

IDEALISM

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>Note on the text</i>	xi
Introduction	1
I Ancient idealism	
1. Parmenides and the birth of ancient idealism	10
2. Plato and Neoplatonism	19
II Idealism and early modern philosophy	
3. Phenomenalism and idealism I: Descartes and Malebranche	34
4. Phenomenalism and idealism II: Leibniz and Berkeley	59
III German idealism	
5. Immanuel Kant: cognition, freedom and teleology	89
6. Fichte and the system of freedom	116
7. Idealist philosophy of nature: F. W. J Schelling	129
8. Hegel and Hegelianism: mind, nature and logic	144
IV British idealism	
9. British absolute idealism: from Green to Bradley	159
10. Personal idealism: from Ward to McTaggart	175
11. Naturalist idealism: Bernard Bosanquet	190
12. Criticisms and persistent misconceptions of idealism	201

CONTENTS

13. Actual occasions and eternal objects: the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead	210
V Contemporary idealisms	
14. Self-organization: the idea in late-twentieth-century science	223
15. Contemporary philosophical idealism	256
<i>Notes</i>	299
<i>Bibliography</i>	313
<i>Index</i>	329

ABBREVIATIONS

- A Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* (1923–). Cited by series, volume and page number.
- Ak. *Immanuel Kants gesammelte Schriften* (1902). Cited by volume number (in roman numerals).
- AG Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays* (1989).
- AT Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes* (1974–89). Cited by volume and page number.
- CA Leibniz, *The Leibniz–Arnauld Correspondence* (1967). Page references refer to the *Die Philosophischen Schriften* (1857–90), vol. 2, which are cited alongside the translation in Mason’s edition.
- CDB Leibniz, *The Leibniz–Des Bosses Correspondence* (2007). The original Latin is printed on the page facing the translation.
- CP Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil* (2005).
- CPR Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1929). Cited by A/B editions.
- CSM Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (1984–91). Cited by volume and page number.
- DM Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*. In AG, cited by section number.
- DMR Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion* (1997b).
- DSR Leibniz, *De Summa Rerum: Metaphysical Papers, 1675–1676* (1992b).
- E Leibniz, *Opera Philosophicae quae exstant Latina, Gallica, Germanica omnia* (1838–40).
- ET Proclus, *The Elements of Theology* (1963).
- G Leibniz, *Die Philosophischen Schriften von Leibniz* (1875–90). Cited by volume and page number.
- GA Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (1976–). Cited by series, volume and page number.
- GM Leibniz, *Mathematische Schriften* (1848–63). Cited by volume and page number.

ABBREVIATIONS

- GBW Berkeley, *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne* (1948–57).
- L Leibniz, *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters* (1989).
- M Rescher, *G. W. Leibniz's Monadology* (1992). Cited by section number.
- NE Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1992a). Page numbers refer to the *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, series VI, volume vi (A VI.vi), which are the only page numbers used in this edition.
- OCM Malebranche, *Oeuvres completes de Malebranche* (1958–67). Cited by volume and page number.
- PHK Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. In *GWB*, cited by section number.
- PR Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1929).
- SAT Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* (1997a).
- SW Schelling, *Schellings Werke* (1856–61).
- T Leibniz, *The Theodicy* (1985). Cited by section number.
- TNG Malebranche, *Treatise on Nature and Grace* (1992).
- W Fichte, *Fichtes Werke herausgegeben von Immanuel Hermann Fichte* (1971). Cited by volume and page number.
- WFNS Woolhouse & Francks, *Leibniz's "New System" and Associated Contemporary Texts* (1997).
- WLS Wiener, *Leibniz Selections* (1951).

INTRODUCTION

The idealist tradition in philosophy stretches from the earliest beginnings of the subject, and extends to the present. There has never been a moment in the history of philosophy when there has not existed an idealist current: for every Locke and Hume there is a Berkeley, just as for every Russell and Moore there is a Whitehead and for every contemporary philosophical naturalist there is a John Leslie and a T. L. S. Sprigge. While this very ubiquity makes a survey of the entire range of idealist philosophy a difficult and obscure undertaking, the present philosophical situation affords good reasons to do so.

First, idealism is once again at the core of mainstream philosophical problems. The same issues that make a survey of idealism as such difficult, however, make any extant idealism partial with respect to that tradition. In consequence, portraits of idealism emerge that, while depicting only local features, tend inexorably to be confused with the entire landscape. Most contemporary idealism, for example, is preoccupied with constructing a metaphysics on the basis of a normativity posed as an alternative to naturalism. While this has, of course, been one theme in the history of idealism, it does not exhaust it.

Second, therefore, there is a need for an account of idealism that sets out its central problems such that contemporary, historical and unacknowledged idealisms can be coordinated within its general landscape. Despite the enormous and growing scholarly interest in idealism, such interest tends by definition to focus on specific philosophers, schools or periods, rather than addressing idealism as such. Thus, German idealism, surely one of the most inventive periods in the entire history of philosophy, continues to attract enormous scholarly and philosophical energy, while the emerging historical consciousness of the analytic philosophical tradition has brought about a return to the problems that defined that tradition against its idealist precursors. Nevertheless, few works cover both, let alone other tributaries of idealist philosophy.

Third, while we hope to restore relatively unnoticed dimensions of historical idealisms to contemporary attention, we seek not only to contextualize contemporary idealism, but also to engage the philosophical resources idealism offers across a range of problems that extend beyond the history of philosophy. On the one hand, we wish to engage a debate concerning what idealism is. On the other, we wish to extend the range of environments in which contributions and developments of idealist problematics may be found. Chief among these environments is that of the natural sciences. While idealism has a long history of engagement with cosmology and the philosophy of nature, contemporary focus tends to be on providing alternatives to the predominant naturalistic tendency in philosophy. Yet this is not the only way in which idealism engages with the problem of nature. Idealism has often, for example, engaged in productive exchanges with the natural sciences. Our hope in so doing is to promote contemporary philosophical engagements with idealism and the problem of nature.

We take seriously our responsibilities to the figures and concepts we treat, and have endeavoured as far as we can not to distort them. Yet the presence of the set of problems through which we shall consider idealism will of course be registered in our accounts, perhaps to the consternation of the reader in that philosophers will emerge from our discussions in a relatively unfamiliar context. We hope the virtues of direct engagement outweigh the vices of what distortion remains inevitable. Moreover, we cannot, even within the framework we have set ourselves for this project, pretend to completeness. We have had to omit large swathes of idealism's varieties and history,¹ sometimes, frankly, owing to a lack of the relevant knowledge, sometimes owing to space and sometimes to prior decision. Two such decisions should be mentioned at the outset. The first concerns the relative subjugation of the ethical and political to the metaphysical dimensions of idealism. This reflects (a) the relatively widespread extant discussions of the former as contrasting with the relative paucity of those of the latter dimensions; (b) our concern to foreground these last, especially given the current predominance of normative idealism; and (c) our contention that philosophy in general, but idealist philosophy in particular, faces a considerable challenge from the problems of nature that normativism rather avoids than meets.

The second such decision concerns our address to the natural sciences in what follows. In particular as regards the science of biology, it is hard to avoid the problem Kant bequeathed philosophers in the *Critique of Judgement*. Kant's famous despair over the prospect of discovering a "Newton of the blade of grass" (Ak. V.400),² that is, over the adequacy of mechanistic materialism to explanation in the life sciences, centres on the number and kinds of causes operative in nature. With the development of the sciences of complexity, the same problem recurs regarding what kind of cause "organization"

is or involves. At one level, then, the natural sciences call out for philosophical interpretation. At another, however, forms of philosophy are implicit in science's accounts of the phenomena it investigates. Sometimes this becomes explicit, as is Bernard d'Espagnat's (2006) redeployment of Kant's noumenon for particle physics; Julian Barbour's (2003) celebration of the cosmological pertinence of Leibniz; Stuart Kauffman's direct address to Kant's third *Critique* (see Chapter 14); or in Roland Omnès' (1999) plea that philosophers cease to worry about scientific method or epistemology and provide the sort of conceptual orientation for intelligibility as such to which Plotinus is better suited than Popper. Our rationale for exploring the idealism we find in contemporary biology (chs 14–15) concerns the concepts involved in the explanation of natural phenomena. What Bernard Bosanquet (1911) called "the morphology of knowledge" is most fully developed, philosophers are apt to contend, in logic; yet if logic is conceived, as for example Hegel did, as "the science of things grasped in thoughts" (Hegel 1991: 156), then wherever concepts are deployed, that morphology is evidenced in the grappling of thought with things. It seems to us, therefore, an arbitrary limitation of the concept that it be exclusively discovered in philosophy.

A further reason, however, to pursue idealism *through* naturalism is precisely to unsettle the contemporary normativist consensus as regards what idealism *is*. Since Socrates explained his disappointment with natural history in explaining the nature of things, idealism has negotiated its concerns with the philosophy of nature, more overtly on some occasions than others. Nature is a central element of Platonism's architecture, as is its reinvention by the rationalists; Kant and the German idealists were centrally concerned with nature, with only Fichte rejecting any form of naturalism as philosophically important. Among the British idealists, James Ward agitated for the reintroduction of finality and creativity into physics, while Bosanquet sought to unite Hegel and Darwin. Alfred North Whitehead followed Schelling's "real idealism" in the direction of a speculative philosophy of nature, while John Leslie returns to Platonism to explain cosmogony.

That the naturalistic dimension of idealism's history is not well known is to some degree due to some central confusions over what idealism in fact holds. This is relatively unsurprising given the ferocious oversimplifications formulated in G. E. Moore's (1903) so-called "refutation" of it, and the relative silence surrounding idealism following the success of analytic philosophy in deposing its forebears. Accordingly, two aspects in particular of these criticisms ought to be addressed before we discuss what we take to be idealism's core principles. These are (a) that idealism is *anti-realist* in that it argues that reality, for idealism, is something essentially "mind-dependent"; and (b) that idealism is *anti-naturalistic*, in so far as it disputes that matter is the basis of all existence.

IDEALISM AS ANTI-REALISM

Idealism is frequently characterized, especially following Berkeley, as “anti-realist”, meaning that it disputes the mind-independent reality of the world. According to some accounts of Berkeleyan idealism, that existence consists solely of perceptions means that there can by definition be no mind-independent existence. Yet Berkeley was clearly disputing the constitution of things with the corpuscular philosophers. That he offers a theory of the world as constituted by other than tiny, spatiotemporally extended material spheres suggests that his philosophy is precisely an attempt to characterize reality. To call Berkeley an anti-realist is therefore to beg the question concerning the character of reality.

The Berkeleyan corollary, however, that idealism is the position that reality is mind-dependent, has proved extraordinarily resilient to correction. Six out of eight contemporary dictionaries and encyclopaedias of philosophy we consulted presented idealism as the theory that reality is mind-dependent. The thesis is part and parcel of the general anti-realist charge, but makes the additional assertion that whatever reality is, it cannot exist independently of a mind that observes or thinks it. Where idealists are concerned, however, to promote the fundamentality of mindedness, they do not have in mind some reality other than the one common to us all. Idealism, in other words, tends to be motivated not by scepticism, but rather by systematic completeness. Consider, for example, the panpsychist idealism of the sort that T. L. S. Sprigge (ch. 15) maintains and draws from F. H. Bradley (ch. 9). The revelation that the universe is panpsychist may well entail that reality turns out to be something other than we had previously conceived it to be, but it does not entail that reality is eliminated, or that its fundamental character has changed. As with the anti-realism charge, the deep claim about universal mindedness is not destructive, but rather constitutive of reality.

This means that the idealist, rather than being anti-realist, is in fact additionally a realist concerning elements more usually dismissed from reality. Chief among these is the Idea, as Plato understood it. Plato (ch. 2) is often erroneously interpreted as holding that what is not the Idea has no existence whatsoever, or that *only* the Idea exists. Yet as Socrates puts it in the *Phaedo* (100d), the Idea of Beauty or “beauty itself” is the *cause*, the *reason why*, of the existence of beautiful things. An idealism that is a realism concerning Ideas is not therefore committed *only* to the existence of Ideas, but rather to the claim that any adequate ontology must include *all* existence, including the existence of the Ideas and the becomings they cause. Idealism, that is, is not anti-realist, but realist precisely about the existence of Ideas.

IDEALISM AND ANTI-SCIENCE

One of the motives behind Berkeley's idealism (ch. 4) was to dispute with what he called the "minute philosophers", who earned their name by virtue of maintaining that the real nature of things consisted entirely of atomic entities. In other words, Berkeley was disputing the adequacy of mechanistic materialism not only as an explanatory model, but as an ontology. Now the claim is often made that this amounts to being anti-science, and yet it is clearly not so. Rather, Berkeley opposes a particular scientific account in explaining things. In some senses, then, the claim that idealism is anti-science is of a piece with the claim that it is anti-realist: philosophers committed to the mind-dependent existence of entities cannot maintain, it is held, the existence of a physical reality. We know of no idealist for whom this is true. Kant's transcendental idealism (ch. 5), for instance, is premised on Newtonianism having the nature of the physical universe fundamentally right, a point Kant had maintained since his first major book, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755). As already noted, Kant's problematization of the adequacy of mechanistic materialism for explaining the phenomena of life is not so much anti-science as intra-science, a fact corroborated by the scientists who began theorizing in acknowledged accordance with his strictures concerning natural history. Again, Kant worries about the lack of human remains in the emergent fossil record precisely because this makes the "kingdom of ends" he sees it as our moral duty to create dependent on the contingencies of physical nature: should an earthquake strike, all finite rational intellect might conceivably vanish in the upheaval. Additionally, Kant's immediate contribution was not simply to provide philosophers hell-bent on denying reality with a means of consistently doing so, but also to give philosophical impetus to natural scientists such as Christoph Girtanner and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach in what we would now call biology, to Johann Christian Reil in what would now be known as the neurosciences, and to Johann Heinrich Lambert in physics. Lastly, when Kant disputes the right of chemistry to be accounted a science (rather than a technique), he does so not in an anti-scientific spirit, but in support of the mathematical grounds of what he holds to be true science.

Of Kant's immediate successors, while Fichte did pursue the elimination of all that is unfree from nature (ch. 6), Schelling spent his entire career developing and situating the philosophy of nature as a fundamental department of philosophy (ch. 7), while at the same time maintaining the existence of the Absolute. Thus Schelling committed himself to precisely the kind of inclusive ontology we noted to be a hallmark of idealism's realism, while the organicist theory of nature we associate with the Romantic period owes much to Hegel (ch. 8).

Again, the portrait of the British idealists we receive from the triumphalist literature of the “analytic revolution” is of philosophers with no concern for nature and its sciences. Yet this is consistently untrue: the avowedly speculative philosopher Bosanquet (ch. 11), for instance, contested so-called “realist” philosophers such as C. D. Broad and Samuel Alexander regarding their “emergentist” thesis of mind, which had an enormous influence in psychology and biology (C. Lloyd Morgan, William McDougall and James Ward, the last often considered the “Godfather of Emergentism”, owing to his theory of creative synthesis). Then, as now, emergentism was the thesis that mind is a late acquisition, a relatively rare product that is as natural as rivers but with properties not to be discovered elsewhere in nature. Bosanquet, who was committed to a synthesis of Hegel and Darwin, despite the latter’s supposedly infamous denial of the reality of evolution,³ in explaining the origins of logic, proposed against the realists that “nature moulds mind” through evolutionary process. Similarly, the impact of Einsteinian relativity on the idealists was enormous, prompting not only Bertrand Russell, but also H. Wildon Carr, J. S. Haldane and Whitehead (ch. 13), to write significant works on it. This impact is significant not only in that it illustrates idealism’s attention to the sciences, but also in so far as it reveals that idealism, far from being anti-science, disputes the adequacy of mechanistic materialism to real nature. This amounts to arguing that idealism is the sole philosophical means by which to arrive at an adequate theory of matter in so far as this must involve an explanation of the existence of all phenomena, including the Ideas about which idealists are realists. These theses will form an important strand in our account of idealism throughout this book.

WHAT IDEALISM IS

If we put together our view that idealism is realist about ideas with the argument that the philosophy of nature forms a crucial component of it, we arrive at a conception not of the two-worlds idealism beloved of interpretations of Plato, but of a one-world inflationary idealism. The world of change, birth and decay is not a world causally isolated from that of the Ideas since, as the *Phaedo*, for instance, makes clear, the Idea has as its nature to be causal in respect of becomings.

This is the Platonism maintained by idealists, a Platonism of “immanent law” or causal efficacy. Not only, that is, do idealists such as Bosanquet dispute the two-worlds interpretation (1912: 260–61), but, as a result of idealism’s realism concerning Ideas, they will be committed in turn to a single world that has Ideas as features of its actual existence or nature, as Gernot Böhme has recently argued (2000: 18). Similarly, the Hegelian Absolute is not

other than the world, but it *is* the world to the fullest extent of its powers; Whitehead's "eternal objects" are not situated outside or beyond actual entities, but are their articulators, their possibilizers; Schelling's Absolute "is the universe"; and even Bradley, that most apparently conspicuous "two-worlds" idealist, is committed to a single world that our partial and limited epistemological and practical perspectives are condemned to misconstrue.

To be a realist concerning Ideas entails having a theory of what they are. One of the reasons the two-worlds interpretation of Plato has such purchase is that textbooks of metaphysics present the Platonic Idea as a version of the medieval theory of universals. Nominalist critics of universals held that they have no real existence other than in our mind (Boethius) or God's (Augustine), since what really exist are particulars only. When we manufacture universals, we merely "equate what is unequal", as Nietzsche maintained. Such universals, therefore, correspond to the "abstract universals" criticized by Berkeley. There is no "red in itself", such critics hold, but only red things. How could anyone argue that universals are *more* real than the world of particulars, and that they occupy a separate and eternal realm?

If we hold the Idea to be equivalent to the abstract universal, we will arrive at a poor view of Platonism. This is why it is so important to examine not only the themes of the various disputes tracked across Plato's dialogues, but also what the Neoplatonists (ch. 2) made of these: the One that is the source of all things, with matter as the lowest ebb of its productivity; the One whose power is augmented by production, while its productions lack sufficient power to return to it. These Platonists share a commitment to the causal dimension of the Idea, integrating it into the world as its immanent reason for being what it is, as Whitehead clearly saw. Clearly, abstract universals do not possess a causal dimension of the sort Platonism hypothesizes the Idea does. While the Platonic Idea certainly acts as a "form" or "paradigm", it is *actual* in itself whereas, as Sprigge (1983: 11) writes, the abstract universal remains merely a set of *possible* forms. We must not therefore confuse the Idea with the abstract universals of medieval and modern philosophy.

The other modern candidate for equivalence with the Idea is the concrete universal. Introduced by Hegel, it was enthusiastically embraced as core to many of the British idealists, especially Bradley, and remained central even to Sprigge's ontology. Hegel contrasts the "abstract universality" of mere collections or sets, and "concrete universality", which develops into real particularity. What makes the concrete universal concrete is precisely its development, which tends always to the production of particulars or singulars. Without this development, it remains abstract. According to the ordinary understanding, Hegel writes, the concept is an example of a universal in so far as it is without particularities; such a concept, however, remains undetermined and therefore abstract, since the increase in determination is an increase in

particularity. In so far as the Concept determines itself to particularity, then and only then does its generality relate to its particularization so as to form the concrete universal (Hegel 1991: 239–41). In keeping with Hegel’s general organicism, then, the concrete universal is for him the “metabolic” relation between system and product.

Hegel’s understanding of the concrete universal survives in Bosanquet’s account of the “plastic unity of an inclusive system” (1924: 62) and in Josiah Royce’s: “The universal is no abstraction at all, but a perfectly concrete whole, since the facts are, one and all, not mere examples of it, but are embraced in it, are brought forth by it as its moments, and exist only in relation to one another and to it” (1892: 224). Crucially, then, the concrete universal is inseparable from its moments. It is accordingly immanent to its particulars because they derive from it. Bradley adds an additional dimension to this “organic mereology” in his *Principles of Logic*. On the one hand, Bradley considers the concrete universal to be the whole of reality. On the other, he takes it to constitute a denial of the concreteness of particulars *qua* particulars. In other words, there are no particulars that do not derive their existence from the universal, while universality exists independently of particulars. Since, however, particulars have “internal diversity of content” (Bradley 1922: 187), none is indivisible or atomic, making it a concrete universal in turn. Where Hegel’s organicism makes particularity into a moment of the universal’s self-development, thus introducing the causal dimension of the Idea, Bradley adds to it the idea of *organization* as internal complexity all the way down. Gilles Deleuze overtly equates the Idea with the concrete universal, opposing it, as does Hegel, to the “concepts of the understanding”, which retain a non-reciprocal relation with their exemplars (1994: 173).

The concrete universal, or the whole determined by the particulars it generates and that differentiate it in turn, is the Idea exactly as Platonism conceived it: as the *cause* of the approximations of becomings to particular forms, and as the “setting into order of this universe” (*Ti.* 53a)⁴ from disorder (*ataxia*), as organization. When idealism is therefore presented as realism concerning the Idea, this means: *first*, that the Idea is causal in terms of organization; *second*, that this is an organization that is not formal or abstract in the separable sense, but rather concretely relates part to whole as the whole; and *third*, therefore that such an idealism is a *one-world* idealism that must, accordingly, take nature seriously.

This is the variety of idealism the present book is concerned to identify and defend as it is at once less ubiquitous in the secondary literature and more indebted to the tradition’s origins than others of its variants. We shall, however, provide this defence within the full range of idealist positions, rather than seeking to reduce them all to our favoured formula. This context is at once historical and contemporary since, as we shall see, contemporary

idealisms tend overwhelmingly to leave nature behind. Finally, it is contemporary in the sense that this is a philosophical exercise, a thinking grasp of things more generally, an attempt to make explicit what lies implicit in a philosophy we thought we had already displaced.