particles and laws. The other – which some call ‘expansive’ or ‘enriched’ naturalism – denies that talk of values and thoughts can be wholly reduced to talk of physical properties, but insists that such talk presupposes that there is a physical basis for such emergent properties, and usually insists too that all causes are physical causes, so that there is no place for any sort of non-physical, mental, or spiritual causes in the world. For expansive naturalism, we may say that values exist objectively. But we must also say that they could not exist without a physical basis, and that they are effects, perhaps side-effects, of physical processes, not independently existing entities or any such allegedly spooky thing.

Largely because of the success of neuro-science in recent years, materialism has become quite a widely held view among professional philosophers. Values, it may be said, are mental events, and all mental events are caused by and are wholly dependent upon brain events; some say that they are actually identical with brain events. They do not have any independent existence. It is often said by materialists that they cannot even imagine what it would be for a ‘value’ to exist on its own. Where would it be? And how could it connect causally to such things as brain events? Dualism, the theory that mental events are different in kind from brain events, has come to seem obviously false. Our thoughts are in our brains; if our brains do not work, we do not think; and what we think depends upon physical processes in the brain. It’s obvious.

It would not have been obvious to Ayer or Ryle. And it has not seemed obvious to the vast majority of classical philosophers of the past. For most past philosophers, the mental is just so obviously different in nature from the physical that materialism was rarely taken seriously. What helps to make modern materialism plausible is that many people try to run together radical empiricism, common sense, and materialism. They think that we should believe what our senses tell us, that what they tell us is just common sense, and that common sense says that matter is the necessary basis of all real things. But this is completely false! Radical empiricism, remember, is actually quite sceptical of the independent existence of material things. They are logical constructs out of sense-experiences.

As for common sense, we have long passed the stage at which science gave us a common sense view of the world. A brief dip into quantum physics will reveal a set of ideas so strange and surprising that common sense becomes only an obstacle to understanding.

For instance, a common sense view is that we live in a world of three-dimensional solid continuing coloured objects in space and time. Classical Newtonian physics did not wholly destroy this view – it only made the objects much smaller than we thought, and regimented them under absolute laws much more rigidly than we thought. But quantum physics seems to undermine a common sense view altogether. One view, cited with approval by Stephen Hawking and others – M theory - is that we actually live in an eleven-dimensional world in which space and time are relative, in which sub-atomic particles pop in and out of existence continually, though they are not really particles so much as superposition’s and probability waves, and in which there are in reality no solid coloured continuing physical objects at all.

Quantum physics is a continually developing subject, and there is much still to be discovered that we can probably not even imagine at present. But one thing seems certain – quantum physics shows the world to be very much weirder than common sense ever imagined. For a scientifically based materialism, common sense is not a good guide to how the world really is. For science, mathematics is a much better guide, and that requires a high degree of conceptual skill, not just ordinary everyday experience.

So empiricism, common sense, and science based materialism, generate very different metaphysical views. And they are not the only views on offer. In fact one of the most ancient and widespread, and one that I hold myself, is different from all of these. It is Idealism, which is the belief that the realities most evident to us as human beings are consciousness, values, and intentions. This suggests that conscious knowledge, value, and purpose, is the basic stuff of reality, and what we call the material world only exists as an expression or appearance of that reality. The material world is the means of expressing the values and purposes of an underlying immaterial reality, so that the history of the material cosmos is a progressive unfolding of the nature of that underlying spiritual reality.

Materialism has come to seem so obvious to many philosophers that they have no difficulty with asserting that material, unconscious, valueless, and purposeless things are real. But they have great difficulty in thinking that purely conscious knowledge, values, and purposes can exist without any material underpinning. Probably the best known British Idealist was Bishop Berkeley (though his was a rather extreme form of Idealism), and he put this challenge to those who tend to take physical realities for granted: when you think of a purely physical thing, you have to think of it as an object of consciousness. That is, you think of it as it is seen or imagined by us. But a little reflection and a little scientific knowledge show that when it is not an object of consciousness a physical object does not have the properties we see it to have. For instance, what looks like a solid three-dimensional coloured object is not in itself solid, three-dimensional, or coloured, as any physicist will tell you. It might be made up of a lot of quivering super-strings, with length but no width, no colour, and existing in eleven or so (we are not quite sure how many)dimensions. So you must make a distinction between appearance and reality. What we call the physical properties of objects are in fact appearances to human consciousness of realities that do not have those properties at all. Berkeley’s challenge is this: take away the appearances of physical objects, appearances which only exist in human minds and what do you have left?

To cut a very long story very short, I will appeal to an eminent French quantum physicist, Bernard d’Espagnat, one time director of the elementary particle laboratory at the University of Paris, who says that the physicist produces mathematical representations of objective reality which provide amazingly accurate predictions, but which cannot be regarded as providing representational pictures of reality, and which probably do not give complete access to the objective causal powers of nature, which belong to ‘a veiled reality’ (‘Reality and the Physicist’, Cambridge University Press, 1990, ch. 12).

The classical materialist could confidently say that physical reality was composed of little billiard-balls moving in accordance with well-defined inflexible laws. But quantum physicists have to say that matter itself seems to be composed of wave-particles in many dimensions moving probabilistically, connected non-locally, and represented by mathematical functions that cannot be mapped onto any picture of reality. It is not so easy to be a materialist when matter itself seems to turn into an unknown, ‘veiled’, reality that can only be represented by abstract mathematical (and therefore supremely mental and intelligible) functions.

It seems that the human senses give one set of appearances of physical things, and the human mind, working mathematically, provides another set of appearances, but the reality remains beyond all appearances, sensory or mathematical.

Idealists do not say that there is no reality-in-itself, nothing objective that provides appearances to human minds – that is one prevalent misunderstanding of Berkeley. Idealists say that what we call the material or physical is a set of appearances that exist as we see them only in human minds. Whatever it is that appears, it is not identical with appearances. Therefore reality-in-itself is not physical. What we call the physical is in fact mind-dependent. How, then, can we say that the physical can obviously exist on its own, but the mental cannot? It looks rather as if the physical could not exist in the form in which we apprehend it without minds to which reality appears. Some physicists, including Stephen Hawking, John von Neumann, Henry Stapp, and John Wheeler, take this even further and suggest that without observing minds to collapse wave-functions, there would not be any elementary particles, and therefore there would not be any material objects, at all.

If the materialist is someone who says that mental events cannot exist without physical brains, the idealist response is to say that physical brains, as we experience them, cannot exist without minds that experience them, and that we tend to imagine brains continuing to exist in much the same form when we are not experiencing them, though they do not really do so. It is not easy to disconnect what we call the physical from the mental. Brains, we might say, are how minds – their outward aspect and operation but not their content - appear to other minds, within a common public space – which is itself a construct out of the internal spatial relations of many individual human minds.

A mind without any physical basis or expression can be imagined by a simple thought-experiment. Think of a situation like that in the film, ‘The Matrix’, where brains are artificially stimulated to produce sense-impressions of being in a material world, though that world does not exist. It seems that humans can seem to experience the sights and sounds of a material world, without that world existing – though of course there is a real material world, which consists of brains in vats being artificially stimulated. The illusory world is caused by electrical stimulation of part of the brain.

Effects are, in principle, separable from their usual causes, even if that never happens in fact. In other words, all causes are contingent. The causes of a given event could have been different, or might not even have existed. I have a headache, caused by drinking too much. But I might have had the same headache even if I had not had a drink. We can separate the effect from the cause. So now eliminate the brains in vats, and think of the same sense-impressions of being in a material world existing, but not being caused by electrical stimulation.

That seems logically possible, even though we would have problems about what causes the sense-impressions to exist in the coherent way they do, and about how different sets of sense-impressions could be separated from each other. Where would the sense-impressions be? Well, they would not be anywhere in a public space; that would be rather like asking where our universe is. Space is in the universe, but the universe is not in space. If there are many universes, they will not be spatially related to each other. They will be distinguished by their internal properties. For instance, one universe will be a set of entities that are spatially related to each other, but not spatially related to any entities that belong to other universes. So with non-embodied minds. They would not be in a public space, but each one could have an internal private space, and minds would be distinguished by their internal properties, by having relations of co-consciousness with a set of other data, but not any such relations with other data.

It is, of course, highly disputed just what a ‘mind’ is. But let us suppose that a mind is at least a series of sense-impressions, feelings, thoughts, and sensations which are in principle co-conscious, members of the same stream of consciousness. It seems possible for there to be different streams of consciousness, different minds, distinguished by their differing mental contents. And it seems possible that mental events within these streams could be causally connected to postulated physical events, to law-governed processes in a public physical world that enables the experiences of different minds to be correlated in predictable and comprehensible ways. This would make communication and co-operative action between different minds possible, and so we might expect that in normal conditions mental and physical events would be very closely correlated. However, it is possible that there could be mental events without any physical correlates. A mind could, for example, have a beautiful view of Mount Everest without being physically there, or without being embodied at all. As a thought-experiment this seems quite imaginable, though it is obviously very difficult to think of any way of demonstrating that an unembodied mind exists and has experiences.

The Idealist hypothesis is not usually that human minds are really unembodied. It is that there is just one supreme mind that conceives of every possible state that could ever exist. That mind is defined by being the exhaustive set of all possible states. It would itself be actual, and that might help to explain how there can be real future possibilities for a universe, which in some sense exist as possibilities, but not as actualities. Such a thing might seem inconceivable, unless you think of possible states as states imagined by some mind, since it is a basic property of minds to conceive of states that are possible but not actual. The idea of such a supreme mind is quite helpful, in considering how it could be that a universe could have a possible future development which is not just arbitrary or wholly accidental, but somehow built into the universe itself.

For how can a universe which originally consists in nothing but a mass of infinite density in some contain a future development of complex and integrated structures like human brains? It seems that the laws of its development must somehow be inherent in its first simple state. But laws are not physical things anyway, and how can they be ‘contained in’ a simple physical state? For an Idealist, the laws are not contained in any physical state. They are archetypes of possible universes which exist in a supremely intelligent mind. This mind would conceive of many different possible space-times, but it would not itself be in any space-time. It would not be anywhere. For a materialist, this might amount to saying that it does not exist. But even physics these days conceives of things, like universes, that are not anywhere, and yet that exist.

This is the transformation of view that Idealism requires. It may seem that physical things can be real, but the existence and nature of mental things is dubious and problematic. But in fact what we call physical things are appearances to minds. Though they might exist without minds, we cannot imagine what such an existence would be like; it is a totally obscure concept. We know, however, in our own everyday experience what minds are. We know that as far as we can see knowledge could exist without any material basis, that values could exist as desirable future possibilities conceived by some mind, and that purposes could exist as mental decisions to actualise some of these possibilities. The existence of a supreme mind is thus more intelligible to us than the existence of purely physical states, without knowledge, value, or purpose, which yet somehow blunder into developing complex integrated material forms from which knowledge, value, and purpose emerge. If the nature of reality is ‘veiled’ – that is, we do not know what its basic properties are – we are in no position to give matter priority over mind. We should, if we are rational, at least admit that there could be a supreme mental reality from which all physical realities are generated.

This issue could be confused by the acknowledged facts that human minds do evolve from complex integrated material structures, human brains, and that their operation is largely – though probably not wholly - dependent on the correct working of human brains. What is misleading is to take these facts about human minds and make them ontological principles that apply to every possible thing. We can extrapolate from human bodies to suppose that there may be, and are, other organic forms in existence, some of them much more perfect than ours. In a similar way, we can extrapolate from human minds to suppose that there may be minds which know, feel, and think without being dependent on physical conditions. In particular, we can form the concept of a supreme mind which knows all possible, knows exactly what states are intrinsically good and worth-while, and is able to set about actualising some such states.

If you accept, as I do, that all knowledge begins with experience, you cannot subsequently deny that experiences exist. So reductive materialism must be rejected from the start. Experiences are basic, and cannot be analysed out of existence and replaced by some postulated independently existing physical state. So only expansive materialism is a rational possibility. Experiences exist as well as physical (unexperienced states). I argued in my first lecture that there is reason to postulate unobserved physical states. But there is also good reason to postulate unobserved values, especially values of beauty and goodness in art and morality. These values appear to us as ideas of possible futures which place a demand upon us that we actualise them in physical form by our own creative activity. Their form of existence is precisely as an idea, not a physical object. As ideas, they have ‘intentionality’: that is, it is intrinsic to their nature that they refer beyond themselves to a possible future state. Intentionality is the mark of mind. It is minds which contain actual ideas which refer to possible future states. So values seem to have the form of mental ideas. Further, in exerting a demand upon human minds which are responsive to them, they have something like attractive or persuasive force. This again is a mental property, the property of influencing other minds to do what they say. A mind can only reasonably persuade another if it is thought to be wiser or more powerful or more worthy of respect than that other. So if ideas exert a persuasive influence, the mind which contains the ideas must be believed to be wiser or more powerful or more admirable than the responding mind.

In this way, we might see that a value could be said to exist objectively if it was formulated by and existed in a wise, powerful, and admirable mind, a mind which could seek to persuade others minds to adopt the value as its own. There may be other ways of thinking how a value could exist objectively, though it seems that for materialists actual values, as mental states, must depend on very complex physical states (brains), and are therefore going to be latecomers in the cosmic evolutionary story. Values will not exist objectively until entities with large brains exist, and of course their nature will depend on the physical properties of those brains. It does not seem that such values would be truly capable of evoking total commitment and loyalty.

I therefore suggest that objective values are most naturally thought of as ideas in a cosmic mind which envisages and desires a possible future for the universe, wishes this desire to be realised through the creative actions of finite beings, and exerts a mental influence on those beings, an influence that is experienced as ‘demand’, ‘obligation’, or ‘ideal’. Artists and moral agents do not have to accept such a metaphysical picture, and they may even react against the idea of a cosmic mind as an undesirable limitation of human autonomy. What I am suggesting is that the postulate of a cosmic mind is the best explanation of a rational commitment to artistic and moral values, and that we may need to think again about the nature of that cosmic mind before we react against it.

What I have done in this lecture is to show that there is not just one obvious account of the nature of the world in which we live. There are a number of different philosophical – I have called them ‘metaphysical’ – accounts all of which have a good claim to rationality and plausibility. Common sense seems a good starting point, and will appeal to those who are impatient of abstract theorising, and just want to get things done. But it does seem to suffer from a lack of reflection on just what ‘common sense’ is, and whether the unexamined life is really the most worth living. Radical empiricism appeals to those who like a no-nonsense view that likes to have sensory evidence for all beliefs. But it quickly runs into severe problems about how much intellectual interpretation there has to be to make sense of sense-experiences, and about whether the senses might not mediate more knowledge of reality than they alone can manage to encompass. Materialism takes modern science seriously, and looks beneath the surface of experience to find a strangely intelligible yet seemingly pointless and purposeless reality at the heart of things. But it has severe problems with the existence of consciousness and intelligence, and with the almost inexplicable intellectual beauty of the strange world it uncovers. Idealism is a defence of the ultimate reality and priority of mind, and in particular of one supreme mind of whom the world revealed by sense-experience is an appearance or self-unfolding. But to some it seems a very abstract result of pure speculation, which delivers an unduly Romantic or optimistic account of a world filled with chance, accident, and catastrophe.

What is to be done? It is important to realise that each metaphysical view can be reasonably expounded and defended. It is not the case, for instance, that materialism is just obviously based on good scientific evidence, while Idealism is simply based on blind faith, with no evidence at all. Each metaphysical view has it strong points and its problems. In this situation it becomes an intellectual virtue to aim at greater understanding of each view. But it is also an intellectual virtue to realise that we stand at a point in intellectual history when we are called to make the best of whatever tradition we start from, in the light of new understanding we can obtain from a wider knowledge of the history of human thought. No metaphysical system is a closed and completed system, which we must just accept or reject wholesale. Development is both possible and necessary. The rational position is not to proclaim the absolute truth of one view, and condemn all others. The rational position is to be open to criticism and to illumination from other viewpoints, and in consequence to move towards a deeper understanding and expansion of our own initial view.

If we are looking for evidence for God, it is important to see that evidence is not always a matter of public data which can be tested and confirmed quite neutrally by all observers. In this area, evidence may be a matter of formulating the most comprehensive and compelling interpretation of a wide range of human experiences. There is no value-neutral interpretation, and in preferring one, we are making a personal commitment which not all will share.

The philosophy of Idealism is not a proof that there is a God. It is evidence that there are good, though not overwhelming reasons for an interpretation of experiences which sees them as mediating an underlying spiritual reality of supreme value. If this general interpretation of experience is added to ways of seeing aesthetic and moral experiences as apprehensions of objective values, then the case for God gains in strength. But there is another area of human experience that is even more relevant to affirming the existence of God, which is in some sense a personal reality, since it has knowledge and intention. That is the area of personal knowledge, the knowledge of persons, both in oneself and in others. Such knowledge is quite distinctive, and is different in kind from the objective knowledge of the natural sciences. It may provide more concrete evidence of the existence of a personal dimension to human experience of reality. It is that which I shall discuss in my third lecture.

© Professor Keith Ward DD FBA, February 2015