The Re-enchantment of the World

Art versus Religion

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1

Spheres of Meaning

IDEALISM

An ancient approach to philosophy begins with the question of what it is that marks human beings off from other kinds of being. An equally ancient answer, Plato's in fact, draws a sharp contrast between physical and mental being, or body and soul, and locates the distinctiveness of human beings in the latter. There thus enters into philosophy at a very early stage a kind of dualism, and it is not entirely fanciful to regard the subsequent history of the subject as a repeated attempt to deal with this dualism—by affirming it, denying it, or overcoming it in some way.

The most metaphysically weighty form of affirming dualism construes it as an ontological distinction that posits two different kinds of 'stuff', a mental and a physical 'substance' of some sort. The most trenchant metaphysical alternative denies the reality of the distinction by explaining one side as a manifestation of the other. Occasionally, as in Plato perhaps and Bishop Berkeley, philosophers have attempted to reduce the physical to the mental, but, much more commonly, the mental is reduced to the physical and thought of as a phenomenal manifestation of it. It is plausible to suggest, in my view, that no one has ever been much persuaded by the first of these reductions. In sharp contrast, the second is widely taken to be obviously correct. That is why in the modern period the debate about mind and body has generally been couched in terms of just two possibilities—dualism and physicalism. The principal difficulty confronting the first is well known. If mind and body (or thought

and extension) are ontologically distinct, how is it possible for there to be any relation between them? Yet it is precisely in trying to arrive at an adequate understanding of this relation that dualism was posited in the first place. The principal difficulty confronting the second is that any reduction of the mental to the physical risks the elimination of the mental altogether, so that the appeal to the physical as the ultimate *explanans* results not so much in explaining the mental as in explaining it *away*.

The philosophy known as Idealism, whose origins lie in Kant, but which found its most influential form in Hegel, represents the third possibility—neither affirming nor denying, but *overcoming* the dualism of mind and body. No doubt there are many variations between all those authors and positions that are labelled 'Idealist', but the version I have chiefly in mind is that which was prominent in Britain and North America in the late nineteenth century (conveniently summarized in Edward Caird's British Academy Lecture 'Idealism and the Theory of Knowledge'). Its collapse was rather sudden. In the first decades of the twentieth century, a powerful combination of logical positivism and native British empiricism brought about the virtual demise of Idealism within Anglo-American philosophy. Both R. G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott are interesting thinkers and significant continuers of the spirit of Idealist philosophy, but for the larger part of the twentieth century neither had much impact on English language philosophy. Compared to the position in 1900, and despite great interest in Kant, Idealism acknowledged as such made scarcely any appearance in the philosophical landscape of 2000. The principal twentieth-century alternative to analytical debates dominated by dualism and reductionism was 'Continental' philosophy, a mix of Marxism, Existentialism, Structuralism, Feminism, and Postmodernism. It is thanks to this alternative strand of thought that major thinkers such as Hegel and Nietzsche came to be given the attention they deserve. Unhappily, this led to them being identified with an anti-analytical philosophical orientation, so that, although they unquestionably stand in the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, and so on, the illumination

they offer on some of the recurrent problems of analytical philosophy has been overlooked. This book is based on the thought that, by revisiting Idealism, something of this illumination can be recovered.

The book is not an essay in the philosophy of mind, however, and so I shall not be concerned to re-visit Idealism with a view to throwing new light on the mind/body problem. From an Idealist point of view, mind/body is just one duality that needs to be overcome. There are many others that have set philosophy's agenda, of which freedom and causality, the subjective and the objective, consciousness and content, fact and value, are among the most important. For my purposes all these can be subsumed under a general distinction offered to us by Hegel, the distinction between Nature and Spirit (words I shall capitalize when using them in this quasi-technical sense). Expressed in this way, we might describe the general course of philosophy as a debate between those who want to spiritualize Nature (pantheists, including Spinoza perhaps), those who want to naturalize Spirit (naturalists, like Hume and Mill say), and those who hold that there is a radical gulf between the two (Cartesians). The key thought in Idealism (as I understand it) is that all these positions mistakenly treat the distinctions they employ as absolute. That is to say, they hold that the last word (so to speak) in metaphysics must lie with one, or the other, or both equally. Either to be *is* to be perceived (Berkeley, Kant on some interpretations), or mind is fully explained in terms of matter in motion (Hobbes and modern materialists), or mind and matter are ontologically distinct (Plato/Descartes). None of these is ultimately satisfactory, the Idealist contends, because either they require us to deny the reality of some aspect of our experience outright, or they elevate the distinctions we commonly draw to a level that makes our experience incoherent. Human beings intuitively draw distinctions between mind and body, free will and causality, subject and object, and so on, while at the same time employing these distinctions in a way that presupposes a relation between them. The philosophical task is to make *both* the distinction *and* the relation intelligible.

This task, however, is not a purely intellectual one. The oppositions that comprise Spirit and Nature confront us in active life. Freedom implies responsibility, causality denies it. Thus, understanding the relation between them properly is of crucial importance to morality and the law. At a very basic level, the confrontation between Nature and Spirit may just be between the individual will and the intractable material world it encounters. I decide to go from A to B and find my path blocked by a river. My successfully getting to the other side requires that I do more than merely imagine I am there. But neither must I accept the reality of the river as an insurmountable obstacle. By means of practical deliberation and creative imagination, I devise a way of getting to the other side. The river continues to exist, of course, but the *river as obstacle,* to my will and desire, has been overcome.

This example will serve to illustrate some further important aspects of the Idealist way of thinking. One obvious way of overcoming the river as obstacle is to build a bridge. But the technology of bridge building is a cultural accumulation; the practical deliberation and creative imagination of the individual are never sufficient to come up with such a solution *de novo*. This cultural accumulation is twofold, conceptual as well as material. It consists both in the very idea of bridging a river, and in the actual technology that allows us to build bridges successfully. The conceptual and the material are inseparable, and together they are the product of a cultural history. History in this sense is not merely the passage of time, but the accumulated thought and experience of a set of people whose identity arises precisely from a past commonly acknowledged as *theirs* (more often implicitly than explicitly). This historical dimension is an aspect of Idealism that is to be returned to shortly.

As it stands, this particular example simply takes it as a fact that I want to cross the river. My desire to do so might be nothing more than an impulse that I find myself having, something like the desire that impels an animal to roam for food. A distinguishing mark of human consciousness, however, lies in its being subject to its own critical reflection: is crossing the river a good idea, and if so, why?

Once begun, this process of reflection moves imperceptibly to ever larger interests and concerns—from action to purpose to plan to strategy to goal—and at the furthest point results in the question 'What am I to make of my life?', a question inseparable from a closely related one: '*How* am I to make something of my life?' Both these questions point us to an important Idealist concept—self-realization.

The aim of self-realization has often been misunderstood. Either it is thought to bring with it too much in the way of metaphysical baggage, or it is discounted as little more than a grandiose term for moral self-indulgence. But it is worth persisting with because it captures something of considerable philosophical importance. What am I going to *make* of my life? What am I going to *be*? These are both ontological questions in the sense that they refer to something coming or being brought into existence. But the 'being' they refer to—the person I am or become—does not fall on either side of the body/mind distinction. Nor is it some unhappy division between the two. A 'life' in this sense is not merely a biological event, as the 'life' of a tree might be said to be. But neither is it a 'mental' event such as a separable stream of thought or consciousness, which is how Cartesian ways of thinking tend to represent it. What I *am* includes but overcomes (or in Hegelian language 'sublates') the division between body and mind, thought and extension. Human beings are *both* Spirit and Nature. Self-realization may be described as the achievement of a mode of being within which they can properly cohere. In the course of a human life a self is realized, made a thing. This self, however, is not properly conceived (as Hobbesian egoists may be said to conceive it) in terms of a bundle of felt desires that await satisfaction. To think in this way is to slide into according absolute status to one side of another duality (reason and feeling, objective/subjective) so that, in a famous phrase of Hume's, reason is conceived as the slave of the passions. But I can *decide* what I want to be. Importantly, though, while I can decide what I want to be, I cannot decide the constitution of the thing that I want to be. My subjective desire is formed in the light of objective purposes.

For example, suppose I want to be a doctor. This is a subjective desire in the sense that I experience it. But the *object* of the desire 'being a doctor' exists independently of my desire. What it is to be a doctor is not a matter of my making. Successfully becoming a doctor thus has both a subjective and an objective side. On the subjective side, my desire is fulfilled rather than frustrated; on the objective side I truly am a doctor, and do not merely fancy myself to be so. There is thus a consonance between what I want to do and what being a doctor requires me to do, a consonance that should make thought and feeling and action cohere into a unity. This unifying coherence is what the idea of self-realization is meant to capture. At the same time, being a doctor cannot be conceived as a complete form of self-realization, because, though being a doctor is more than just a job, it describes a professional occupation rather than a full human life. Any actual doctor has more than a professional life. Family, friends, hobbies, and so on will all play an important part in his or her life story. Standardly, however, these other aspects of life are not merely distinguishable, but largely separate. The hopes, ambitions, and accomplishments relevant to each have relatively little to do with the others.

This separation becomes a matter of consequence for us when we are compelled to ask just what aspect of our lives it is that ultimately makes them worth living. Pressed to an answer, we are likely to find that the personal and the professional offer independent, and sometimes competing, answers. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, this is not an inescapable feature of the human condition, but a marked feature of modernity.

Any contemporary attempt to envisage each human life as a whole, as a unity . . . encounters two different kinds of obstacle, one social and one philosophical. The social obstacles derive from the way in which modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour. So work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms. . . . The philosophical obstacles derive from

> two distinct tendencies . . . [first] the tendency to think atomistically about human action and analyse complex actions and transactions in terms of social components . . . [and second] . . . when a sharp separation is made either between the individual and the roles that he or she plays . . . or between the different roles—and quasi-role enactments of an individual life so that life comes to appear as nothing but a series of unconnected episodes. (MacIntyre 1981: 190)

The theme is one to be returned to, but for present purposes it is relevant to note that religion stands in contrast to this modern tendency because of its unifying character. To be a Christian, a Muslim, or a Jew is an identity that (in theory at any rate) touches and informs all aspects of a life. This is why it is useful to distinguish between 'occupation' and 'vocation'. As I intend the term, a vocation offers us the possibility of a unified life, that is to say, a life in which all the different aspects cohere. The connection with religion lies in the fact that the word 'vocation' has a theological root, and refers to being called by God. But, in contemporary usage, and for some considerable time, it has been possible to speak of vocations in wider contexts, and with different objects in view. It is in this non-theological sense that Max Weber writes of 'Science as a Vocation' and 'Politics as a Vocation'. 'Science' and 'Politics' are two very general abstract concepts that naturally fall alongside a number of others—'art', 'religion', and 'morality' being further obvious instances. All these can be thought of as cultural spheres, and it is not implausible to think of realizing a meaningful life as finding a vocation within one of them—as artist, scientist, politician. It is also plausible to think that one such sphere encompasses the others within it; religion has often been thought of in this way—a Jewish politician, a Christian artist, and so on. Similarly, the concept of human beings as moral agents is often thought to be more fundamental or encompassing than their roles as artists or scientists. Conceived in this way, the concept of vocation is contentious, however. Discussing this issue in the context of art, Jacques Barzun writes: 'It is part of the loss of faith generally . . . [that the] very word vocation can nowadays only be spoken with irony: we are not called in the least' (Barzun 1974: 92).

One way of summarizing the issue this book addresses would be as follows: can human beings find a properly encompassing vocation in art or the aesthetic? For the moment, then, the term 'vocation' will have to be used in inverted commas, and the expression 'spheres of meaning' will have to be used with similar caution. But, in the light of this qualification, let us say that among such spheres of meaning we may include science, art, religion, politics, morality, and perhaps others (sport?), and that to describe them in this way is to say that any of them may offer human beings the possibility of a unifying 'vocation', a way of realizing a meaningful life.

It is characteristic of a good deal of Idealist philosophy, starting with Hegel, that it casts its thought in terms of these general concepts, a style of reflection that has influenced important thinkers who cannot themselves be classified as Idealists, still less Hegelians. Both Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard are among Hegel's fiercest critics (the former hating him with a passion) and yet both use the concepts of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious to depict alternative aspects/kinds of life. Similarly, Nietzsche's central theses, especially in *Human, All Too Human*, would be impossible to state except in terms of such general concepts as 'morality', 'religion', and 'art'. At the same time, philosophy conducted after this fashion (as I too propose to conduct it) must find a way round certain important difficulties.

The first of these is method. According to Plato's account of it, the Socratic dialectic seeks to understand such general concepts by means of definition, and the pursuit of adequate definition is still a marked feature of some branches of philosophy—aesthetics, for example. Leaving aside the fact that no proposed definition ever seems to meet with widespread agreement, there is this further problem. If we arrive at a definition of Art or Religion that can accommodate all or most of the phenomena that people are inclined to classify under these labels, the definition will be too abstract to do any useful work as far as critical application goes. If, alive to this danger, we approach the task from the other direction, start with the phenomena that

are classified in these ways and try to generalize from them, we will find that the variety is too great to uncover anything common to all. The first may be said to be the error into which Platonism falls, the second the outcome of an empirical approach.

A second problem is that of normativity. What is the purpose of a philosophical definition? At least part of the purpose is the desire to tell the true from the false, the real from the unreal. We want to know whether all that passes for religion, or science, or art is properly so called. Is Wicca a religion? Is psychoanalysis a science? Can ready-mades be works of art? And so on. These are often questions of considerable importance beyond philosophy. Should research in psychoanalysis be financially supported by foundations devoted to the advancement of science? Should Wicca be accorded the same legal status as other religions? Should the purchase of ready-mades qualify for grants from a foundation devoted to the arts? But how could a philosophical definition abstractly arrived at have any authority in this respect? Suppose that, on one proposed definition of 'science', physics should turn out not to be a science. Or, on a proposed definition of religion, Buddhism should turn out not to be a religion. Would there not then be greater reason to reject the definition than to apply it?

The answer to this question seems obvious, and this suggests that all such definitions must answer to the facts, so that the empirical alternative beckons once more. But this will not do for a related reason. The normative question—is this science?—cannot be answered on the strength of the 'facts' because the facts are contentious. The proponents of psychoanalysis will undoubtedly claim the status of science for it, just as Karl Popper famously denied it, and adherents of Wicca will declare it to be truly a religion in order to put themselves on a par with Christians, Jews, and Muslims. When Duchamps offered a urinal to an exhibition in New York, the question could not be avoided—is this art or not? But the only way to answer it, it seems, is to answer the abstract question—what *is* art?

CONCEPTUAL HISTORY

One of the merits of Idealism, in my estimation, lies in its ability to give us a way round this impasse. It does so by drawing attention to an important fact. Plato was mistaken in thinking of concepts as the names of Forms or Ideas that are both unchanging and of universal validity. This is because almost all the concepts we employ have a history. They are not of our own invention, but have come down to us from the past. This is not just a remark about language. The Italian word *scienza* and the German word *Wissenschaft* both have a history. Lexicographers can put fairly precise dates on their first appearances. But these different words capture the same concept—'science'—and this *concept* also has a history. That is to say, it is the origins not only of the word, but of the idea it seeks to capture and express, that we can identify. The history of the concept 'science', however, is not just a matter of origins. We can also trace its evolutionary development over a long period. This is perhaps the most important and enduring lesson to be learned from Hegel's philosophy, and a salutary counter to Platonism; the history of ideas is that of an unfolding development (*Entwicklung*). That is to say, the concepts we employ embody the state of our understanding and inform our activity in its light. As time passes, human understanding develops, becoming more sophisticated and changing our activity accordingly. One aspect of this development is the emergence of new concepts; another is the disappearance of old ones. For example, there was a time when the concept of 'germ', now so crucial to medical science and the practice of healing, was unknown, and, conversely, the concepts of 'witch' and 'phlogiston', once widely used, have (for rather different reasons) become redundant. All the phenomena to which these concepts related are better understood now than they were, and that is why such changes have taken place. Human understanding, then, has a history in which concepts come and go. They can also become more refined and precise; the disappearance

of the concept of 'witch' is part of the same history in which the related concept of 'wickedness' has become more refined.

Looking back to the Greeks, it is evident that this kind of conceptual evolution has been central to intellectual activity and to the development of disciplined enquiry. In the fragmentary writings of the pre-Socratics we find the beginnings of what we now distinguish as 'science' and 'philosophy', but we find them inextricably intermingled with religious and theological interests and conceptions. It is pointless to ask whether the pre-Socratics were philosophers, scientists, or theologians. They were all and none of these things, since the attempt to apply these distinctions as we now make them is anachronistic. The concepts of philosophy, theology, and science have evolved (or in more Hegelian language unfolded) from this shared beginning, and discrimination between them is possible now where previously it was not.

Exactly the same is true in the case of Art and Religion, the concepts with which this book is concerned. One of the sins 'endemic to philosophically minded art theory' Karol Berger remarks, is that it 'speaks ahistorically as if art (or rather Art) were a permanent unchanging feature of human nature, rather than a culturally evolving practice or family of practices' (Berger 2000: 109). We think of Sophocles as a great dramatist or playwright and consequently classify *Oedipus Rex* alongside *Hamlet* and *Lear*. Yet we might as readily describe him as a great liturgist. To do so would sound very odd, but 'liturgist' is actually no odder than the anachronistic 'playwright'. As is well known, Greek tragedies were written for and performed at religious festivals in which music played an important part. They thus share features *both* with major Christian observances like Midnight Mass at Christmas, *and* with a night at the opera. Since we now regard these as importantly different, it is tempting to identify Greek tragedies with one or the other (usually opera-type performance), but the truth is that they cannot be exclusively identified with either.

This point about conceptual evolution is especially important for the issue of art's relation to religion. Music, sculpture, poetry, and

architecture were all to be found in the ancient world, as they are in ours. We commonly gather these individual arts (along with some others) within the general concept 'Art'. But, as has often been observed, the Greeks, indeed the ancients, had no word for 'Art'. The Greek word *techne* is not accurately translated in this way or even the Latin word *ars* despite its etymological association. It is less often observed that a similar point can be made about religion. Histories and guidebooks tell us about 'the religion of the ancient Greeks', and it is true that they had temples, gods, and stories of their doings on Olympus. Greek 'religion' was not like Judaism, however. Still less did it have the scope or coherence of Christianity or Islam, and the distinctions that are now important, between religion, magic, myth, superstition, and political ceremony, cannot be drawn meaningfully within it. Of course, we have to describe their culture in some way if we are to say anything about it, and speaking of Greek art and Greek religion need not be dramatically misleading. Nevertheless, it should constantly be remembered that the concepts of art and religion have evolved just as much as the concepts of science and medicine have. This is why the attempt to define them as though they were Platonic Forms or natural kinds has always proved a failure.

At the same time, we should not conclude from this (as some have done) that philosophy has to give way to the history of ideas. Historical understanding seeks to explain phenomena in terms of origins—by 'going back to the beginning'. By contrast, Hegel's celebrated dictum that 'the owl of Minerva takes its flight at dusk' positions understanding at the end of a process, not at the start. That is why 'development' is a more accurate translation of Hegel's *Entwicklung* than 'evolution'. Hegel thinks philosophical understanding requires hindsight, a view of the past from the vantage point of the present. To take the example of the pre-Socratics again: we are able to understand the mixture of science, philosophy, and religion that pervades their thought in a way that they could not have, precisely because we have the benefit of operating with these as distinct concepts. This enables us to see (among other things) not

just why they thought the things that they did, but where they went wrong in thinking them.

What is crucial to Idealism, as I understand it, is its pursuit of a genuinely philosophical understanding that, because it looks from present to past rather than from past to present, is informed by history, but not itself merely historical. This is an interpretation the nineteenth-century Scottish Idealist David Ritchie confirms in a paper originally read to the Aristotelian Society in 1891, whose point was to explore the similarities and differences between Darwin and Hegel: 'The Idealist . . . insists that, after we have as complete a history as can be given of how things have come to be what they are, we are justified in looking back from our vantage point and seeing in the past evolution the gradual "unrolling" of the meaning that we only fully understand at the end of the process' (Ritchie 1893/1998: 75–6).

An instructive example that serves to illuminate the contrast is Larry Shiner's *The Invention of Art*, an account of the gradual emergence of the concept of 'art' as we know it today. Though himself a philosopher, he subtitles his book 'a cultural history', thereby seeming to identify it as a study of the past. At the same time, the book has a normative tone. There is an unspoken suggestion in the way he writes, and even in the title, that 'art' is a manufactured concept, not grounded in reality somehow, a kind of chimera that haunts the intellectual world in a way that 'philosophy' or 'science' does not. 'The Greeks had no word for it' is in fact the heading he gives to the first section of his opening chapter. But the Greeks had no word for lots of things whose reality is not in doubt, so that there is no immediate implication to be drawn about art in particular. What is true, though, is that 'art' is an emergent concept. Its emergence or 'invention' does not make it any less substantial. This shows that the concept is not fixed, but contains the seeds of its development within it. Calling something 'Art' marks an *aspiration* as well as a reality. While the investigation of its origins and development can be undertaken out of interest in the history of ideas, there is thus this further matter of aspiration. Assessing its

realism is a task for normative philosophical enquiry, and part of the importance of examining the concept's historical development lies in the value it has for this enquiry. The question is whether a concept of Art has emerged from this evolutionary history that is coherent, or whether the elements within it conflict in some way. Shiner's is an important and insightful book to which we will return, and in fact the normative question is one he is concerned to address. But his description of it as 'a cultural history' is misleading with respect both to the book itself, and to the contemporary cultural significance of the kind of investigation it is.

The Hegelian account of philosophical development might seem reasonably uncontentious in the case of art (though there is a good deal more to be said about it). But if the point about evolutionary development applies in general, something similar has to be said about religion—that 'religion' too is an emergent concept. This is an unfamiliar thought nowadays, though nineteenth-century Idealists (and others) developed it at length, as, for example, in Edward Caird's Gifford Lectures *The Evolution of Religion*. The idea at work in his lectures is that the concept of 'religion' captures first and foremost, not a specific historical phenomenon or set of phenomena, but an aspiration of the human mind and spirit. Religious activity is a kind of 'striving towards the complete realization of itself' (Caird 1907: i. 35). Crucially this striving includes within it an attempt to understand more adequately what it is a striving for, or, as Caird puts it, the history of religion is one in which it is 'progressively defining itself' (ibid. i. 61). This is why later forms of religion are more articulate than earlier ones; they are more self-conscious. An important implication of this is that studying the evolution of religion is important, not just because of the intrinsic interest of the process, but because of its ability to help us address our own religious questions. In his preface, Caird declares that a major part of the point of his lectures is to enable 'that large and increasing class who have become . . . alienated from the ordinary dogmatic system of belief . . . to distinguish what is tenable from what is untenable in the opposite claims made upon them' (ibid. i, pp. viii–ix) by Christians and sceptics.

So too 'the invention of art' arises from a kind of striving—the attempt to develop out of the mechanical arts and the skills that their mastery has won, an autonomous realm of activity that will transform those same skills in ways that realize their potential more fully. 'A practice is autonomous', Berger writes, 'because it has aims of its own and does not derive them from another practice' (Berger 2000: 115). The Greeks, it is true, had no word for 'art' in this sense, because the *techne* with which they were familiar derived its meaning from the practice of making and fashioning in general. Nevertheless, the concepts of *ars* and *techne* contain elements that are still to be found in 'art' as we now think of it (the 'art' of the ready-made aside, for the moment). The philosophical question is whether they have acquired aims of their own sufficiently distinct and coherent to allow us to say that Art's 'striving towards the complete realization of itself' has been successful.

SPHERES OF MEANING

The position we have reached is this. Human beings, unlike other animals, seek more than health, satisfaction, and longevity. They also seek meaningful lives. The accomplishment of a meaningful life can be conceived as a process of self-realization; the different aspects of a human life—reason, emotion, desire, accomplishment, work, leisure, personal relationships, and so on—are successfully forged into a coherent whole. Let us call any mode of existence in which such a self can be realized a 'vocation'. Vocations depend on spheres of meaning—Art, Politics, Religion, Science, Morality—each of which is a developed cultural entity, part practice and artefacts, part philosophical idea, the idea being the aspiration embodied in the practices and their products. These cultural entities have to be historically and socially specific. Having identified one of the besetting sins of the philosophically minded art theorist, Berger identifies another that 'speaks of Art, rather than concrete specific arts, even though more often than not one does have one specific

art, and not Art in general at the back of one's mind. (Thus when Dewey speaks of art he usually means painting, just as Heidegger usually means poetry)' (Berger 2000: 109). A parallel point can be made about 'religion'. It can be useful to talk of 'Religion' quite generally (as Schleiermacher does in his early *Speeches*), but all its historical manifestations are particular religions—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so on.

One merit of Hegel's philosophy of art (as opposed to Kant's, say), is that he cannot be said to fall into the sin that Berger identifies. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* he devotes almost the whole of the second half to a treatment of the specific forms of art—architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry, and drama. His treatment of them, however, is set within a much larger context in which he attempts to relate the general spheres of art, religion, and philosophy. By his account, all these are spheres within which Spirit seeks to realize itself. The 'motor' that drives this quest is the need to overcome its opposition to Nature, and progress takes the form of the celebrated Hegelian dialectic—thesis–antithesis–synthesis. The various art forms can be hierarchically ordered in accordance with the extent to which they more adequately allow the realization of Spirit. Thus, painting is more adequate to Spirit than sculpture because (roughly) its figures are images not objects.

But it is not just the various arts that can be ordered hierarchically. So too can the spheres of meaning. What Art strives to do finds a more adequate mode of realization in Religion, and the ambition within Religion is realized most satisfactorily in Philosophy. All this can sound extravagant, though Hegel's thinking on these matters is not as fanciful (or obscure) as is often alleged. What matters more for present purposes, however, is the lead he gave in trying to relate these 'spheres of meaning' in an intelligible and illuminating way. The nineteenth century saw the emergence of three important rival views, all of which are conceived along broadly similar lines. Marx, Hegel's most famous critic, claimed to 'turn him on his head', but his concern was still with the ways in which Spirit can be realized. For Marx, though, it is the human spirit not Absolute Spirit that

seeks realization. Religion is an 'opiate' that loses its value once the painful condition of human alienation is overcome, and Art is of purely instrumental value in this quest for human freedom that will ultimately be satisfied only in communist society. Kierkegaard, another of Hegel's critics, contrasts the aesthetic and the religious way of life and (at least in some moods) places the second above the first. Both contend with a third possibility—ethical life—while the philosophical (or scientific) sphere of meaning is rejected altogether because for Kierkegaard it does not constitute a sphere of meaning by which we could live. This is the force of his celebrated slogan 'Truth as Subjectivity'. Nietzsche, another major post-Hegelian thinker, makes very few explicit references to Hegel. Yet he also thinks in the same general way. 'Morality' for Nietzsche is a defective sphere of meaning, a mode of slave mentality, while Art and Religion encapsulate rival attitudes to life.

Hegel and Kierkegaard, for rather different reasons, rank Religion above Art. Nietzsche sees Art as increasingly occupying the place of Religion. His view, in contrast to theirs, appears to reflect more accurately an observable tendency, and one that the next chapter will address. But, whichever view we take in the end, there is a good case to be made for thinking that Art and Religion are closely allied in some way or other. In their most developed forms both make important use of three concepts, namely 'creation', 'inspiration', and 'contemplation'. God is a creator, and his creative acts both invite our contemplation and inspire us. Something very similar is commonly said of art and artists—that artworks are also the outcome of creativity and objects worthy of studied contemplation. They are also commonly said to be both inspired and inspiring.

This conceptual overlap can hardly be a matter of pure contingency. And, indeed, it is not. As Christopher Sartwell remarks, 'the history of Western art is *incomprehensible* without an account of Western religion' (Levinson 2003: 762; emphasis added). An important part of this history over the last 200 years or so, is an ambition on the part of art to retain its importance while winning its autonomy from religion. If this is true, it can hardly come as a

surprise that, at some level or other, the two are in competition. If Hegel is right, Art is bound to lose this competition. If Nietzsche is right, Art can present itself in this way only because Religion has already lost it. It is the principal purpose of this book to investigate which of these contentions is the more plausible, and what further implications we should draw from any conclusion we reach. To begin this investigation, it will be valuable to look more closely at the concepts of creation, inspiration, and contemplation, first in the religious, and then in the aesthetic context.

THE DYNAMIC OF RELIGION

In *The Evolution of Religion* Edward Caird writes as follows.

> Nothing can be more coarse and repulsive than are many of the superstitious customs of savages; nothing can be more absurd and irrational than most of their ideas as to the constitution of the natural and the spiritual world. No civilized being could possibly look to such a source, either for moral guidance or intellectual light. (Caird 1907: i. 13)

A contemporary audience is likely to feel uncomfortable when anyone else's religion is described in this way, even the religion of peoples and cultures long gone. Yet the possibility of some such judgement seems required by the idea that religion, like science, undergoes development across time. Science fits the Hegelian model easily. What we might call the 'spirit' of science lies in the perpetual desire for a more adequate understanding, a more comprehensive theory than any that has been formulated hitherto. This search is never completed, of course, but the history of science does appear to be the continuous realization of the desire. Its realization reveals an internal relation between the *actual* adequacy of the thing sought, on the one hand, and *our conception* of its adequacy, on the other. A crucially important feature of scientific growth and progress is not just better theory, but an evolving conception of what ought to *count as* a better theory. This creates a dialectical relationship between

theory and practice in science. The best theories suggest further investigation by which they can be tested, but in turn techniques of investigation refine the tests that those theories must pass.

Religion fits the Hegelian scheme much less readily. To begin with it appears to lack anything of the same dynamism. Whereas science is focused on progress and a future in which established concepts and theories come to be discarded in favour of new and better ones, typically religions are static, concerned with preserving ancient texts and doctrines unchanged. Thus the Christian Reformation was about recovery, not discovery. It sought not advance but return.

This difference between science and religion, though real, does not prevent the concept of development applying to both, however. Religion ought not to be confused with theology, which is an intellectual enterprise within it. The goal of science, we might say, is knowledge, and its motor the twin fears of ignorance and error. The goal of religion is the sacred (or the holy), and its twin fears are idolatry and sacrilege. Religion, in contrast to science, is concerned with more than truth and explanation. It prescribes a way of living, so that theological error and ignorance matter only in so far as they lead us into idolatry or sacrilege. This subsidiary role of the intellect lends religion an internal dynamic different from that of science. The religious quest is not first and foremost a matter of intellectual enquiry, and the genuine seeker need not be (and usually is not) a theological theorist of some kind. Even so, it is still correct to speak of religious engagement with the world as a type of search, and it is this that makes it dynamic. The question then is what drives and constrains the activity of searching.

Idolatry is the worship of false or unfitting objects; sacrilege is the failure to accord holy things the veneration they are due. Accordingly, at the heart of any religious quest is the drive to uncover and venerate the properly sacred. This quest may often occasion a return to sacred texts (or holy writ), but even when it does its purpose is still to secure an advance, the advance to *purer* (or purified) worship. The three concepts of creation, contemplation, and inspiration can be located in the search for such purification.

Creation is fundamental because, at heart, fear of idolatry is anxiety that the objects we worship are a golden calf of our own making, or a human monument with feet of clay (to use images from the Jewish scriptures). The iconoclastic movement of eighth- and ninth-century Christianity, renewed in the Protestant Reformation, and the abhorrence of the figurative in Islam are all expressions of this fear. Though iconodules (the defenders of icons) have arguments upon which they can call, they accept as crucial a distinction between the image and the prototype. Athanasius of Alexandria writing in the fourth century says 'The person who bows to an icon, bows to the king in it' (quoted in Nes 2004: 14), and St John of Damascus, formulating a defence in the eighth century, says 'I do not worship matter; I worship the creator of matter who became matter for my sake' (John of Damascus 726/2003: i. 16–17). In other words, iconodules share with iconoclasts the belief that worship of the merely existing is misplaced. The only proper object of worship is that on which all things (including human beings) depend for their existence. In more modern theological language, there are no beings worthy of worship. Only the *ground* of being is properly regarded as holy.

But what is this 'worship' that can be properly or improperly directed? The answer is a combination of attitude and action. Bowing the knee, standing in silence, solemnizing sacrifice, offering prayer and praise can all be described as acts of worship, and within them we find the second of the three concepts—contemplation, which is to say, rapt attention generated by awe. Contemplation as such, though, falls short of worship. It is not enough to be dumbstruck, or deeply attentive out of curiosity. I can contemplate with loathing, and the repellent can compel a horrid fascination. Worshipful contemplation is *drawn* to the object it contemplates with longing and/or love, and we can mark this difference by locating contemplation within a wider concept—veneration.

Veneration in and of itself is compatible with inactivity, whereas religion is a mode of the practical; it is a way of living and being. Accordingly, the veneration of the sacred must lead those who engage

in it to being 'inspired' to live in one way rather than another. In its original sense this means being given breath, and thus according to an ancient way of thinking being given life. 'Inspire' and 'enliven' are still common words, of course, but no one any longer subscribes to this view. *Contra* the ancient world, we now take breathing to be a *sign* of life, not its *cause*, and this might raise a question about what concept of 'spirit' it is still meaningful to employ. At the same time, we need not conclude that words such as inspiration, spirit, spirited, and so on are *merely* figurative. We can still use them to make assertions with a truth value. Perhaps when theatre critics say that an actor gave a spirited performance, their description does derive from an outmoded physiology. Yet we can still ask whether what they say is true or not, just as we can ask, and decide, whether (say) a gift was given in the right or the wrong spirit.

A similar point can be made about the language of 'holy spirit', 'divine inspiration', and so on in a religious context. When the prophet Isaiah says that 'the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon' the servant born of the house of Jesse, this is amplified as 'the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge' (Isa. 11: 1–2). Such references to a holy spirit can be separated from the metaphysical theories (outmoded or not) that this is normally thought to require. The 'mechanics' of the relation between inspiration and action can be left on one side. All that is required is the possibility of making truth claims about human actions being motivated by the veneration of the sacred. Of course, not all motivation is inspiration, and there is more to be said about this shortly. At this stage, however, it is sufficient to note that virtually every religion makes a connection between venerating the sacred and being inspired to act, and holds that this is the place where a large part of the importance of religion lies.

If this analysis is correct, the concepts of creation, contemplation, and inspiration can be related as follows. Only divine creation is truly sacred; sacredness calls for contemplative veneration; to venerate the sacred is to be inspired. Religious development both in the individual and culturally over time takes the form of a clearer

identification of sacredness leading to a purer form of veneration, and thus to a deeper inspiration. Against this background it is illuminating to see how these same concepts—creation, contemplation, and inspiration—are to be found in an alternative sphere of meaning—Art.

CREATION AND INSPIRATION IN ART

In *The Invention of Art* Larry Shiner observes that

> the idea of creation has become so banalized that it is difficult [for us now] to appreciate the reluctance of eighteenth-century critics and philosophers to call artistic activity 'creation'. In the early eighteenth century, the dominant term was still 'invention', and the artisan/artist's activity was still seen as construction. (Shiner 2001: 114)

The principal purpose of Shiner's book is to reveal how the concepts of artisan and artist, which were originally interchangeable, came to be distinguished, and, more significantly, came to have a quite different status as a result of the way in which this distinction was understood. As the status of 'the artist' rose, the status of 'the artisan' fell. At one time it was perfectly correct to speak of the art of a carpenter, weaver, or silversmith. Then people began to differentiate between 'mechanical' arts such as metalworking, watch-making, and engineering, and the 'fine' arts of painting, sculpture, poetry, and music. After a time, the 'fine' was dropped, 'art' was a term no longer used of intricate practical skill that required special mastery, until finally 'the arts' became 'Art'.

Part IV of Shiner's book, which describes the culmination of this process, has the title 'The Apotheosis of Art' and its chapters are headed 'Art as Redemptive Revelation' and 'The Artist: A Sacred Calling'. These are not mere metaphors intended to emphasize the high regard in which Art had come to be held. They reflect a real ambition on the part of artists to give Art something of the function of Religion—and crucial to this 'apotheosis' of art was the concept

of creation. Charles Batteux writing in 1746 could still say: 'The human spirit cannot properly create . . . . To invent in the arts isn't to give being to an object, but to recognize where and how it is . . . [T]he men of genius who dig deepest, discover only what existed before' (quoted in Shiner 2001: 114). One hundred years later Wordsworth was describing the artist's imagination as an 'absolute power'. The contrast is with imagination in the sense of 'fancy'. True artistic imagination calls into existence new worlds—of sight and sound, as well as people and events. Thus in the course of 'the invention of art', artistic 'making' came to be regarded as a form of pure creation and the artist in that sense a creator *ex nihilo*. 'The genius of creation and the creations of genius had to be believed in before Art with a capital A could arise', Jacques Barzun contends (Barzun 1974: 31) and goes on to observe: 'this title of creator, repeated over 100 years, finally raised the artist to a unique status' (ibid. 35).

Accompanying this focus on the work of art as an act of creation comes a conception of aesthetic appreciation as a form of contemplation, and the life of the aesthete as a sort of *vita contemplativa.* The idea that aesthetic judgement is a distinctive mode of attention that 'plays freely' on the objects presented to it is of course central to Kant's account in the *Third Critique*. The Kantian aesthetic has been immensely influential on the way in which art and the aesthetic have come to be thought about, and central to it is a concept of autonomy, which is to say freedom both from causal determination and from practical usefulness. The slogan 'art for art's sake' is a later formulation of the same idea. This unique and wholly free judgement on the part of the art lover, combined with the power of the artist's imagination to create *ex nihilo* objects worthy of aesthetic contemplation, brings into view a unique and self-constituting world of experience. Of this world, impressive claims have been made. Louise Colet enjoined those who participate in it 'Let us love one another "in Art" as the mystics love one another "in God"' (quoted in Shiner 2001: 194), and Clive Bell, famous for the doctrine of art as significant form, remarks that the experience of art so conceived 'might prove the world's salvation' (quoted in ibid. 196).

This spiritual unity of creative artist and contemplative aesthete is achieved through mutual inspiration. The creative spirit or genius of the artist is transmitted to anyone who can and does give serious attention of the right sort, and is thus shared by them. To read Jane Austen attentively is to enter the moral and psychological world that she created and thus in some sense to 'be' in that world with her. To experience the power of Rembrandt's imaginative visions, we have to construct 'The Nightwatch' in our own imaginations. Otherwise it remains simply pigment on canvas. To listen attentively to the music of Beethoven is to be transported into a world of sounds and harmonies in such a way that we participate directly in the imaginative genius of Beethoven. But if such experiences are to be more than subjective diversions, or even emotional 'highs', they must inspire in a fashion something similar to the religious case. Barzun quotes the French novelist Romain Rolland, author of an enormously successful *Life of Beethoven*, first published in 1902, who recalls the experience of hearing Beethoven's symphonies that led him to undertake the biography. 'Alone with the creator, confessing myself to him on the foggy banks of the Rhine . . . I went back to Paris with his benediction, restored, having taken a new lease on life and singing a hymn of thanks as from a convalescent to the Deity. That hymn is the present book' (Barzun 1974: 77–8). The emulation of religion could hardly be plainer. The contemplation of artistic creation, like the contemplation of God's creation, must lead to or influence ways of living and being.

ACTION, MOTIVATION, AND INSPIRATION

In the case of art, as in the case of religion, in employing the concept of inspiration we need not make any metaphysically weighty assumptions. Though Rolland's language suggests it, such inspirational experiences as he describes can be explained without deifying artists in the sense of changing their ontological status, or attributing the phenomenon of inspiration to metaphysical causes. A simpler

interpretation is available by looking at ways in which people are motivated to act. A longstanding tradition in philosophy (with which Socrates contends at length in the early Platonic dialogues) holds that there is one basic form of motivation, namely self-interested desire, and that all other apparent kinds of motivation must be deduced from or cashed out in terms of it. Among the most famous proponents of this view were Hobbes and Mandeville, and their arguments still find adherents. Nevertheless, as a description of how human beings operate, rational egoism requires a degree of calculative reflection that most people simply do not go in for. Whether at any given moment the task engaged in is the one most likely to maximize self-interest is a question we rarely stop to investigate, or would know how to. Whatever the merits of egoism as a normative standard of practical rationality (an account of how we *ought* to decide what to do), it seems that any attempt simply to summarize and classify human motivations should focus on a less calculative or reflective level. Normally, our motivations to act are more immediate than the assessment of consequences.

These more immediate motivations fall within some very general classifications. People often act as they do just because there is something to be done. 'Something to be done' might be opening up the store, getting the bus to work in the morning, taking the car to be serviced, or keeping a medical appointment. Each of these, though not all 'work' in the strict sense, can be contrasted with leisure, and this brings in a different type of motive. Ordering dinner, planning a holiday, watching television or just chatting are actions that arise from the anticipation of enjoyment, and not because they 'have to be done'. The majority of lives, however, are not completely filled with the actions arising from reasons of work and leisure. For the vast majority of people, an additional, distinguishable motivation lies in caring about others. Listening to a friend in trouble, teaching my daughter to ride a bicycle, or visiting my mother in hospital are all things I have reason to do, not because they have to be done, or will be enjoyable, but because they involve people I care about. Though practical necessity and the prospect of enjoyment can

certainly enter into personal relationships, the claims of 'familiars' generally function as an independent source of motivation.

All these are relatively unreflective motivations. We do not usually look for justifying reasons to go to our paid employment, or to watch a television programme we expect to enjoy, or to spend time helping our children with their school work. Rather, these are taken to be foundational reasons, and being motivated by them is accepted as the norm without further justification. Indeed, the request for a justification—Why are you doing what you enjoy doing? Why are you helping those you love?—would in most circumstances be regarded as unintelligible. And, yet, there is a certain mood or cast of mind that leads human beings to ask just what the common round and daily task amounts to, whether everyday life really is worth living, or whether it is just a matter of putting in the time between the cradle and the grave. This mood undermines most easily the reason for doing the things that need to be done. All the ordinary things of life—tidying up the house, going to work, washing the car, arranging insurance—come to seem fruitless and pointless. With equal ease, this same mood can make leisure activities pall. A kind of boredom—*ennui*—saturates everything. Yet more devastatingly, it can even erode personal relationships. In extreme cases, the effort to climb out of this mood leads to their pointless destruction.

Nowadays, when we encounter this mood in ourselves or others, a reductivist tendency inclines us to reach for pathological explanations, of which 'clinical depression' is the most familiar. This is an important mistake in so far as it removes *ennui* from the realms of meaning. It may be true that sometimes lack of motivation is evidence of physiological disorder, but it can also be a manifestation of spiritual malaise. John Kekes has convincingly identified boredom as one of 'the roots of evil' (see chapter 7 of his book of this title). Viewed as a spiritual malaise, it cannot be cured by reaching for the medicine cabinet. But neither can we simply go on appealing to the claims of work, leisure, and family as foundational. We have lost the thing that animates their claim on us, a sense of meaning to our lives. If it is to be restored, we must turn to what I have called

'spheres' of meaning, some larger frame within which we can find renewed enthusiasm for the common round of work, leisure, and family life. One natural way of putting this is to say we are seeking 'something to inspire' us. That is how Art and Religion come to present themselves as alternative, rival, or possibly allied claims on our attention. A person's religion, if not merely conventional, is the ground upon which the meaning and value of their existence rests. Religious faith can inspire to great heights of sacrifice and endeavour (and occasionally great heights of wickedness). More ordinarily, it lends enduring significance to what must otherwise seem ephemeral (a topic to be returned to). Now, as some of the quotations offered earlier make plain, it is incontestable that a number of artists and art theorists have claimed something similar for art, chiefly those who have laid greatest emphasis on the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the world of aesthetic experience. This is an important aspect of the concept of 'Art' that can be seen to have evolved over the two and a half centuries that witnessed (as Shiner expresses it) 'the separation of the artist from the artisan'. It is just such a conception Nietzsche has in mind when he says that 'our highest dignity lies in the meaning of works of art—for it is only as *an aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified* (Nietzsche 1886/1993: 8; emphasis in original).

This last remark introduces the element of rivalry. Barzun, in 'The Rise of Art as Religion', the second of his Mellon Lectures on Fine Art, offers a good deal of evidence that, in the course of the nineteenth century, artists came to have what we might call grandiose spiritual ambitions. 'As early as 1837 we have the revolutionary artist and the transcendental artist fighting side by side. Their voices have rung in chorus ever since, because their common religious task is to repel the world, with or without the zeal to remake it' (Barzun 1974: 38). In support of his view he quotes among others Vincent Van Gogh: 'To try to understand the real significance of what the great artists, the serious masters, tell us in their masterpieces, *that* leads to God' (quoted in ibid. 45). But the words here attributed to Van Gogh might be interpreted more modestly. Such a comment could

be made about Caravaggio or J. S. Bach—that their masterpieces were meant to lead to God—and could thus be construed as placing Art in a properly subservient position to Religion. This is precisely its relation for most of its history. What transforms the thought in Van Gogh's remark into the claim of a rival is the relative positions that Barzun attributes to Religion and Art in the wider culture.

> [I]t required the Renaissance glorification of man, the scattering and weakening of creeds by the Protestant Reformation, and the general unbelief caused by the progress of science, before art and artists could achieve their present position in the world of intellect. The goal and spur of religion had to be withdrawn from the other world to this world. (Barzun 1974: 33)

The references to the Renaissance and the Reformation are a little misleading since they locate the origins of the apotheosis of art long before Art's claim to be Religion's rival. It was during the eighteenth century that the fine arts distinguished themselves from the mechanical arts, and it was the same century that saw an increasing emphasis on creation and contemplation as central aesthetic concepts. Whether or not the ultimate cause was a 'weakening of creeds by the Protestant reformation', it was in the nineteenth century, over 300 years after Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, that this change took on its most dramatic significance. For this was when the rise of Art was perceived to coincide with a decline in Religion.

> Art raises its head [Nietzsche tells us] where religions decline. It takes over a number of feelings and moods produced by religion, clasps them to its heart, and then itself becomes deeper, more soulful, so that it is able to communicate exaltation and enthusiasm which it could not do before . . . Growing enlightenment has shaken the dogmas of religion and generated a thorough mistrust of it; therefore feeling, forced out of the religious sphere by enlightenment, throws itself into art. (Nietzsche 1878/2004: 150)

Nietzsche here sketches a general possibility, but one that he thought had been realized in his own time. It was a belief shared by many others.

> There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. . . . More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. (Arnold 1880/1964: 235)

This is Matthew Arnold affirming Nietzsche's possibility as both a reality and a *hope*. The affirmation consists of two parts: that the traditional Religion of Europe has failed, and that Art can replace the loss that this failure represents. The remainder of this book consists in an investigation of these two claims.