

4. Personal Idealism

I

The Scottish philosopher, Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison (1856–1931), was one of the editors of *Essays in Philosophical Criticism*, the volume, as we said in the last chapter, that is credited with making known the wide range and scope of British interest in Hegel.¹ Two years later he published, *Scottish Philosophy*, in which he argued that Hegelian philosophy should be understood as a partner with Scottish realism in its critique of Kant, Hamilton and the British empiricists. Thus, in 1887, when he published, *Hegelianism and Personality*, a book sharply critical of the Hegelian tendency to identify divine and human consciousness, his friends were surprised and thought that he was abandoning the Hegelian approach to philosophy. In fact, he was not so much abandoning Hegelianism as he was developments in the absolutist wing of Hegelianism. This book led to what some have called a revolution in the Hegelian camp resulting in an opposition movement to the absolutism of Bradley and Bosanquet. This movement came to be called personal idealism.

After completing his first degree in classics and philosophy at Edinburgh University, Pringle-Pattison traveled to Germany where he studied the work of Kant and Hegel. He also came under the influence of Lotze. The idea that the world has an end or purpose is, on Lotze's account, a moral conviction. And God, who is conceived as a personal being, is understood to be expressing himself in the world for the realization of the moral ideal. Only God can be personal being in the fullest sense of the word. Finite persons, nevertheless, are not mere modifications of the Absolute. Each individual is conceived as his or her own center of activity. Lotze's work influenced many British and American philosophers at the time. We have already seen evidence of this in the case of Royce, who is sometimes counted among the personal idealists.

Hegelianism and Personality has a sharply polemical tone and it challenges the work of several philosophers, including T.H. Green. Although in

¹Andrew Seth acquired a new surname in 1898 when he inherited the Pringle estate in the borderlands of Scotland. The estate was left to him with the provision that he change his surname to Pringle-Pattison. I have discussed the work of Pringle-Pattison and Sorley at more length in 'The Gifford Lectures and the Scottish Personal Idealists', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 49 (December 1995), pp. 365–395.

many ways sympathetic with Green, Pringle-Pattison argues that the concept of self in Green's thought remains vague and points in the direction of an identification of the human and the divine self-consciousness. He agreed that the concept of a mere individual is a fiction of philosophical thought, and that there could be no interaction between persons or knowledge of persons unless they are embraced in one reality. It is, however, a big step from this to the point where there is one universal self that thinks in all individual selves. Although selfhood involves a duality in unity, it is, argues Pringle-Pattison, "none the less true that each Self is a unique existence, which is perfectly *impervious*, if I may so speak, to other selves."² To reduce the self to an object of a universal thinker is to leave the self and the universal thinker without any true personality.

The sharply polemical tone is significantly moderated in his Gifford Lectures, *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy*. Following a critique of the idea of God in the empirical tradition, in which he challenges its narrow view of experience and argues that philosophy should be open to all dimensions of experience, Pringle-Pattison engages in a discussion with the absolute idealists. He argues for a rational interpretation of reality in which reality is understood to be spiritual and persons are understood to be organically related to God, without losing their status as independent beings. He seeks to steer a course between the monism of absolute idealism and the pluralism of the more radical personal idealists to be discussed later in this chapter. He challenges in particular the absolute idealism of Bradley and Bosanquet, arguing that their evaluation of experience is based not upon the standpoint of human experience, but upon the visionary and abstract standpoint of absolute experience. He maintains that it is an inversion of philosophical method to define the Absolute on the basis of an empty principle, and then, from that principle, reason to actual experience and condemn its most characteristic features to the status of mere appearance and illusion. On Bradley's account, everything is held to be reconciled in the Absolute, but we do not know how, since none of the predicates drawn from our experience is applicable. By contrast, Pringle-Pattison argues that it is from ideals present and operative in our experience that we draw our criteria of value and our understanding of the reality in which we live. The proper function of reason is to clarify and explain experience, not explain it away by means of an abstract theory.

The presence of the ideal in human experience, according to Pringle-Pattison, is as much a fact of experience as any other. Indeed, it is the fundamental characteristic of our experience. Our ideals are the creative forms that give shape and direction to our lives from within. We are not, on his view, beings enclosed in our finite reality. Rather, we stretch out into a wider range of reality, conscious of our finitude only in relation to the presence of an infinite life within us. This is indicated in our aspirations, our infinite

²Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, *Hegelianism and Personality* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1887), pp. 216–217.

dissatisfactions, and in our belief in the possibility of infinite progress. The ideal is the spirit of the whole working in us, and our reverence for the moral law, the sense of sin, and worship are possible only if we feel ourselves in the presence of a reality, in relation to which all else fades into insignificance. "The presence of the Ideal is the reality of God within us."³ Pringle-Pattison wants to maintain both the individuality and ethical independence of finite selves as fundamental conditions of the moral life, and the reality of divine consciousness. The possibility of progress in goodness and truth can be explained, he argues, only if the finite creature is grounded in and illuminated by a creative divine being. If we think of God and persons as two separate entities, "we lose our hold upon the experienced fact, which is *the existence of the one in the other and through the other*."⁴ Transcendence is retained, but not in the sense of an ontological separateness of one being from another. Transcendence refers to a distinction of value or quality, to "the infinite greatness and richness of the containing life, as compared with anything as yet appropriated by the finite creature."⁵

Pringle-Pattison believes that the traditional metaphysics of substance is not adequate to explain the relation of God or the Absolute to finite individuals and that the absolute idealists have reverted to a pre-Christian concept of the self in their understanding of persons primarily as cognitive beings. By contrast, he understands the self primarily as an acting being. Knowledge and will, he argues, are mere abstractions unless they are regarded as the moving and determining forces in a personality that shapes its attitudes and actions in the world. It is the spiritual will, which is our concrete personality, and this will is independent. In all actions, the person is the source of the action and the forces that help shape her also demand from her a response. The ethical life depends upon the freedom of the self-conscious being. Without it, we would have a world of mere automata.

To speak of finite individuals, argues Pringle-Pattison, is to speak of their being incomplete, not fitted for absolute ends. Finite individuals need something to contemplate, something beyond them which makes them dare and hope to be. This means that finite individuals cannot make themselves their goal. They may, however, constitute the end or goal of the Absolute. The Absolute in this case is not that of a self-satisfied being contemplating its own perfection. The perfection of human beings is understood in terms of our giving and finding ourselves in others, and God's perfection may be understood analogously in terms of God's fellowship with others. This results in the abandonment of the picture of God as a changeless, self-sufficient being, but it did not lead Pringle-Pattison to take up the more radical pluralist position in which God is understood to be merely one entity among others.

We have seen that, for Pringle-Pattison, purposive activity is the central

³Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy*, 2nd edition revised (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 246.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 255.

feature of human existence. Some argued that the theory of evolution ruled out the idea of cosmic purposiveness, but Pringle-Pattison believed that the idea of development in the sense of a gradual refinement through countless intermediate stages is compatible with a teleological view of the universe. When seen in the context of the whole, he argues, mechanical and teleological explanations are not contradictory. Rather, teleological explanation is conceived as the more inclusive. The idea of an end or realized purpose involves the idea that the end is worthy of attainment. It is an achievement in which the rational person can see the fulfillment of the primary purpose of her being. It is, then, the idea of value that gives unity. Value and its correlate, satisfaction, are tied to realized purpose. It is through this satisfaction that we are said to have access to the secrets of the Absolute. This is the case because in making judgments of value we are not expressing individual purposes. We experience satisfaction only if we are judging from the viewpoint of the whole. From this perspective, our finite judgments may be understood as postulating the satisfaction of the Absolute itself, which, as heirs of reason and freedom, we are capable of sharing.

On Pringle-Pattison's account, God cannot be an eternal being outside the world of time. God's eternity is conceived as both including and transcending time. The expression, "God's eternity," is not merely or even primarily a quantitative measure. It is charged with value and, if we consult religious language, we find that God's eternity refers primarily to "the indestructible confidence of the worshipper in the permanence of the divine character and in the constancy of the divine purpose of righteousness as revealed in the government of the world."⁶ Pringle-Pattison finds an analogy for this understanding of God's eternity in human experience, specifically in the concept of the specious present. Our actual experience of time is dependent on the continual change of the experienced content, a melting of one moment into the next, a togetherness of the parts of time in which we are lifted above mere succession. In the compresence of the moments of time in our experience, Pringle-Pattison says in agreement with Royce, we already realize on an infinitesimal scale the nature of eternal consciousness. We can imagine a consciousness in which the whole context of time is known in the same way that finite beings know the specious present.

In 1912, when Pringle-Pattison delivered his Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen, William Ernest Hocking (1873–1966) published his first and most representative book, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*. Hocking, a student of Josiah Royce and William James, shared much in common with the general outlook of Pringle-Pattison, and his work continues to be influential among some American philosophers today. He was committed to the general view that knowledge of the world and other minds is dependent upon knowledge of what he calls the Other Mind or God, but he was sensitive to the criticisms of the pragmatists, who insist on objectivity, change,

⁶Ibid., pp. 348–349.

growth, personality and freedom. To satisfy the pragmatist test, Hocking argues, idealism has to become more realistic. And in the matter of religion, which is central to his endeavors, idealism has to come to grips with the concrete and historical factors which are essential to religion. He does not believe that the Absolute of philosophy and the God of religion are identical, but he insists that we need both concepts.

It is Hocking's aim in *The Meaning of God in Human Experience* to inquire of experience what the God of religion means and has meant to humankind, and to find the foundations of religion, whether they be in reason or beyond. Religious truth, he argues, is founded upon experience, but experience in this sense is not confined to sensation as in the classical British tradition. The experience upon which religious faith is built is not wholly different from sensation, but is what he calls a "super-sensible experience, like the experience of our human fellows; an experience which recognizes the reality given in sensation for what, in its true nature, it is."⁷ Experience is cognitive; it is not independent of idea and hence whatever is a matter of experience must in time become also a matter of reason. If God is to be known at all, he argues, God has to be known in experience. Thus we have to interrogate experience to see whether the reality we encounter is in any sense a living and divine reality. Hocking is aware that many persons look to tradition for their ideas of God. He argues, however, that we are able to recognize and accept the authority of tradition only as a result of our own knowledge of God, especially the more elementary knowledge that God exists and has left his word in the world. He calls this knowledge universal and primordial. A study of the history of religions shows that the experience of divine presence is mediated by things and events. The experience of divine presence occurs at special points in our experience of nature, where our awareness of God seems to have broken through our ordinary awareness of objects in such special social events as birth, death, marriage, disease and war. Ultimately, Hocking argues, we cannot separate the experience of nature from social experience or assign a priority to either, for the religious experience of nature means finding nature to be living and even personal.

Experience for Hocking is a social event and the question, whether our experience of nature and social events can mediate experience of an Infinite Spirit, is closely related to the question of our experience of other minds. Indeed, our awareness of others is understood to involve at least an implicit awareness of the Other Mind or God. The world of nature, says Hocking, is known by me as a common world, a world of the other, as well as my world. It has continuity and is shareable. When we criticize our experience as merely subjective and solitary, we do so by reference to a social experience which is more comprehensive. Thus, he says, "a knowledge of Other Knower is an integral part of the simplest knowledge of nature itself."⁸ It is through my

⁷William Ernest Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 155.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 269.

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