

The aim of this book is to suggest some plausible and accessible solutions to some of the Western philosophy's most persistent and perplexing problems. Nothing very original here perhaps, but the approach will be novel and the implications far reaching. Why is it that so many of the problems that philosophers have posed have proved so difficult and remained unanswered? Newcomers to philosophy are often lured to the subject with a few innocuous questions. "How do I know you exist?" or "Why does time run in only one direction?" are typical of the type that diverted me and other innocents away from the proper preoccupations of youth. The questions have a beguiling charm, are easily understood and demand no more than that we justify the most familiar and strongly held of our beliefs. And yet the effort to answer them has preoccupied and entangled the greatest minds, leaving most of us confused by their failures and frustrated by our own efforts.

It has long been a cherished belief of mine that such simple sounding questions should one day prompt the discovery of a correspondingly neat set of solutions. My hope has been that just one final question would one day remain for us to chorus in amazement: "Why is it that no one thought of that before?" Unfortunately the philosophy profession doesn't think this will be at all likely, and has built a discipline that has become increasingly hard for the student to master. Their members argue that, since the profound and difficult question circumscribes its subject matter, we should expect no easy solutions. Besides, most other subjects at degree level and beyond are also very challenging for a general reader. So why should philosophy be any different? Both good points. But it would be wrong to reject all simple solutions solely on the grounds of their simplicity. Should anyone devise a straightforward means to banish the perplexity and confusion, then it merits at least a cursory examination. This would probably pick up any structural defects quickly, and routine deliberations could then resume with scarcely an interruption. If there is merit in the suggestions however, a number of long-standing and rather tiresome questions may have been exposed. Perhaps they were neither profound nor difficult in the first place.

I have waited in at home long and patiently for the professionals to resolve their disputes, to deliver the philosophical goods and propose the solutions that my curiosity craved as a teenager. But for some while I have known this to be an undertaking I would have to tackle alone! Indeed, the rickety edifices they have built for themselves have long been suspect. In my estimation the whole lot will have to come out! The proposed replacement I have christened "philosophical dynamism." In the course of developing this simpler approach, I met many people who earnestly seek a defensible intellectual foundation for their thinking

on scientific, moral and other important issues. It is mainly with them in mind that I have written this book. It will demand little of a reader beyond a sincere interest in tackling philosophy's central dilemmas, and a passing knowledge of the principal players who have helped shape its development. Technical language is kept to a minimum, and I have avoided a detailed examination of any single philosopher's work. Above all I have strived for a bold and original approach that will challenge the reader to look at ancient and tired problems under a bright new light. Stay with the book and by the end you will have a comprehensive, consistent and comprehensible set of solutions to all of the subject's major dilemmas. If you end up puzzled as to why these are problems that should ever have confounded anyone, then I shall still count myself successful! More realistically I hope I will have helped secure a platform from which to launch a more vigorous examination of the subject and its applications beyond. The project has a practical purpose too. Relieved of the burden of excessive philosophical preoccupation and confusion, I hope a general reader will feel liberated to pursue more pressing questions elsewhere with a renewed confidence and vigour. And with greater effectiveness to boot.

First to the hub of the problems. Philosophy does seem to have difficulty keeping a tidy house. Other disciplines have had a tendency to drag any unanswerable and undesirable questions towards the philosopher's door, until they feel ready to accommodate and answer them for themselves. Their domains have looked so much more orderly in consequence. Take just a few of the questions that languish within philosophical territory, largely unclaimed by natural or human sciences. What is consciousness? What is the nature of the self that is the seat of that consciousness? On what foundation rests our knowledge of the world beyond our experience? What is truth? Is it possible to define the dimensions of time and space? Do human beings possess free will? And to what authority can we legitimately appeal when we try to devise a moral framework for the free conduct of our lives? A few questions for us to be getting along with, and each the subject of an unresolved debate that has continued largely uninterrupted for as long as civilisation has permitted it. Admittedly scientists have recently begun to take an interest in one or two of them, but philosophers are not yet ready to relinquish them. If any of these has ever aroused your curiosity, I hope you will read on.

There are many more questions that I could choose, but most seem to exemplify a paradox peculiar to our lives as conscious beings. On the one hand we affirm the subjectivity of our consciousness within the World. Our experiences only represent a fluctuating personal

perspective on reality. On the other hand we acknowledge the objectivity of a world beyond experience. Reality itself is independent of any aspect that is revealed by individual experiences. So how does experience make accessible a world lying beyond experience? How is an objective reality both possible and knowable? Whether we are born with any knowledge of reality or not seems to make no difference. The fundamental philosophical concern persists: understanding the nature of all human experience and its relationship with the reality it confronts. Only if we resolve the paradox can we, for instance, embrace a concept of truth expressing this relationship, understand time and space as structures or components within it, or construct a moral framework for an independent authority which makes a legitimate claim upon our freely bestowed personal allegiance.

The paradox is also maintained at a practical level, because we all continue unquestioningly to embrace both its limbs in our decision-making. Materialist theories reject the idea that consciousness can be anything that is not material, and in transcendental theories consciousness displaces material reality. Adherents to extreme versions of these alternatives may not be numerous, yet none is so committed to their beliefs that every aspect of their lives is altered in consequence. Indeed few philosophers of any persuasion take the paradox and its philosophical implications seriously in any practical sense. This inconsistency is a shame because it becomes easy for us all to joke about philosophers, and the image of the subject as an important area of enquiry suffers in consequence.

Second to the proposed solutions. Prominent amongst theories that tackle philosophy's central dilemma are two broad groups: first those that are either experience or subject based, and second those that are object based or rooted in the material world.

**Idealism or Subject-based theories** The first group represents philosophical Idealism in some form and attempts to explain reality in terms of our experience of it. In these theories material reality is subordinated to experience but can in some fashion be understood in terms of it. Our perception of the physical world can then, as some Idealistic tending philosophers believe, be explained in terms of actual experiences, or constructions out them, created by an organising spiritual subject or mind. Subject-based theories have some inbuilt advantages. One is that the contents of our own minds can provide us with an infallible source on which to build theories of knowledge and truth. Idealists reasonably claim that we can be far more certain of the nature of our own experiences than of events happening in the outside

world. Another is that they can help explain the process of learning. We can always call upon experiences, particularly those supplied by the senses, to supply a foundation for what is often termed the empirical knowledge that investigation supplies.

Idealism has a long history, and philosophers who adopt some of its assumptions include Plato, the eighteenth century English empiricists, and philosophers such as A.J. Ayer and Bertrand Russell from the last century. One component of a subject-based programme, which continues to frustrate the efforts of those who attempt it, is the location of conditions within experience for the existence of the reality we acknowledge to exist outside it. Some experiences, such as dreams, do not represent reality, whereas our perceptions can usually offer us reliable access to the material world. So how are the two classes of experience distinguishable from the point of view of the subject having them?

From a harshly sceptical viewpoint the programme is doomed from the outset, because we are in no position to ascertain whether one experience reveals reality until we have ascertained that there is a reality out there which can be the possible object of any experience. How can a subject-based theory furnish us with possible candidates in experience that open a window upon reality?

Supposing that a subject-based programme could locate a set of experiences genuinely representative of reality, there is a problem of understanding this representative relationship. In order to counter sceptical arguments, subject-based theories are asked to locate conditions within experience which guarantee, as a matter of necessity, a correspondence with reality beyond experience. An effort to construct, say, the perception of a snooker ball from visual experience of a two-dimensional coloured circular shape in consciousness, is a typical response. Unfortunately it founders because the relationship between an ordinary perception and the reality it reveals is never quite like that. Perceptions can often be unrepresentative of the object they are directed towards, and errors or oversights are commonplace. Our senses frequently generate misunderstandings and lead us into error. A number of conditions independent of the experience have to be satisfied before we can confidently affirm that our senses give us unimpeded access to the outside world. So the relationship between experience and reality alone doesn't offer us the security of necessity, but only the more cautious assurances of the provisional or contingent. Besides, there appears to be a catch in any request for **necessary** conditions within experience for the existence of reality. If pushed for a definition of

necessary conditions, a critic of Idealism is likely to suggest that they must be independent of experience.

If the relationship between experience and reality has to be contingent rather than necessary then, for a subject-based theory, conditions within experience will only indicate a likelihood of the existence of an object outside experience. Is this a satisfactory basis within experience for an Idealist to build a reality beyond? A foundation in probability hardly seems strong enough. Typically, in assessing the probability of an event, we calculate the number of outcomes qualifying as the occurrence of the event, and compare it with the number of all possible outcomes. In throwing two dice, for instance, the probability of throwing a seven is calculated as the number of ways in which a seven can be thrown, namely six, placed against all the possible outcomes, namely thirty-six. This we can express as a fraction or percentage. Such a calculation of probability deals in the relationship between different sets of possible events. It cannot tell us what the actual outcome of any throw of the dice will produce. Only what will be a likely outcome.

So if we were to call upon probability to aid the Idealist programme, we would need a basis in certainty. We need to know which conditions within experience qualify as the occurrence of a perception of reality, so that these can be compared with the number of all possible interpretations of the experience. But this requires us to determine which these are and to make the very distinction which the programme is trying to effect. Contingent guarantees of a material world will not work. Probabilities can only be calculated where we already have an independent means of establishing the existence or occurrence of whatever we are trying to ascertain. Necessity and contingency alone cannot characterise the relationship we seek. Facts about the World may be contingent, but there are conditions under which we can justifiably be certain of their truth.

Subject-based theories accordingly encounter great difficulty in breaking out of the realm of experience which encloses their position, and into the real world we all share with them. It is a problem they must tackle alone because, until they can ascertain the existence of the real world, the poor beleaguered souls cannot acknowledge you and me as other subjects of experience sympathising with their plight. Until then, every experience must belong to them as the subject of all experience. Establishing contact with us can wait however, because subject-based philosophers need first to convince themselves that life is not an unbroken dream, and that any experience can offer them access to

reality. They may well be condemning themselves to a longer wait in than I have endured!

These and other insoluble problems are a threat to any subject-based philosophy. But these need not be problems that philosophy as a whole has to address. It is only a philosophical Idealism which provokes them in the first place. Abandon that particular philosophical position and that is the end of them.

**Object-Based Theories.** Another prominent tradition in philosophy, and one diametrically opposed to Idealism, is philosophical Materialism. **Materialist or object-based theories** try to resolve philosophy's central problems by offering to explain our experience of the world in terms of physical, biological or chemical processes. According to these theories, conscious experience can be understood and described as an interaction between material events occurring in our environment, and material events occurring within our bodies and central nervous system. If correct the subjectivity of our experience in the face of the objectivity of the material world need not produce a paradox. An experience conceived in Materialist terms is a complex sequence of events occurring not in opposition to reality, but functioning compatibly as a part of it.

Materialist or object-based theories are becoming more influential as advances in our understanding of the workings of the brain and central nervous system maintain rapid progress. They offer a simpler and scientifically sustainable explanation of central philosophical problems, and so avoid much of the sceptical questioning that their more spiritually inclined rivals attract. If it is hard to name any great philosopher who is wholeheartedly a Materialist, this is in part because the theory is broadly anti-philosophical in tone. Implicit in a statement of extreme Materialism is the view that philosophical problems are either nonsensical, or can be solved by scientific investigation. We no longer need to define and characterise experiences introspectively when it becomes possible to locate, control and ultimately synthesise specified experiences by examining and manipulating the brains, bodies and surroundings of individual persons.

Materialism meets stiff resistance, and its supporters are sometimes baffled by the level of antagonism and distrust they encounter from a broader public. Underlying much of this I suspect is an instinctive emotional rejection of some of the implications of the theory. We are suspicious that our spirituality is being undermined and replaced. Can it really be that the enjoyment of a simple experience, such as eating an

apple, and our subjection to a series of neurophysiological changes, amount to one and the same thing? We are probably happy to accept that scientific investigation can locate the causes or effects of, or accompaniments to an experience, but many of us remain stubbornly unconvinced that science could reveal the content in all its immediacy, richness and subtlety. Actually having and savouring the experience seems to put it in a different category altogether.

Clinging to such precious notions may of course be mere vanity. We are steeped in a culture stressing human pre-eminence. A belief in ourselves as spiritual beings is a source of our dignity, underpinning our respect for others, and often sustaining religious faith. Reappraising our beliefs can be painful and we often try to avoid doing so. But the misgivings are deeper rooted, I believe, and we must investigate further.

Much opposition to Materialism is protective of the first person perspective we enjoy in relation to our own experiences by virtue of *owning* them. There is something unique about the taste of an apple in *my* mouth. And yours too. Similar neural events may be recorded as occurring in countless individuals when they devour apples, but my experience differs from yours and theirs simply by virtue of its being *mine*. I recognise the experience immediately and directly. I discover the sweetness, sharpness and other qualities belonging to the apple without having to consult with another about the experience, and without sponsoring investigations into the workings of my own brain. Materialist theories are accused of disregarding the first person viewpoint and of trying to subordinate all experience to the third person perspective that embraces scientific investigation. The charge is that they deny the subjectivity of experience altogether. The point is a fair one. Materialists tend to downplay or even ignore it altogether. The nature of this subjectivity should at least be examined and discussed. It is something we are all aware of: a fundamental asymmetry between first and third person perspectives, between experience and reality.

Recognising the subjectivity of experience is necessary in order to appreciate the paradox that launched this philosophical enquiry. Clearly a convincing Materialist denial of this subjectivity would do away with the paradox and remove the need for much philosophical theorising. So it might seem a sensible idea to drop all vain reservations about the special status of our subjectivity and abandon all hope of finding our salvation there. Were it not for the problem of free will, I too might be persuaded to join them and do just that.

Alongside the belief in a material world independent of experience, the belief in the possession of free will is another inextricable element of our conscious lives. Whether acting alone or with others we are constantly making decisions. If the deliberations and choices are to be at all intelligible, then we must presume that the actions they instigate are freely chosen from amongst alternatives, each of which would have produced different outcomes. Our lives at every turn hinge upon a genuine belief that we enjoy some measure of influence over the direction we can give them. Morality cannot exist otherwise. So the existence of free will appears to contradict the central beliefs of Materialism. Choice and decision-making for the Materialist are conscious activities that take place principally in the brain, and brain activity is in turn controlled by the physical and chemical stimuli to which it is subjected. The subordination of the actions of our brains and bodies to material processes seems to commit the Materialist to a doctrine of determinism. Materialism allows no room for a subject of experience to interfere with these processes, and impose his or her own freely chosen own agenda on proceedings, since the subject is identified entirely and precisely with the body and brain processes of a single biological organism. We may enjoy freedom of action in the sense that we consent to the actions we perform, and are unimpeded in their execution, but what we think and do will always be entirely determined by the material condition of our bodies and their interaction in a material environment.

So Materialism is exposed to determinism and the problem of free will, and implies that attributions of responsibility, considerations of right and wrong, and dispensing rewards and punishments, have no sustainable foundation, and can make no legitimate claims upon our conduct. At a pragmatic level such precautions may work, helping society to thrive and function more harmoniously. Everything functions *as though* every individual has free will, and to the benefit of society. Nonetheless a Materialist perspective suggests that the assertion that free will is real or genuine is hollow and deceitful. No Materialist **moral** framework has yet been devised that supports or legitimises claims upon individual conduct. This leaves a stable society in jeopardy if it cannot prevent its members discovering this fact and acting on its consequences. It would be a feeble Materialist response to suggest that we adopt and enforce a moral framework because it serves society's interests to do so. This would suggest that decisions had been made and that free will had been again involved. Materialism may be true, but it might be better for all if we kept quiet about it!

Many scientists who are Materialists stumble on the problem of free will. Rather than accept they have been misled in their interpretation of

scientific progress, most are happier delegating the problem back for the philosophers to solve. This isn't really good enough. Until it is resolved, the problem puts all Materialist theories in jeopardy. It is a problem that Materialism has made for itself, and one that they must tackle if their programme is to succeed. Materialist theories suffer from a difficulty which is the opposite of that encountered by the Idealists. They have locked themselves out into a world beyond experience, and have discarded the means of re-entering a conscious realm, where every waking moment is saturated in freedom and engages all it surveys. If we could find a way to reinterpret scientific progress without a materialist bias and re-examine the central problems of philosophy, it may be possible to avoid the problem of free will altogether. That we can do so is a central contention of this book.

**Dualism.** In the light of difficulties troubling both Idealism and Materialism, it might seem like a good idea to combine both in a single integrated philosophy. A dual-substance theory, or dualism aims to do just that by creating a partnership of experience and reality as fundamental and radically different forms of existence. Both are present in the human being as mind (or soul) and body. A dualist theory need not concern itself with explaining one in terms of the other, as the monist or single substance theories of Idealism and Materialism are required to. Both mind and body, mental and physical, are self-sufficient and each occupies its own exclusive domain.

A dualist conception of the human being representing, for instance, a harmonious balance between a transient body and an indestructible soul has been influential and helped shape a number of theologies. Some regard life on Earth as a preparatory stage for a purely spiritual state, or maintain that we were created to occupy a superior and privileged position in relation to other life forms. It is also a theory which receives much support in the writings of Descartes and other great philosophers. More generally the dual-substance theory accords comfortably with our everyday thinking about ourselves, offering easy explanations for common sense beliefs concerning personal identity, free will, the independence of objects from experience, and so on.

Unfortunately mind-body dualism has suffered an unhappy history. Not only does it appear vulnerable to the objections fired at both single substance theories, but it also prone to difficulties which are exclusively its own. For example it fails to solve the problem of solipsism. Having access to only our own minds puts an insuperable barrier between us and the knowledge of other minds. We are left in no position to ascertain that others have minds behind their bodily behaviour. Direct

verification is impossible because we can only experience the contents of our own minds, and indirect deduction is no more than speculation if we can never penetrate their behaviour to secure direct verification. Even if we were able to delve this far, our understanding of others would remain fraught with problems. For a dualist, for instance, to see a green object is, amongst other things, to have an experience in one's own mind of its greenness. What of another's perception of the same object? How could we compare my experience of green with yours when we view the same object? Unlike Idealism, mind-body dualism gives our existence a public dimension, but crowding us into a world alongside other bodies only serves to make our inner experience of isolation that much more acute.

**Rationalism or Concept-Based Theories.** So much for those theories I label "Substance" theories: Idealism, Materialism and their combination in Dualism. Each seems to lead to insuperable difficulties, some of which have become fixed in that celebrated catalogue of imponderables known as "The Problems of Philosophy." But our brief survey of the subject is not yet concluded. Experience and reality, although independent, must be brought together for knowledge of reality to be possible. Securing this connection seems to highlight a weakness in all the substance theories. However, this is less conspicuously a failing for what I shall call "Concept- Based" theories, and to which most subscribe in some form. The term is mine and covers a tradition that may loosely be called "Rationalism" in philosophy. As old as philosophy itself, elements of Rationalism appear in the work of Aristotle through to philosophers of the present day, though the work of Kant has been particularly influential in securing something of a Rationalist consensus within modern continental philosophy.

In its loosest sense, Rationalism asserts, in opposition to Idealist tending theories such as Empiricism, that some of our knowledge can be acquired other than by means of experience through the senses. For many Rationalists at least, knowledge of reality is possible only if it is structured by concepts that are not derived from sense experience. By the introduction of concepts, variously labelled "ideas" or "reason", "essences", "categories" "texts" and so on, even the simplest perception integrates the experience with an object, and every object of perception is presented under an aspect supplied by a concept.

So what are concepts and why does Rationalism consider them necessary to secure a link with reality? Although every object is unique, every possible object shares at least some properties with some others. Concepts express the generality that allows different objects to share a

property, or for a single object to change. The property of being green is an example. Different objects may be green, and most green objects may change hue or colour. Concepts introduce an element of flexibility into the way in which we refer to objects, and Rationalism recognises its importance. Due to the variety, complexity and changeability of the World, it is not practical to label every object with a proper noun, and devise a new one representing every shift of nuance. Far better to devise and apply a system of common nouns defined by concepts, laying down bands of tolerance for their application. Concepts possess limits within which an object can persist and where other objects can co-exist. The concept of a billiard ball, for instance lays down essential criteria of size, shape and composition to which all billiard balls must conform, but is less exacting on their colour, which may be red or white, and none at all on its ownership, place of manufacture and so on.

Rationalism recognises that concepts are necessary for defining and specifying what we perceive, but also that they are not the objects of perception. Being real and knowable, Rationalists infer that they are a source of knowledge not obtained through the senses, and conclude that concept-possession is necessary in order to perceive and know reality at all. Obviously sense-experience aids concept-development and sharpens our understanding of concepts, but a Rationalist would maintain that any journey of discovery must be launched and guided by simple concept applications.

Behind the central Rationalist assertion is the assumption that reality itself is undifferentiated and unknowable in any form unmediated by concepts. Nothing can be located or understood there except by applying concepts in its direction. So perceiving the redness of a billiard ball cannot be understood as the presence of its raw redness suspended in consciousness. The perception of its redness is the result we should obtain from aiming and focussing our developed colour-sensitive faculties in the direction of the ball. What we see will depend upon a large number of considerations. Perception and reality are therefore linked within a Rationalist perspective. The nature of reality itself is defined by the scope of the concepts that can be applied to it. Some Rationalists go further and suggest that reality cannot contain anything beyond that we can conceive it as containing. No incomprehensible mystery can lie out there beyond our powers of comprehension.

Concept-based or Rationalist theories offer hope to their substance-based cousins because they introduce a dynamic element into understanding reality. In making the identity of objects dependent upon the relationship we are able to assume with them, Rationalism makes

reality penetrable and knowable. It also reveals a social dimension to concept formation, for the concepts that obtain currency will reflect the priorities and preoccupations of a society and the social forces it commands. Indeed they contribute to the reality we inhabit. It is because we have an interest in individual seating arrangements, for instance, that we devise, make, seek and use chairs, distinguishing them from other pieces of furniture. Concepts emerge, develop and disappear as a response to the changing needs, outlook and demands that we place upon our environment. For substance-based theories, reality remains a more alien place. The identities of the objects there inhere in those objects. They possess an internal self-sufficiency that resists our efforts to penetrate them.

Disagreements between Rationalist and Materialist theories make an interesting discussion. Rationalism identifies a meaningfulness or significance in our lives that demands we employ concepts to engage our surroundings. This significance forms an essential part of any Rationalist characterisation of reality, and yet appears missing altogether from Materialist versions. Materialists are pronounced guilty of a crude oversimplification, for instance, if they suppose that the meaning of a line of poetry, or beauty of a phrase of music is somehow encapsulated in a sequence of material processes it sets in motion. Beauty and meaning from a Rationalist perspective can only be discerned within a wide cultural context that cultivates tastes, promotes fashions and supports alternative interpretations. Such a context, it is argued, cannot be identified with any single material representation of events.

In its defence, Materialism questions the importance of non-scientific concepts for an objective understanding of reality. It sees no obstacle to providing a comprehensive representation of all facts in terms that make no reference to the predilections bound up with a culture and the vocabulary it deploys. Philosophical discussion it sees as too often confined to a cosy world of coffee mugs and armchairs, whose objective character is obscured by sentimental attachments, associations or estimations of utility. Materialism is more interested in a universe exclusively composed of subatomic particles that underpins our familiar world, together with it all the meaning and beauty it doubtless contains. We need concepts to refer to these particles too, but Materialists believe these contain none of the emotional baggage that Rationalism considers so indispensable to its own representation.

Rationalism can mount a spirited response here, and questions whether a Materialist conceptual scheme could possibly succeed in referring to reality at any level. Discretion and decision-making seem to play an

unavoidable part in the formation of any scheme where a concept needs either to characterise change in one object, or a property shared by more than one. How should we determine the limits or bands of tolerance of a given concept? Looking for them in the objects or properties themselves clearly begs the question. Yet it is a question that has to be addressed even at subatomic levels, when determining the components of the electron for instance. Indeed sub-atomic research seems to weaken the Materialist position, because quantum physics locates ambivalence in the fabric of reality itself. Scientific investigation now seems to support the belief that considerations other than the material nature of reality itself will influence the ways we decide to represent and measure it through our concepts.

There is clearly a suggestion in a Rationalist position that Materialism takes for granted the role played by concepts in referring to reality, and is incapable of devising a scheme of its own and making it stick. The point is a telling one, but Rationalism can never escape the main Materialist counter-thrust for very long. This is the assertion that reality always remains outside and independent of our approach towards it, whatever arrangement of concepts we devise for its investigation. A simple point, but concept-led theories need reminding of it constantly. It is because there are chairs out there in reality that we can use concepts successfully to refer to them. The existence and substance of the Universe does not depend upon some actual or possible labels we might arbitrarily devise and attach to it.

Why should such a reminder be necessary? It is perhaps because the mere suggestion of a real world lying beyond the scope of concepts leads a concept-based theory into acute difficulties. After all, what no possible set of concepts can represent must be inconceivable and thereby impossible. For Kant and so many other philosophers since, we can never perceive reality, as it is, in-itself, without the mediation of some concept-like structure. And this renders doubtful any prospect of a reality as a common focus for our perceptions.

The ongoing argument between Materialist and concept-based theories is in part concerned about the meaning and reference of concepts. Concepts should possess both, but they are not the same thing. Take the concept of a chair. The Rationalist can explore every connotation of its meaning with subtlety and penetration, but we seem to need a Materialist to produce the chair itself. We would probably need the pair of them to change a light bulb as well! The concept of a chair may be rigorously, loosely or exhaustively defined, but real chairs are neither rigorous nor loose nor exhaustive. Loosely covered maybe, but they are

wooden or upholstered or with cabriole legs, whilst concepts are none of these things. Neither theory seems able to do justice to both the concept and the instances it can represent.

For many the most damaging consequence of any concept-based philosophy is a descent into relativism at the levels of both knowledge and morality. Relieved of an independent reality to act as yardstick for the adequacy of any conceptual scheme, the Rationalist philosopher is forced to concede the competing claims of rival depictions of reality on equal terms. A statement about reality must only be appraised in relation to the conceptual scheme which nurtures it, and not against the object, situation or whatever that it refers to. Truth itself falls a victim to an unhealthy Rationalist tolerance for rival contenders for the truth. Astrological, religious, psychological and biological explanations of historical events, for instance, must all be looked at in their own terms, and made understandable only in terms of the social conditions that produced them. None can justifiably claim to be more or less true than another.

Theoretical relativists abound and they persistently delight in reminding us all that whatever is true for you need not hold for anybody else. Like solipsism and determinism, relativism represents a position which it can be entertaining to hold and amusing to defend. For a short while, at any rate, before they become absolutely insufferable! At a theoretical level the notion is a complete non-starter, not least because a statement to the effect that the theory is true can never be so. It might even prove difficult for two people sharing the same conceptual outlook to verify that they do so. Maybe they just appear that way to each other. But I am more interested in the plausibility of adopting relativism in practice. The effective conduct of a large part of all of our lives rests on the assumption of certainties and facts furnishing the arena within which disagreements can be located and resolved. Anyone promoting relativism must cautiously resist certainty or conviction in the face of the most compelling evidence, must dispute the need to seek, communicate or act on information in cases of emergency, and must disdain all disagreement or efforts at persuasion where injustice arises. Reasoning, inquisitiveness, persuasion and debate are a few of the activities indispensable to civilised life. Yet, without the conviction that there are answers in reality that are accessible and knowable, they are doomed to redundancy. Relativism is not a feasible life choice.

Relativism has something in common with the problems of solipsism and determinism that have also arisen in this introductory discussion. All are chronic problems that demand a solution, but they are not fundamental

philosophical concerns. Their rather unfortunate emergence has done little for the image of philosophy, but they represent no more than unpalatable consequences of genuine if flawed efforts to address the subject's more central questions. I know I have done little justice to the richness and subtlety of the principal contributors to Western philosophy. The work of most philosophers is an always complex and sometimes inconsistent blend of ideas from the three traditions I have sketched, often embellished or patched up with elements of common sense, pragmatism, or metaphysical speculation. My aim so far has been to highlight some of the most troublesome of the problems that bedevil the subject and to indicate a source of their appearance. My next is to suggest new answers to these questions, and to show how we might avoid the problems altogether.

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