Chapter 6  Idealism and Empire

When the hysterical vision strikes
The facade of an era it manifests
Its insidious relations.
— Ern Malley

How far can philosophy diverge from common sense? This is a question, of course, for philosophy, and one that has produced a range of divergent opinions. Some regard the deliverances of common sense as data that philosophy can explain, but not deny. Others dismiss common sense as so much Stone Age metaphysics, incorporating the confusions of the Cave Man in the street in much the same way that ordinary language includes antique science like ‘The sun rises in the east.’

Now, if departures from common sense are allowed, how far can you go? Surely there is a limit. David Armstrong’s first year lectures on Descartes included this joke: A philosophy lecturer noticed one of his students looking more and more worried as the course progressed. The student was absent for a while, then staggered in unkempt, dirty, obviously unslept. ‘Professor, Professor,’ he said, ‘You’ve got to help me. Do I really exist?’ The Professor looked around and said, ‘Who wants to know?’

1 Ern Malley, Collected Poems (Sydney, 1993), p. 36.
The point of Descartes’ dictum, ‘I think, therefore I am’ is that, if you really try, you can doubt the existence of everything outside your own mind at least in principle. But there is no denying the existence of yourself, at least if ‘yourself’ means only the thinking being that you directly experience.

The most determined school of philosophy in pushing doubt to this theoretical limit is idealism. The best-known version of idealism is that of George Berkeley, the eighteenth-century Irish bishop who maintained that there were no physical objects outside the mind at all. Instead, he thought, God causes directly the play of (apparent) perceptions on our psyches. Hector Monro’s *Sonneteer’s History of Philosophy*, one of the shorter introductions to the subject, summarises Berkeley’s position as follows:

‘The scientific cosmos’, grumbled Berkeley, ‘Is, once you penetrate beneath the patter, Made up of something mystical called Matter. It’s not just that you see it through glass darkly, You cannot see the stuff at all. It’s starkly Devoid of scent and sound and colour, flatter And duller than a garden party’s chatter. We’re all bamboozled by the learned-clerkly Romantic balderdash. Reality Is surely what we touch and hear and see. If what our senses yield is in the mind, Then so’s Reality.’ At once maligned, Good Berkeley’s universe, because it’s mental Is labelled thin, ethereal, transcendental.  

Needless to say, it is not a widely held opinion. Indeed, it invites jokes about why anybody who holds it should be concerned to express it: who does he think he is talking to? The significance of Berkeley lies actually more in his arguments than in his conclusions. The colonial poet Charles Harpur wrote:

His logic puzzles so, it don’t convince. So wide his arguments, we half suspect them Of aberrations though we can’t detect them.  

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This is quite wrong, as Berkeley has an exceptional ability to make gross mistakes clearly, and is therefore in regular use as target practice for philosophy undergraduates — as David Stove said, an undergraduate course without Berkeley is like a zoo without elephants. He is important not only for students: David Armstrong’s early works, in which he refined the rigorous style of argumentation that became his hallmark, are on Berkeley.

The only sign of Berkeleian idealism being taken seriously in Australia was an event in 1936, when the Sydney Anglican Church wheeled out the Lord Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, the Most Reverend C.F. D’Arcy, to give a talk at Sydney University. The Archbishop said that Berkeley’s doctrine, although it had been attacked severely, had not, in his opinion, been overthrown. ‘The principles of his philosophy supplied a great spiritual need at the present time.’ No doubt there was a spiritual need, especially with John Anderson firmly in the chair of philosophy, but Berkeleian idealism is a cure surely at once worse than the disease, and necessarily ineffective.

The Primate’s suggestion that the point of idealism is to pervade the universe with a general tone of moral uplift, amenable to religion, is even more evident in the other variant of the theory, Absolute Idealism. This is a late Victorian construction with some resemblance to the wedding-cake architecture beloved of the period. It is possibly too alien a thought-world to understand at this distance, but the general idea is that, while the physical world may exist, its nature is essentially mental rather than (what we take to be) material. Everything is interconnected, and is a manifestation of the Absolute, which is something like God, but less crudely personal, and also less distant from oneself. Absolute Idealism in its heyday — around the 1890s — became the first and only philosophy to be accepted as orthodoxy in

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5 D.M. Armstrong, Course submission for 1974.
Corrupting the Youth

the whole learned world (Paris, Heidelberg, Edinburgh, Peking, Adelaide ...). Then it simply evaporated. John Anderson always regarded idealism as the prime enemy, but by his time there were hardly any live idealists left to devour — in the philosophical world, at least, though as we saw in chapter 1, there were some in the New South Wales Parliament. The importance of idealism for Australia is that all of the first philosophers in Australian universities were adherents, including, for example, Australia’s only philosophical knights, Sir Francis Anderson at Sydney and Sir William Mitchell at Adelaide. In his memorable attack, ‘Idealism: A Victorian horror story’, David Stove writes,

Nineteenth-century idealism, accordingly, provided an important holding-station or decompression chamber, for that century’s vast flood of intellectual refugees from Christianity; or at any rate, for the more philosophically inclined among them. The situation of these people was truly pitiful. The burden of their biblical embarrassments had become intolerable ... The problem was how to part with the absurdities of Christianity, while keeping cosmic consolation: no one dreamt of parting with the latter as well (it should hardly be necessary to say), or at any rate no philosopher did.10

An idealist, he says, is one of a philosophical turn of mind, who can no longer stomach the raw barbarisms of popular religion, but ‘in whom, nevertheless, the religious determination to have the universe congenial is still sovereign.’ This was a period in which a wide variety of remedies were tried by the less philosophical, including the Wisdom of the East, theosophy, spiritualism, and so on,11 as well as relig-


ion substitutes like the ‘religion of humanity’, socialism and Australian nationalism, and attempts to find a non-dogmatic common core of Christianity. As the Catholic Archbishop Vaughan said, ‘the troubled air resounds with Pan–Christianities, Pantisolatries, Eirenica, the fraternization of Churches, and the amalgamation of sects.’ And as one of those he attacked was happy to admit, ‘our thought is eclectic, our method is elastic.’ But for those who demanded philosophy, there could be only one possible answer, idealism. ‘That is,’ (Stove says)

something like Berkeley’s pan-spiritualism, as long as it could be freed from its embarrassing implication of universal hallucination. If Berkeley’s too gaseous world could be solidified (so to speak), or at least ‘jellied’, by being passed through a strong field of Kant–Hegel radiation; that would be the very thing. Let the refugees from Christianity be told, on the highest possible philosophical authority, that Nature is Thought, that the Universe is Spirit, that the Absolute is experience, that the dualism of matter and mind, like the related dualism of fact and value, is a superficial one, and ‘ultimately’ (as the Hegelians loved to say) even a self-contradictory one. That should buck them up, as nothing else could.

Stove’s diagnosis is confirmed by the poet Christopher Brennan’s reaction to Francis Anderson’s lectures at Sydney University. After leaving the Jesuit Riverview College, the undergraduate Brennan experienced the doubts customary in these cases. ‘Religion began to worry me in my 19th year ... The next Christmas I experienced a sudden collapse of all the barriers and entered the philosophy class in March 1890 a ripe agnostic, already beginning to elaborate a special epistemology of the Unknowable, which was the Absolute. The year

Being a Record of Spiritualistic Experiences in Ballarat and Melbourne (Ballarat, 1890?)


13 R. Vaughan, Hidden Springs (Sydney, 1876), p. 38.


I spent in open conflict with F.A.’16 Brennan has caught on to one of the defining tics of Absolute Idealism, its plague of Capital Letters. The caricature some still have of philosophers, as men spouting rapid and implausible generalities about Truth and Wisdom and the Absolute, is perhaps the last vestige of the reign of Absolute Idealism.

In Melbourne, idealism actually constituted itself as an institutional religion, in the Reverend Charles Strong’s Australian Church. Strong took modern philosophy and science to have rendered outmoded the myths of the Old Testament, and to have shown the way forward to ‘the idea of a universe that lives and moves and has its being in God ... Ultimate Reality is not to be found outside but inside us, in our own minds and natures.’17 The Church, formed after Strong’s persecution by his own Presbyterian Church, was a success for some years. A typically idealist project was Strong’s leadership of the Melbourne Peace Society; he believed that Australia could lead the way towards the resolution through arbitration of conflict between nations, as it had for the conflict between labour and capital.18 Francis Anderson was assistant minister in the Church before leaving for Sydney University,19 and Alfred Deakin and the poet Bernard O’Dowd were staunch supporters.20

Idealism also had its political significance, arising from its tendency to reify abstract concepts and endow them with claims on people. History and Progress were favourites. The Mind that permeates the world ought to express itself in History, which is thus a cosmic process with a direction rather than a statistical result of individual human actions or just one damned thing after another. The universe, Francis Anderson said, was in constant evolution, a never-ending progressive unfolding towards a higher stage of development; ‘History is a great

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19 See The Australian Church: Report MDCCCLXXXVII and sermons preached by Chas. Strong and Francis Anderson (Melbourne, 1887).
adventure in which man sets out to discover himself and the secret of his personality.” Religion, of a non-sectarian sort, was also approved of, as promoting an “advance to a further and higher phase of

development, under the guidance of the spirit of Truth.”

One of the leading British idealists was Sir Henry Jones, John Anderson’s main teacher in philosophy; the pupil’s views on the state, religion, and technical philosophical questions are diametrically opposite to Sir Henry’s. Jones visited Francis Anderson in Sydney in 1908, giving a series of lectures later published as — note the title — *Idealism as a Practical Creed*. His farewell lecture concluded with a marvellously Edwardian piece of orotund condescension towards the colonials:

I cannot forget the greatness, and the difficulties of your enterprise — a new people amidst the lonely silence of a vast continent. Material prosperity you will attain, I have no doubt; and it is worth attaining. Perhaps power among the nations of the world awaits you, which is also worth attaining. But a kingdom founded upon righteousness, a life amongst yourselves sanctified in all its ways by this faith in man, in the world and in God, is greater far than all these things. I can form no higher wish for you than that it may be your destiny to try by actual experiment how far this faith of the Idealists will stand the strain of a nation’s practice.

John Anderson later recalled with a degree of horror Jones forcing himself to spell out the optimistic idealist faith of Robert Browning while suffering the pains of advanced cancer. The incident does something to explain the tremendous emotional force behind John Anderson’s reaction to anything that smelt of a sentimental attachment to another world, or of consolation or uplift.

If Sydney was only mildly responsive to such ‘practical idealism’, Melbourne saw one of its boldest experiments. There, the unique Australian scheme for the settlement of industrial disputes by an Arbitration Court was undertaken under the presidency of the idealist

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24 [G. Munster], ‘Prophet in a gown’, *Nation* no. 9 (17/1/1959), pp. 10–13, at p. 10; for Jones on Browning see H. Jones, *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher* (Glasgow, 1891); for Browning as an answer to Darwin, M.W. MacCallum, *Browning after a Generation* (Sydney, 1924), pp. 8–13; cf. D. Stove on ‘horror Victorianum’ in *Against the Idols of the Age* (New Brunswick, 1999), pp. 25–32.
Henry Bournes Higgins. He wrote of the purpose of arbitration in typically idealist prose:

Though the functions of the Court are definite and limited, there is opened up for idealists a very wide horizon, with, perhaps, something of the glow of a sunrise ... Give them [the workers] relief from their materialistic anxiety; give them reasonable certainty that their essential material needs will be met by honest work, and you release infinite stores of human energy for higher efforts, for nobler ideals, when 'Body gets its sop, and holds its noise, and leaves soul free a little'.

The quotation is from Browning, on whose thought Higgins had written.

To appreciate fully the victory of idealism in its day, one needs to understand that a student would not avoid it simply by failing to take philosophy. At the time Francis Anderson was serving as Sydney University’s first professor of philosophy, the occupants of the new chairs of Modern Languages and of History were giving their students much the same message. Mungo MacCallum had studied the same idealist philosophy at Glasgow as Francis Anderson, and had produced a long idealist interpretation of the Arthurian legend. And George Arnold Wood in History proclaimed a similar optimistic doctrine of progress driven by spiritually active men — demonstrated, he thought, nowhere better than in the history of Australia, from its foundation by noble convicts to its apotheosis at Gallipoli and Flanders.

A secular version of these notions appears in What Happened in History?, a work of immense worldwide popularity written by Francis Anderson’s student, V. Gordon Childe. It is resolutely about the Progress of Man: ‘history may still justify a belief in progress in days of
Something similar occurred in Melbourne, where the idealist views of history of the philosophy professor W.R. Boyce Gibson had an impact on the overblown style of history associated with Melbourne University. At their best, doctrines of historical evolution towards a better world could inspire reasonable projects of reform. Francis Anderson himself spent a great deal of effort on reforms of the public education system and mental health services, and wrote controversial pamphlets on such subjects as ‘The Root of the Matter: Social and Economic Aspects of the Sex Problem’. ‘The end of teaching’, he said, ‘is to produce self-active pupils’, and unlike some who have expressed similar opinions, he meant it. ‘An inspirer of youth to action in the interests of daring and adventure’, he had an impact on, among other students, H.V. Evatt (who gained a University Medal in philosophy and tutored in the subject), the anthropologist and architect of policy on Aborigines, A.P. Elkin, and Ernest Burgmann, the ‘Red Bishop’.

And since the idealists had taken charge of reforms of the school curriculum as well, it was not just the small number of university-trained intellectuals who were being fed idealism. Donald Horne is here describing his primary school education:

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We were offered a view of life based on an optimistic belief in inevitable progress, a progress that would proceed of necessity, without our doing anything in particular about it. It was the officially expressed belief of the New South Wales Department of Public Instruction that there was a natural 'sense of growth and development' in human affairs, and that 'the human race ... was developing towards better and happier conditions of life'. This meant that one of our schoolroom views of mankind was optimistic, progressive and radical. We were on the side of revolution, exploration and innovation. We were for the barons against King John; for Wat Tyler against Richard II; for Sir Thomas More against Henry VIII, and for Henry VIII against the Pope ... Human history was a predictable progress of discovery and reform; innovation served the welfare of the ordinary people in a sure evolution from serfdom to having a good time playing tennis at Muswellbrook.35

Horne is speaking of 1933, at the end of the twenty years from the Somme to the Depression.

Also given a capital letter and endowed with moral standing were the State and the Empire. The State was not adored in the way it was in some European countries, if only because Australia had barely established itself as a nation. The Empire certainly was. As an entity to inspire loyalty, the Empire had several useful and remarkable properties. On the one hand, it was abstract, but on the other, it was right where you were. In fact, you were part of it. Its ability to be in many places at once, and to unite the emotional high points of all of them, made it the sort of entity the Absolute Idealists were proud of. It was itself not a mere person, but was strengthened by personal devotion to the monarch. All creeds could unite in praying for its welfare. And its successful defence against its many enemies made for stirring stories. All in all, it was a perfect focus for loyalty in the armed forces and for idolatry in schools.36 Those who had charge of its implementation in schools were careful to avoid making the Empire an excuse for simple jingoism. Something morally superior was aimed at. A circular from Peter Board, Francis Anderson’s chief ally in school reform, on the celebration of Empire Day in 1906 instructs: ‘It is not intended that there should be any encouragement of an exaggerated sentiment arising out of a mere glorification of the British

Corrupting the Youth

races by the disparagement of other peoples, but that the interest in
the Empire should rest on a knowledge of what it is, and on an appre-
ciation of the higher qualities that have played a part in its pro-
gress. By this means, also, pupils may be encouraged to become
worthy citizens of their own native country, feel a pride in its pro-
gress, and an obligation to advance its interests. 37

During the rest of the year, the Empire and its virtues occupied a
large part of the syllabus, especially in history. As to the particular
higher qualities for which the Empire was to be admired, the view of
a typical textbook is that of A Story of the English People, by K.R.
Cramp, later the historian of the New South Wales Freemasons. 38

‘For British rule, in spite of a mistake here and there, has brought
peace, justice, liberty and prosperity in its train wherever it has been
established. And the size, wealth and population of the Empire is a
kind of guarantee that those ideals of Peace, Justice, Liberty and Pro-
sperty must be respected. For they endear British rule to the native
races.’ 39

Between the Wars, Empire Day retained a place alongside Anzac
Day, and became an occasion for student practice in giving talks on
the moral destiny of the Empire. 40 Though not as deeply significant as
Anzac Day, students were told, it was celebrated more widely.

On that day, in almost every school in the Empire, children are reminded,
not so much of the greatness and wealth of the Empire, but of the need to

37 P. Board, ‘Empire Day Celebration’, circular, Public Instruction Gazette
(N.S.W.) 1 (1905–7): p. 78; F.B. Boyce, Fourscore Years and Seven (Sydney,
1934), ch. 10.
38 On the author see ‘K.R. Cramp OBE, BA, FRAHS’, NSW Freemason 46
Issued by the Department of Public Instruction for Use in Schools
(Sydney, 1919), p. 408; at greater length in Walter Murdoch, The Australian Citizen: An
Elementary Account of Civic Rights and Duties (Melbourne, 1912), ch. 8. also
ch. 27 on ‘liberty’; L. Alston, The White Man’s Work in Asia and Africa
(London, 1907), esp. ch. 2, ‘Christian ethics and philosophy in relation to
the lower races’; further in Partington, Australian Nation, pp. 162–4; G.
Souter, The Idle Hill of Summer (Sydney, 1972), pp. 46–7; on the moral
aspects of university history teaching, see One Hundred Years of the Faculty of
Arts (Sydney, 1952), pp. 65–8; Irish Catholic scepticism about British
701.
40 R. Hall, The Real John Kerr (Sydney, 1978), p. 12; R. Cracknell, A Biased
Memoir (Melbourne, 1997), p. 10; H.L. Rubinstein, ‘Empire loyalty in
M. French, ‘The ambiguity of Empire Day in New South Wales, 1901–21’,
keep it bound together by ties of good will and love. This can be done by helping one another, and being fair to one another... In a small way, even a boy may become an Empire builder, for so long as he works honestly, strives for the right, and keeps his mind clean, he is adding something to the greatness and glory of our Empire.  

There is no point in trying to force a naturalistic interpretation on this passage. An Empire which is bound together by ties of love and can be benefited by a boy’s keeping his mind clean is an idealist entity. It is the same language as used by a real idealist, Sir Francis Anderson, who spoke of the ‘moral bonds of union’ which, with the person of the King, unified the Empire more than economic self-interest or military fears. Sir Henry Jones, too, said that in performing

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his duty to the state an individual was building his own character, ‘at
the same time he is a humble hod-bearer on the walls of a greater and
more permanent edifice than his own character; he is building the
State.’' Even the very young John Anderson took some part in this,
at the very time when the Great War was beginning to make it look
as though History might have lost the plot.”

The ideology of Empire was not simply imposed on an unwilling
mass of children, either. Boys were spending their own pennies
freely enough on English magazines full of Public School ripping
yarns. The Melbourne University archivist recalled how common it
was to find among the papers left by a distinguished scientist or judge
copies of the *Magnet* or *Gem*, tucked furtively away.43 These were not
simply entertaining stories, but models that encouraged imitation of a
certain ideal. Donald Horne says, ‘At other times I miserably contem-
plated how I was not living up to the standards of the Billy Bunter
stories or acting like the son of a trooper in the Australian Light
Horse.’” How this ideal could appear to one who absorbed it fully is
perfectly expressed by one of the Empire’s personifications in later
life, Robert Menzies:

To many people the British Commonwealth is a curious machine that has
worked; looking to the outsider rather like a Heath Robinson invention;
but relied upon by mankind twice during this century, to their great de-

To me it means (and here you will find a curious jumble in both time and
place) a cottage in the wheat lands of the North-West of the State of
Victoria, with the Bible and Henry Drummond and Jerome K. Jerome

fervour and Anglican loyalty 1901–1929’, ch. 4 of *Anglicanism in Australia: A
history*, ed. B. Kaye (Melbourne, 2002).

43 H. Jones, *Principles of Citizenship* (London, 1919), quoted and discussed in
J. Morrow, ‘British idealism, “German philosophy” and the First World

44 J. Anderson, essay ‘Is the state a moral agent?’ (1916), discussed in

45 I. Britain, ‘In pursuit of Englishness: Public School stories and Australian
pp. 13–14; also M. Lyons & L. Taska, *Australian Readers Remem-
p. 203; for girls: A Woollacott, “‘All this is the Empire, I told myself’:
Australian women’s voyages ‘home’ and the articulation of colonial

and *The Scottish Chiefs* and Burns on the shelves. It means the cool green waters of the Cöln as they glide past the church at Fairford; the long sweep of the Wye Valley above Tintern, with a Wordsworth in my pocket; looking north across the dim Northumbrian moors from the Roman Wall, with the rowan trees on the slope before me, and two thousand years of history behind; old colour and light and soaring stone in York Minster. It means King George and Queen Mary coming to their Jubilee in Westminster Hall as Big Ben chimed out and Lords and Commons bowed, and, as they bowed, saw beyond the form of things to a man and a woman greatly loved ... It means, at Canberra, at Wellington, at Ottawa, at Cape Town, the men of Parliament meeting as those met at Westminster seven hundred years ago; at Melbourne the lawyers practising the Common Law first forged at Westminster. It means Hammond at Sydney, and Bradman at Lords ... It means the past ever rising in its strength to forge the future.

Is all this madness? Should I have said, as clever, modern men are wont to do, that the British Commonwealth means an integral association of free and equal nations, whose mutual rights and obligations you will find set out in the Balfour Formula, the Statute of Westminster, and later documents: Or should I have watered it down, as some would have us do and define it in terms of friendship, or alliance, or pact, as if we were discussing an Anglo-Portuguese treaty?

A plague take such notions. Unless the Commonwealth is to British people all over the world a spirit, a proud memory, a confident prayer, courage for the future, it is nothing. ⁴⁷

Menzies had unfortunately to eulogise here not the Empire, which undoubtedly did exist, but the British Commonwealth, whose actuality was by no means obvious. This was despite some fancy footwork and play with mirrors by Arthur Balfour — no mean philosopher, though a prime minister. (John Anderson’s first piece in the *Austral-asian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*, printed shortly after his arrival in Sydney in 1927, was a dismissive note on one of Balfour’s books.⁴⁸) Balfour had been one of the first English statesmen to appreciate that the dominions could no longer be regarded as colonies, and had urged the attendance of the Duke of York, later George V, at the inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia to cement a necessary personal bond in place of the constitutional one.⁴⁹ Some thought Balfour’s attempt to define the essence of the British Com-

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monwealth in words was a mistake, and it would have been better to muddle through with implicit understandings in the fashion of Britain’s unwritten constitution. Menzies succinctly explained why the inarticulateness of tradition is a positive virtue:

One of the great current difficulties of creating a happy, mutual understanding between the British and the other great Powers arises from the fact that our intellectual tradition is inductive — trial, error, trial, success, a precedent — so that we sometimes appear to the onlooker to have no principles; while deductive minds elsewhere sometimes seem to us to be so occupied by pure syllogisms that common sense and human values seem to disappear. Perhaps it was because of our instinctive reluctance to write things down that the Balfour formula, which seemed in the first enthusiasm to solve everything, ended up by leaving most things unsolved.  

But the Empire had itself left a number of problems unsolved, most notably the moral justification of its own existence. Its elevated rhetoric on the Liberty of Peoples was its undoing. The Empire that survived Hitler had no answer to Gandhi. There was to be no British Dien Bien Phu.

Its success in justifying the existence of its servants, or providing them with meaning for their lives, was more mixed. One might die alone and unknown, but one could still enjoy the satisfaction of knowing one had been of some service to the Empire — been with Younghusband to Lhasa, brought law to the Barotse, or stood firm against Nasser over Suez — one had been part of some greater Whole. Not many of the secular ideologies that have succeeded the Empire can say as much.

At their worst, doctrines of the inevitable evolution of historical forces led to the deportation to Siberia of millions believed to be standing in the way of the March of History. Marx’s ‘dialectical materialism’ was a kind of reversal of Hegel’s idealism, and meant that the moral restraints of idealism were discarded but the inevitability of historical development retained. As a result, orthodox Marxism was always on the lookout for ‘Idealist’ deviationism. The results included grave suspicion in the Soviet Union over quantum mechanics and relativity; locally, the Party leader Kavanagh, in a bizarre misunderstanding of John Anderson’s position, reported to the Central Committee:

In 1929 I had an argument with him over this very question, in 395 Sussex Street. He denied that his ideas of things were the result of sense impressions. I asked him if a table that was in the hall was on the floor or in his mind. He said that the table was in his mind and not an impression of it. I pointed out that if that was the case there must be two tables because it was also in my mind.\footnote{Kennedy, p. 89; Anderson’s true views on the question in ‘Marxist philosophy’, in J. Anderson, \textit{Studies in Empirical Philosophy} (Sydney, 1962), pp. 292–313, at pp. 299–300.}

That is all many years ago. Is idealism as dead as it seems? Another point of interest in Stove’s attack is his identification of an argument at the bottom of idealism, which is at once so bad and so pervasive as to encourage despair in the philosophical enterprise. Stove calls it the ‘Gem’,\footnote{Stove, \textit{Plato Cult}, p. 140.} and exhibits it in all its appalling simplicity in Berkeley. The argument is: You cannot think of trees-outside-the-mind, without having them in mind. Therefore, trees cannot be outside the mind. Stove finds this argument many times in the nineteenth-century British idealists whose followers founded philosophy in Australia. A general version of the argument is the winner of Stove’s Competition to Find the Worst Argument in the World. Here is his ‘Judge’s report’ on the ‘competition’:

Ten candidate-arguments were submitted. All of them had some merit, and some of them were very interesting indeed. But none of them is worse than the argument I had in mind when I started the competition. Consequently none of them wins the prize.

Three dimensions, it will be recalled, entered into overall degree-of-badness as here understood: (a) the intrinsic awfulness of the argument; (b) its degree of acceptance among philosophers; (c) the degree to which it has escaped criticism.

The argument — really a family of arguments — which I had in mind as the worst, was the following:

\begin{quote}
We can know things only:
- as they are related to us
- under our forms of perception and understanding
- in so far as they fall under our conceptual schemes, etc

So, we cannot know things as they are in themselves.
\end{quote}

If there is a worse argument than this, I am still to learn of it. This argument has imposed on countless philosophers, from Kant to the present hour, yet it is very hard to beat for awfulness.\footnote{D.C. Stove, ‘Judge’s report on the competition to find the worst argument in the world’, January 1986, repr. in D.C. Stove, \textit{Cricket versus Republicanism} (Quakers Hill, 1995), pp. 66–7.
As we will see in chapter 15, ‘to the present hour’ is no exaggeration, as the argument underpins the modern form of linguistic idealism known as postmodernism.

Stove, idiosyncratic in so many of his views, was typical of Australian philosophy at least in his defence of realism, the view opposed to idealism which admits that reality exists in the way we ordinarily believe it does. Work in favour of realism is even something of an Australian specialty. Michael Devitt wrote, ‘I have always been a realist about the external world. Such realism is common in Australia. Some say that Australian philosophers are born realists. I prefer to attribute our realism to nurture rather than nature.’\(^54\) (‘Nurture’ means, of course, in large part John Anderson, however oddly the word applies to him.) John Passmore writes in similar vein:

Australian philosophy, broadly considered, is direct, clear, forceful, blunt, realist, naturalistic, secular, interested in the world rather than in language and certainly unprepared to identify the two, respectful of science, unwilling to draw a sharp distinction between the conceptual and the empirical, not conspicuous for its subtlety.\(^55\)

It is true that ‘broadly considered’ means here ‘except for those who disagree with myself’, and that it is an old Andersonian speaking, but outsiders say much the same thing, at least regarding realism. According to a survey paper on realism, ‘Australia, out of the loop evolutionarily, continues as stronghold of realists and marsupials.’\(^56\) A long line of graduate students going from Australian universities to the top American philosophical schools have experienced more than a little culture shock at the anti-realist tendencies they have found themselves expected to take seriously.

There is also a British school of anti-realism, one of whose members wrote (under the impression that Australia was discovered in


1683) that, ‘I can allow no sense to the idea of the existence of Australia before 1683.’ This should be a joke, something along the lines of the one perpetrated by Oxford linguistic philosophers in 1958 (‘Now it is clear that “Australia” is not a real place; or better, that “Australia” is not a name. The words “in Australia” are used simply to signify that the contradictory of what is stated to be the case “in Australia” is in fact the case. Thus we say “In Australia there are mammals that lay eggs” (meaning that there are none in reality); “In Australia there are black swans” (meaning that all real swans are some other colour) …’). But it is not a joke. That is not exactly to say that the average American, British or French philosopher literally thinks the physical world does not exist. But somehow, it seems that few in those places are prepared to say so bluntly. Or if there are in fact many realists, the climate of thought in the academic world they inhabit hides their views behind those who take every opportunity to class anything they can as a ‘construction’. American philosophy has a century-old tradition of self-indulgence in this area, which puts a premium on enormous books about the power of ideas, words and things starting with ‘soc’.

It is questionable whether one should attempt to argue against idealism. It might be thought that idealism denies so much that there is no place left to argue from, and that there is nothing to be done but to say: knowing that the world is there is where I start from; what could be more basic? But there is another possibility. Devitt argues that realism about any entity, including the whole ‘external’ world, can be supported by showing it gives the best explanation of experience. There are possibilities in the argument, but it does have an air of conceding too much to the opponent. Berkeley has an explanation of experience, and it may be a tough business showing it is not as good as the realist hypothesis.

Some more detailed Australian realist work, concerning the reality of particular kinds of entities, will be discussed in chapter 12 on the philosophy of science.