

Nicholas Rescher  
Studies in Idealism

**NICHOLAS RESCHER COLLECTED PAPERS**

**Volume III**

Nicholas Rescher

# Studies in Idealism



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# Contents

## Preface

### Chapter 1: WHAT SORT OF IDEALISM IS VIABLE TODAY?

1. On Viability	1
2. Idealism and its Modes	1
3. Problems of Idealism	2
4. Conceptual Idealism and its Merits	4
5. What Conceptual Idealism Comes To	8
6. Problems of Mind and Matter	10

### Chapter 2: REALITY IN THE LIGHT OF REALISM AND IDEALISM

1. Preliminaries	17
2. Reality	18
3. Scientific Realism and its Problems	22
4. The Security/Definitiveness Trade-Off	24
5. Common Sense Realism and its Problems	26
6. Why Not Abandon Realism?	28
7. Regulative Realism	30
8. Realism and Idealism	32

### Chapter 3: THE ARGUMENTS FROM ERROR AND IGNORANCE: AN EPISTEMIC APPROACH TO FACTUAL REALISM

1. Error	35
2. Ignorance	37
3. Lessons	38

### Chapter 4: PRAGMATIC IDEALISM AND META-PHYSICAL REALISM

1. The Existential Component of Realism	41
2. Realism in its Regulative/Pragmatic Aspect	44
3. The Role of Presumption	51
4. The Role of Retrovalidation	53

5. Retrospect	54
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## Chapter 5: POSSIBILITY CONCEPTUALISM AS AN APPROACH TO MODAL ONTOLOGY

1. Modal Conceptualism	57
2. Possibility Conceptualism	63
3. Why Not Possibility Realism?	67
4. Why Not Possibility Nominalism?	69
5. The Crux of Possibility Conceptualism	70
6. Overcoming the Gödelian Objection	73
7. Overcoming the Insufficiency Objection	75

## Chapter 6: OPTIMALISM AND THE RATIONALITY OF THE REAL (ON THE PROSPECTS OF AXIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION)

1. Is The Real Rational?	81
2. The Turn to Axiology	81
3. Abandoning Causality	83
4. Why Optimalism?	86
5. Is Optimalism Theocentric?	88
6. Is Optimalism Purposive?	90
7. Further Difficulties	92
8. Violating Common Sense	93
9. Wishful Thinking?	95
10. Conclusion	95

## Chapter 7: THE REVOLT AGAINST ABSOLUTES IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

1. Stagesetting	97
2. The Assault on Absolutes: Certainty	98
3. The Assault on Absolutes: Necessity	99
4. The Assault on Absolutes: Exactness And Detail	99
5. The Attack on Absolutes: Universality	100
6. The Assault on Absolutes: Timelessness	101
7. The Assault on Absolutes: Objectivity	102
8. A Fundamental Choice	103

9. Anti-Philosophy as the New Absolute	105
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## Chapter 8: THE ABSOLUTE: A CONCISE HISTORY

1. Introduction	109
2. Kant (1724-1804)	111
3. German Idealism	112
4. British Idealism	116
5. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)	119
6. Pragmatism	120
7. Wittgenstein (1889-1951)	125
8. Retrospect	126
9. Coda	128
10. Prospect	129

## Chapter 9: DIALECTIC: A BRIEF HISTORY

1. Pre-History	133
2. Plato	134
3. Aristotle	135
4. The Medievals	137
5. Kant	138
6. Fichte and Schleiermacher	139
7. Hegel	140
8. Marx	144
9. 20th Century Analytic Philosophy	146
10. Examples of Dialectical Analysis	149
11. The Dialectic of Aporetic Situations	152
12. Summary	155

## Chapter 10: MCTAGGART'S LOGICAL DETERMINISM

1. Introduction	157
2. Extrinsic Determination	157
3. Thing and Quality: Individuation	159
4. The Scope and Structure Of McTaggart's Necessitarianism	160
5. Vulnerability of the Position	163
6. Implications for McTaggart's Determinism	167

## Chapter 11: BLANSHARD AND THE COHERENCE THEORY OF TRUTH

1. Coherence as the Definition of Truth	169
2. The Criteriology of Truth	171
3. Truth-Criteria as a Rational Warrant	174
4. Basic Problems of the Coherence Theory of Truth	179
5. A Contrast with Bradley	182
6. Conclusion	185
Name Index	187

# PREFACE

When I first began to consider myself an idealist some thirty years ago there was only a small number of philosophers—all of a decidedly earlier generation—who were willing to have this label applied to themselves.

What led me to see matters differently?

Two prime considerations, I think. One was that I looked back to Leibniz as my philosophical hero. The other was that it seemed to me that the prevailing materialistic/positivistic ethos was inducing philosophy to wear blinders vis-à-vis a good many of the key issues regarding ourselves and our place in the world's scheme of things and that the idealistic tradition opened the way to averting an unhealthy impoverishment of the subject.

The material collected together in this volume are studies written over the last twenty years or so. (Detailed acknowledgement of prior publication is given in the footnotes.) Taken all in all, these essays convey a rounded and representative picture of the sort of idealistic position that I deem is promising and productive to defend in the present state of discussion of the subject.

I am grateful to Estelle Burris for her help in preparing this material in a form suitable for the printer's use.

Nicholas Rescher  
Pittsburgh  
May, 2005



# Chapter 1

## WHAT SORT OF IDEALISM IS VIABLE TODAY?

### 1. ON VIABILITY

What sort of issue is this anyway—this question of whether or not a certain philosophical position is viable today.

We are clearly not dealing here with the *sociological* question of what people-in-general think in the manner of public opinion questionnaires—what they would agree to or disagree with if asked. We are not testing the popular pulse. Rather, what is at stake is related to William James’s distinction between live and dead issues. Viability should here be construed in terms of consonance and compatibility with what the general run of relevantly well-informed people—professional philosophers in particular—think of as being at least a real option: a position to be reckoned with through being taken seriously enough to discuss and debate, even if only by way of rejection and refutation.

### 2. IDEALISM AND ITS MODES

Idealism, broadly speaking, is the doctrine that reality is somehow mind-correlative or mind-coordinated. Bertrand Russell said that “idealists tell us that what appears as matter is really something mental.”<sup>1</sup> But that is rather stretching things. Idealism certainly need not go so far as to maintain a causal theory to the effect that mind somehow *makes or constitutes* matter. This over-simple view of idealism ignores such versions of the theory as, for example, the explanatory idealism which merely holds that an adequate *explanation* of the real always requires some recourse to the operations of mind. A genuine idealism will indeed center around the conception

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<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), p. 58.

that reality as we understand it reflects the workings of mind. But it need not necessarily see mind as a causal source.

Traditional ontological idealism of the sort criticized by Russell did indeed center on the idea that thought creates reality. And in this regard such an idealism the cart before the horse. For the situation is the very reverse: the fact of biological evolution means that natural reality creates thought. It seems best to take the line that thought has gained its key foothold on the world stage not so much by creating it as by virtue of the emergent saliency of its role in nature.

In the historic past, disputes raged within the idealist camp over whether “the mind” at issue in the position’s definition was a mind emplaced outside of or behind nature (*absolute* idealism), or a nature-pervasive power of rationality of some sort (*cosmic* idealism), or the collective impersonal social mind of people-in-general (*social* idealism), or simply the distributive collection of individual minds (*personal* idealism). But over the years, the more grandiose versions of the theory have dropped increasingly from favor, and in recent times virtually all idealists have construed “the minds” at issue in their theory as a matter of separate individual minds equipped with socially engendered resources, and thus forming part of the world rather than standing outside or behind it. The aim of the present discussion is thus to argue for a version of idealism that does not go too decidedly against the grain of such current philosophical sensibilities. What it seeks is a form of idealism that is modest—or, if you insist, minimalistic—enough to flourish in the intellectual climate of the times.

### 3. PROBLEMS OF IDEALISM

It is quite unjust to charge idealism with an antipathy to reality, with *ontophobia*, as Ortega y Gasset called it. For it is not the *existence* but the *nature* of reality upon which idealism sets its sights. Materialism is what classical idealism rejects—and even here the idealists speak with divided voice. (Berkeley’s “immaterialism” does not so much deny the existence of material objects as their unperceivedness.)

There are certainly versions of the doctrine well short of the spiritualistic position of an ontological idealism that (as Kant puts it at *Prolegomena*, sect. 13, n. 2) holds that “there are none but thinking beings.” Few among the so-called idealists have held to pan-psychism of the high-octane variety. To be sure Berkeley maintained an idealistic position on the basis of his thesis that “to be (real) is to be perceived” (*esse est percipi*). It seems

more sensible, however, to adopt “to be is to be perceivable” (*esse est percipibile esse*). For Berkeley, of course, this was a distinction without a difference: if it is perceivable at all, then God perceives it. But if we forego philosophical reliance on God, the matter looks different. We are then driven back to the question of what is an object of perception. On this basis, something really exists if it is, in principle, experientiable: “To be (physically) real is to be actually perceivable by a possible perceiver—one who is physically realizable in the world.” *Physical* existence is seen as tantamount to observability-in-principle for perceivers who are *physically realizable* in “the real world”. The basic idea is that one can only claim (legitimately or appropriately) that a particular physical object exists if there is potential experiential access to it—if something indeed exists in the world, then it must be observable-in-principle, detectable by a suitably endowed creature equipped with some suitably powerful technology.

On such an approach, to exist (physically) is to be “observable” in principle—to be open to experiential confrontation by a cognition-capable creature of some sort. And such merely dispositional observability is clearly something *objective*, in contrast to actual observations, which are always personalized. Observability is a matter of what beings with mind-endowed capacities *can* encounter in experience, and not one of what any particular one or more of them actually *does* encounter in experience. The physical features of the real come to be seen as mind-correlative dispositions—conceivably dispositions in both the perceptual and the conceptual order. In this sense, detectability and discriminability *in principle* is an indispensable request for qualifying as part of the actual furniture of the world. And it is clear that such a weak—and cognitive rather than ontological—version of substantial idealism is altogether unproblematic.

Over the years, many objections to idealism have been advanced. Samuel Johnson thought to refute Berkeley’s phenomenalism by kicking a stone. He conveniently forgot that Berkeley’s theory goes to great lengths to provide for stones—even to the point of invoking the aid of God on their behalf. G.E. Moore pointed to the human hand as an undeniably mind-external material object. He overlooked that, gesticulate as he would, he would do no more than *induce people to accept* the presence of a hand on the basis of the hand-orientation of their *experience*. C. S. Peirce’s “Harvard Experiment” of releasing a stone held aloft was supposed to establish scholastic realism because his audience could not control their expectation of the stone’s falling to earth. But an uncontrollable expectation is still an

expectation, and the realism at issue is no more than a realistic thought-posture.

Immanuel Kant's famous "Refutation of Idealism" argued that our conception of ourselves as mind-endowed beings presupposes material objects because we view our mind-endowed selves as existing in an objective temporal order, which is something that indispensability requires the existence of periodic physical processes (clocks, pendula, planetary regularities) for its establishment. At most, however, this argumentation succeeds in showing that such physical processes *have to be assumed by minds* that insist upon a certain view of themselves—the issue of their actual mind-independent existence remaining unaddressed. (Kantian realism is an intra-experiential "empirical" realism.)

In sum, each of the traditional objections to idealism has inherent limitations that allow a judiciously formulated version of idealism remain unscathed.

#### 4. CONCEPTUAL IDEALISM AND ITS MERITS

The crux of the conceptual idealism here espoused is that the conceptual instruments we standardly and typically use in characterizing the things of the world we live in are conceptually mind invoking in pretty much the same way that our conception of a door-stop or a hammer is. For such things are literally inconceivable in under that description in a word that has never seen the presence of mind.

Conceptual idealism's central thesis is that the principal characterizing properties ascribed to physical things in our standard conceptual scheme are at the bottom of all *relational* properties, with some facet of "the mind"—or of minds-in-general—serving as one term of this relation. Specifically, it holds that the concept-scheme we standardly use to construe our experience itself ascribes to "material" objects, properties and characteristics that involve some reference to mental operations within the very meaning of the terms at issue. Let us consider how this is so.

Conceptual idealism is predicated upon the important distinction between conceptual mind-involvingness and explicit mind-invokingness, illustrated in the contrast between a *book* and a *dream*. To characterize an object of consideration as a *dream* or a *worry* is explicitly mind-invoking. For dreams and worries exist only where there is dreaming and worrying, which, by their very nature, typify the sorts of things at issue in the thought-processes of mind-endowed creatures: where there are dreams or

worries, these must be mind-equipped beings to do the dreaming and worrying. A book, by contrast, seems at first sight entirely non-mental: books, after all, unlike dreams or worries, are physical objects. If mind-endowed beings were to vanish from the world, dreams and worries would vanish with them—but not books! Even if there were no mind-endowed beings, there could certainly be naturally evolved book-like objects, objects *physically indistinguishable from books as we know them*. Nevertheless there could not be *books* in a world where minds have no existence. For a book is, by definition, an artifact of a certain purposive (i.e. communicative) sort equipped with pages on which “reading material” is printed. Such purposive artifacts all invoke goal directed processes of a type that can exist only where there are minds. To be a book is to have *writing* in it, and not just *marks*. And writing is inherently the sort of thing produced and employed by mind-endowed beings. In sum, to explain adequately what a *book* is we must thus make reference to writing and thereby in turn, ultimately to minds.

The salient point here is not that the book is mentalesque as a physical object, but rather that to explicate what is involved in characterizing that object as “a book”—to explicate what it is to be a book—we must eventually refer to minds and their capabilities, seeing that, given our understanding of what is at issue, a book is by its very nature something for people to read. A world without minds can contain objects physically indistinguishable from our books and nails, but books and nails they could not be, since only artifacts created for a certain sort of intelligence-invoking purpose can correctly be so characterized. The status of those objects as books or nails is mind-conducted. And so, while books—unlike dreams—are not mental items, their conceptualization/characterization must nevertheless in the final analysis be cast in mind-involving terms of reference. What it is to be a book is to be something to which minds are related in a suitable and characteristic sort of way. Books as such can only exist in mind-affording contexts.

Now the pivotal thesis of conceptual idealism is that we standardly think of reality in implicitly mentalesque terms. And this contention rests on two basic theses:

- (1) That *our* world, the world as we know it, is—inevitably—the world *as we conceive it to be*, and

- (2) That the pivotal concepts (thought-instrumentalities) that we standardly use in characterizing and describing the world contain in their make-up, somewhere along the line, a reference to the operations of mind.

Observing that our “standard conception” of the world we live in is that of a multitude of particulars endowed with empirical properties and positioned in space and time and interacting causally, conceptual idealism goes on to maintain that all of the salient conceptions operative here—particularity, spatio-temporality, causality, and the possession of empirical (experientially accessible) properties—are (so conceptual idealism contends) mind-involving in exactly the sense explicated above.

Within the present confines, there is not room enough to tell the whole story. So a vary part of it will have to do. Let us begin at the beginning—with particularity. Particularity is a matter of identification; causality a matter of bringing about, and spacetime a matter of locating—and all these are mind-involving processes. And similarly with the rest. But the fact is that careful analysis shows that identification, causal explanation, and spatio-temporal positioning—are all implicitly mind-involving activities that envision the world’s operations in terms of characteristically mental processes. The world *as we conceive it* accordingly emerges throughout a mental artifact that is constructed (at least partly) in mind-referential terms—that the nature of the world as we conceive of it reflects the workings of mind. (Of course, in speaking of mind-involvement or mind-invocation, no reference to any particular mind is at issue. The mental aspect here operative is not private or personal: it is not a question of *whose* mind—of this or that mind rather than another. The dependence at issue is wholly generic and systematic in nature.)

And so, *conceptual* idealism sees mind not as *causal source* of the materials of nature, but as indispensably furnishing some of the *interpretative mechanisms* in whose terms we understand them. It is predicated on the view that reality as we standardly conceive it—in terms of material objects identifiable through discernible dispositional properties and causally interacting with one another in a setting of space and time—is thereby unavoidably enmeshed with the operations of mind. It maintains that the mind understands nature in a manner that in some ways reflects its own operations in some fundamental respects—that we come to cognitive grips with nature on our own terms, that is, in terms of concepts whose make-up involves some reference to minds and their operations. The position rests squarely

on the classical idealistic doctrine that mind contributes essentially to the constitution—as well as the constituting—of our knowledge of reality.

Such a view of reality is not a do-it-yourself position that lets us shape the world in any way we please. Historically, idealists have always recognized objective constraints: God with Berkeley, the faculty-structure of the mind with Kant, biological and perhaps ultimately Darwinian considerations with Bergson, and so on. And conceptual idealism correspondingly acknowledges the restrictive role of an objectively given conceptual scheme. Thus the items that such an idealism characterizes as “mind-dependent” can be perfectly interpersonal and objective; they need not be subjective at all—let alone be something over which people have voluntary control.

It is sometimes said that idealism is predicated on a confusion of objects with our knowledge of them and conflates the real with our thought about it. But this charge misses the point when a conceptual idealism is at issue. Conceptual idealism’s thesis is not the trivial one that mind makes the *idea* of nature, it is not open to Santayana’s complaint against Schopenhauer that “he proclaimed that the world was his idea, but meant only (what is undeniable) that his *idea* of the world was his idea.” Rather, what is at issue is that mind-patterned conceptions are built into our idea of nature—that what this idea involves is itself limited to mental operation in that the way we standardly conceive of nature is in some crucial respects involved with the doings of minds. The conceptualistic idealist sees mind as an explicative resource for our understanding of the real, rather than as a productive source in the causal order of its genetic explanation.

Accordingly, while the thesis that our world picture is mind-provided is not a philosophical doctrine but a simple truism, nevertheless this thesis that an adequate world-picture is one that must be mind-patterned—that it will have to be painted in the coloration of mind, or (to put it less picturesquely) that will involve a recourse to the analogy of mind—is something at once far less obvious and far more interesting. For an idealism designed along these lines has it that while our minds neither make nor constitute nature, they nevertheless depict it in their own terms of reference. At this point, Santayana’s triviality charge falls apart.

To say that we can only obtain a view of reality via its representations by mind is true but alas trivial—we can only obtain a mind-provided view of anything whatsoever. But to say that our view of reality (as standardly articulated) is one that represents reality by means of concepts and categories that are themselves mind-referring in their nature is something very

different. For this idealism is one that sees our view of the world as to be such as to attribute to it features in whose conceptual make-up mind-coordinated conceptions play a pivotal and ineliminable role. And it is this position that is at stake in the conceptual idealism that is now at issue.

## 5. WHAT CONCEPTUAL IDEALISM COMES TO

The most common objection to idealism in general centers on the issue of the mind-independence of the real. “Surely,” so runs the objection, “things in nature would remain substantially unchanged if there were no minds. Had intelligent creatures never evolved on the earth, its mountains and valleys would nevertheless be much as they are, and the sun and moon remain substantially unaffected.” This contention is perfectly plausible in one aspect, namely the *causal* one—which is just why causal idealism has its problems. The crucial mind-independence of the real has to be granted in the causal mode. But not in the conceptual. For the objection’s exponent has to face the question of specifying *just exactly what* it is that would remain the same. “Surely roses would smell just as sweet in a mind-denuded world!” Well . . . yes and no. Agreed—the absence of minds would not *change* roses. But rose-fragrance and sweetness—and even the size and shape of roses—are all features whose character hinges on such mind-invoking operations as smelling, scanning, comparing, measuring, and the like. For something actually to be a rose it must, unavoidably, have various capacities to evoke mental responses—it must admit of identification, specification, classification, and property attribution, and these, by their very nature, are all mental operations. Striking people as being rose-like is critical to qualifying as a rose; if seemingly rose bushes performed strangely—say by sprouting geranium like flowers—they would no longer be so: rose bushes just don’t do that sort of thing. A rose that is not conceived of in mind-referential terms is—nothing at all.

To be sure, the conceptual idealism envisioned here does not maintain that *any possible* way of conceiving nature must proceed in mind-invoking terms of reference (difficult though it is for us to imagine how things could be otherwise). Its purport, rather, is to stress the role of mind-invocation operative in the *standard* conceptual framework that we in fact (*de facto*) use to recognize and interpret our experience. It is geared to what has here been characterized as “our standard conception of reality,” and so its strictures need not and will not invariably apply to other possible conceptions of the real. Specifically, it does not apply to a contingent regularity view of

## WHAT SORT OF IDEALISM IS VIABLE TODAY?

the world that dispenses both with laws (and thus lawful processes): and thereby with the disposition-demarcated particulars to whose conception lawfulness is indispensable. And while it is not easy to conceive in detail what such a kaleidoscopic reality that dispenses both with sensory identifiable particulars and with necessitarian laws would be like, nevertheless, that does not render it impossible. All this must be conceded.

Is this concession damaging? Does it mean that conceptual idealism, with its focus in the ideational mechanisms in whose terms “we standardly think” of the real, is a position no more than a sociological significance? The answer is clearly negative. For while how we *act* is simply a reflection of *sociological* matters, how we *think* of things is, clearly, something of deeper and more far-reaching significance—and inevitably so, seeing that our only possible access to how things *are* is through the mediation of what *we think* them to be. There is, ultimately, no way of limiting the consequences of “how we think of things” to appertain merely and wholly to facts about *us* rather than facts about *them*.

Still, must not a genuine idealism ask for more? Must it not argue transcendently that every possible conceptual scheme for exploiting experience to form a picture of objective reality must be mind-involving? Can it rest content with what is so relative to our standard concept-scheme rather than *inevitably*? As one critic has objected:

Rescher tries to handle the problem by, an appeal . . . to . . . the standard conceptual framework. But . . . the real and unavoidable problem is to determine the conditions of the possibility of *any* conceptual framework whatsoever.<sup>2</sup>

A splendid Kantian ambition, this—but very much misguided. For it makes little sense to demand that which one cannot realistically hope to obtain. Kant’s lesson holds good: for us, reality unavoidably has to be an *empirical* reality—reality as we can experience it. This sort of transcendentalism is quixotically unrealistic because we cannot use the mechanism of our conceptual scheme to project from within the confines of that very conceptual scheme what the essential lineaments of other, different conceptual schemes must of necessity be.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert E. Innes, “[Review of] *Conceptual Idealism*,” *Foundations of Language*, vol. 14 (1976), pp. 287-95 (see p. 294).

No state of science, no genre of art, no style of life or framework of thought can possibly manage to encompass all the rest. This sort of thought-imperialism is just not in the cards. Our own cognitive position cannot at one and the same time be—as it inevitably must—just one position among others, and at the same time somehow *encompass* them by embracing their essential features. No state of knowledge, no doctrinal theory or position can ever find the holy grail of self-transcendence—can ever transmute itself into something that achieves more than the situational immanency of being just one particular alternative among others. The envisioned quest for a self-transcendingly transcendental basis of “conditions under which alone conceptualization is possible” must accordingly be seen as a futile endeavor that is destined to failure from the very outset. And the implications of this fact are, for us, innocuous rather than skeptically nihilistic. For that standard concept-scheme of ours has to be taken at face value. No doubt, it is—in theory—conceivably one alternative among others, without any inevitable foothold in the very structure of intellect, let alone in the nature of things at large. No doubt, its status is the product of natural and cultural evolution. Let all this be as it may. Still, *for us* the fact remains that this scheme is what we have and is all that we have. What matters in the end is that *this* alternative is *our* alternative. Our intellectual dependence on it is as absolute as our physical dependence on the air we breathe. For us there are no options. If this be “mere contingency,” we have little alternative but to make the most of it.<sup>3</sup>

## 6. PROBLEMS OF MIND AND MATTER

The following sort of objection against a conceptual idealism along the indicated lines may well be offered:

How can one sensibly maintain the mind dependency of matter as ordinarily conceived, when all the world recognizes that the operations of mind are based on the machinations of matter. (As Mark Twain asked: “When the body is drunk does the mind stay sober?”) To be an idealist in the face of this recognition is surely to be involved in a vicious or at least vitiating circle.

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<sup>3</sup> This issue is also treated from another point of departure in the author's *The Strife of Systems* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985).

## WHAT SORT OF IDEALISM IS VIABLE TODAY?

However, this objection simply gets things wrong. There just is no question of any real conflict once the proper distinctions have been drawn, because—as indicated above—altogether different sorts of dependencies or requirements are at issue in the two theses:

1. that mind is *causally* dependent upon (i.e., causally requires) matter, in that mental process demands *causally* or productively the physical workings of matter.
2. that matter (conceived of in the standard manner of material substance subject to physical law) is *explicatively* dependent upon (i.e., *conceptually* requires) mind, in that the conception of material processes involves *hermeneutically* or semantically the mentalistic working of mind.

We return here to the crucial distinction between the conceptual order with its essentially hermeneutic or *explicative* perspective upon the intellectual exposition of meanings, and the *causal* order with its *explanatory* perspective upon the productive efficacy of physical processes. In the hermeneutic framework of consideration, our concern is not with any facets of the causal explanation of intellectual processes, but upon understanding them from within, on their own terms—in the conceptual order. The issue is not one of *causal explanation* at all, but one of the *understanding* to be achieved through an analysis of the internal meaning-content of concepts and of the semantical *information* conveyed by statements in which they are operative.

Because of the fundamental difference between these two perspectives, any conflict in the dependency relations to which they give rise is altogether harmless from the standpoint of actual inconsistency. The circle breaks because *different* modes of dependency are involved: we move from mind to matter in the conceptual order of understanding (of *rationes cognoscendi* or rather *concupiendi*) and from matter to mind in the ontological dependency order of causation (*rationes essendi*). Once all the due distinctions are duly heeded, any semblance of vicious circularity disappears. No doubt, this calls for a certain amount of care and subtlety—but then so do many issues of intellectual life, and why should things be easier in philosophy than elsewhere?

And so, while the conceptual idealist's thesis that one specific direction of dependence (viz., that of the physical upon that of the mental) is built