

# Metaphysical Idealism, a Contemporary Perspective



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By

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For my brothers,  
who have guided and inspired me always



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## PROLOGUE

This book intends to explore the possibility of metaphysical idealism as a philosophical theory from a contemporary perspective. The recent realist–anti-realist debate has opened up the possibility of metaphysical idealism as an alternative to metaphysical realism. The foundations of realism have been shaken by anti-realist thinkers like Hilary Putnam, Michael Dummett, and many other like-minded thinkers. The anti-realists have challenged the realist notion of reality as mind-independent, that is, as free from all conceptual elements derived from the human mind. This has led to an impasse in philosophy, as most philosophers until now believed that the realist worldview is the one that has prevailed in epistemology and metaphysics. Scientific-minded philosophers, especially naturalists and materialists, believed that idealism, both epistemological and metaphysical, had finally departed from philosophy. But the anti-realist thinkers have proved them wrong.

With the fall of metaphysical realism, many philosophical ideas regarding truth and reality, which the realists entertained, have been rejected like the idea of truth as correspondence and reality or world as mind-independent. Thus new ideas like truth and reality as mind-dependent have come to the fore. The idealists have come upon the scene to carry forward the anti-realist argument to prove that the world could be understood in the idealist way, that is, in the way in which mind and its categories make the world what it is. The world, according to idealists like Kant and Hegel, is made by the concepts that our mind or reason imposes on the world. Many contemporary thinkers have come to Kant and Hegel for inspiration to understand the universe in a new way.

Kant's Copernican revolution has reappeared in the contemporary philosophy of mind and language to challenge our realist and naturalist beliefs about the mind and the world. Mind and language have come back to the forefront of philosophical thinking in the post-realist era because of revolutionary discoveries in science, especially in quantum physics, and discoveries in the realm of consciousness in the post-materialist-naturalist era in the philosophy of consciousness and phenomenology. These new ideas in philosophy in the twentieth century have shaken our naturalist conception of the world so much so that we have ceased to take scientific

naturalism and realism seriously. Hence there has been an idealist turn in philosophy inspired by Kant and Hegel in recent times.

The central philosophy of idealism, especially of metaphysical idealism, is that mind or reason has primacy over matter and that the world itself can be shown to be mental or rational in nature. The universe, according to idealists, is an expression of a universal mind or reason or spirit. Thus metaphysical idealism tends to characterise the universe in terms of reason and its principles. Following Kant and Hegel, idealists have established the idea that nothing but the mind or consciousness can be absolute Reality since the only reality that is ultimate is the mind or reason or spirit.

The idea that all reality is an expression of consciousness has been an ancient wisdom known to the Indians in Upanishadic times. The Greeks had called the ultimate principle the *logos* or mind or reason and had built their metaphysics around the central principles of reason. In this sense, idealist metaphysics owes its origin to the Indians and the Greeks who had shown that the only reality that could be treated as absolute is consciousness or reason. Modern idealism owes its origin to Kant and Hegel, who in their own way revived the ancient wisdom that consciousness or mind is absolutely real. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century idealism, the ramification of this idea is found in metaphysics.

The eclipse of metaphysical idealism in the second half of the twentieth century is due to the rise of naturalism and materialism in the wake of the rise of modern science. Because of the dominance of scientific knowledge on our thinking, philosophy itself turned scientific and thus welcomed naturalism and materialism with open arms. Because of this naturalist turn in philosophy, metaphysical idealism was set aside as an anti-scientific speculative metaphysics. There was widespread condemnation of metaphysics all over the world and, therefore, all philosophy of spirit or consciousness was treated as metaphysical nonsense. Only what could pass the test of science was treated as a valid form of knowledge.

The present book is an attempt to revive metaphysical idealism as a legitimate form of philosophical inquiry because there is now realisation of the merits of idealism after the rise of philosophy of language and mind in the twentieth century. The linguistic turn in analytic philosophy and the phenomenological turn in continental philosophy brought into focus the important role of language and consciousness in our metaphysical understanding of the world. It was realised that the world could not be understood without the help of language and mind or consciousness. Philosophers like Wittgenstein, Putnam, and Dummett started questioning the foundations of metaphysical realism and the allied doctrines of naturalism and materialism and thus went against predominantly naturalist

and realist trends in philosophy. The possibility of idealism became bright with the fall of metaphysical realism.

My effort in this book is to show that metaphysical idealism can be re-established by reinstating the primacy of mind or consciousness in our understanding of the world. That is to say, the attempt here is to bring back the lost glory of metaphysical idealism by reintroducing the idea that mind or consciousness can better explain the universe than the material principles espoused by the materialists and the naturalists. The principal arguments in defence of idealism can be stated as follows:

1. Mind or reason or consciousness is the primary reality that can explain the universe.
2. Mind or consciousness underlies all phenomena in the universe, as the universe itself is within the conceptual framework that the mind imposes on the world.
3. The world is rational in nature as even matter itself is a projection of the mind and is made intelligible only within our conceptual scheme.

The above arguments for metaphysical idealism are presented in the ten chapters of this book. The first chapter articulates the historical and conceptual background of metaphysical idealism in philosophy. It shows how the metaphysical primacy of mind or reason or spirit has been the driving force of idealist thinking all over the world. The second chapter brings out the metaphysical claims of realism in the history of philosophy and shows why it has failed to face the challenges of anti-realists.

The third chapter shows how the mind–world relationship has been brought into the focus by John McDowell within the main frame of analytic philosophy. It shows that the world can be understood in the space of reason, as the latter alone can make the world intelligible. The fourth chapter discusses the place of language and reason in our understanding of the world following Hilary Putnam, while the fifth chapter discusses Wittgenstein’s philosophy as a milestone in the development of idealism in contemporary philosophy. The sixth chapter makes a case for the primacy of consciousness and self in the metaphysics of the universe.

Chapters seven, eight, and nine are devoted to discussions on certain idealist systems developed in metaphysics in the history of philosophy and their contemporary relevance. The seventh chapter discusses the idealism of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Hegel, as they have influenced contemporary thinking on idealism. The eighth chapter is a study of Husserl’s transcendental idealism, while the ninth chapter studies the metaphysical idealism of the neo-Vedantic thinkers.

The tenth and final chapter defends metaphysical idealism in contemporary times. It shows the way in which we can make safe the place for idealism in contemporary philosophy.

This book in general is a defence of metaphysical idealism from the contemporary perspective by appealing to the primacy of mind or consciousness in metaphysics.

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# CHAPTER 1

## IDEALISM AND ITS METAPHYSICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

### 1. Introduction

Idealism has been a dominant trend in philosophy across centuries. As a metaphysical worldview, it has a long history from the time of ancient Greece to the present day. It has been at the centre of philosophical debates in epistemology and metaphysics since time immemorial, though its fortunes have fluctuated in the history of philosophy due to the changing situations in the human world. It had its early origin in the Greek thinking of Anaxagoras, Parmenides, and Plato and became a dominant school of thought in the eighteenth century in the West, which continued into the early part of the twentieth century. It was only in the later part of the twentieth century that idealism was replaced by realism in epistemology and metaphysics.

This chapter explores idealist trends in philosophy and its metaphysical presuppositions. It is not, however, a historical survey of idealism. It intends to identify the main ideas that are evident in any idealist school of thought. The idealist worldview is founded on many fundamental ideas regarding the human mind or reason and the world. It represents a set of ideas that are fundamental to our understanding of the nature of the world and the place of human beings in the world.

However, in order to understand the possibility of idealist metaphysics in contemporary philosophy, we must understand why idealism as such claims to be a metaphysical way of understanding the world and man. The idealism-realism debate has been at the heart of this metaphysical enquiry, as a result of which from Plato onwards there has been the question of whether we can rise above empiricism, realism, and naturalism to view the world from the standpoint of the human mind and reason. The empiricism-rationalism debate coincides with the realism-idealism debate because there is truth in the view that rationalism ultimately made way for idealism in the

West. Rationalist philosophy was followed by the idealist hypothesis that man occupies a central place in the universe.

This chapter explores the many dimensions of idealism as a metaphysical theory and brings out the continuity between classical idealism and modern and contemporary idealism. Though the main focus is on the idealist metaphysics of the West, attention will be drawn to Indian metaphysical idealism, which has been part of Indian thought from the times of the Upanishadic thinkers.

## **2. Idealism as a metaphysical worldview**

Idealism as a metaphysical theory has been known as the opponent of realism, materialism, and naturalism in their multifarious forms. It posits itself as the defender of the transcendental point of view regarding man and the universe.<sup>1</sup> Idealism has been central to the thinking of mankind in its search for the ideal values of life grounded in the view that the universe itself is rational and spiritual in nature. Idealist thinkers, unlike realists and materialists, do not take the universe as a mere mechanistic system that can be understood in terms of scientific concepts like matter and energy. They offer a teleological and spiritual point of view that can explain the phenomena of matter, life, and mind in a coherent way that is not available within a naturalist-materialist point of view.<sup>2</sup>

In the early part of the twentieth century, idealistic metaphysics reigned supreme in the English-speaking world, including India, because of the predominant philosophical interest in the mental and spiritual nature of reality as found in philosophers like Bradley, Bosanquet, McTaggart, and Royce.<sup>3</sup> These idealist thinkers agreed that there is no way we can get away from the primacy of thought and mind in human affairs and in our metaphysical understanding of the world. Even though Kant<sup>4</sup> in the eighteenth century warned against reason venturing beyond the limits of sense experience, he never doubted that it is reason alone that determines those limits, and therefore idealism was very much at the centre of his philosophical analysis of the nature of the world. Hegel<sup>5</sup> made explicit the idealist thought of Kant on a global scale, which unfolded the rational and spiritual nature of the universe. Idealist thinkers in the post-Hegelian period took the clue from Kant and Hegel in defending idealistic metaphysics in the twentieth century.

The main aim of idealism is to put mind or reason back to the centre of philosophical discourse about the world. This is because philosophy as a metaphysical understanding of the world has to start from an analysis of the mind and its contents before it ventures into the understanding of the



external world. In the ultimate analysis the mind moves to the forefront of metaphysics because mind determines the way reality is conceived in the first place. Idealism takes reality to be mind-centred because that is how the mental concepts make the reality intelligible. In a sense what we call reality is solely dependent on how the mind conceives it.<sup>6</sup> There are many dimensions of this mind-dependence of reality that have been brought out in the course of the development of idealist philosophy.

Idealism in the nineteenth century as found in Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel<sup>7</sup> developed the idea of the spirit for understanding reality. The absolute spirit became the primary reality explaining every aspect of reality, including the individual self and the world. The absolute spirit, in a sense, was taken to have its manifestation in the consciousness of the individual beings and in the world order, thus giving a comprehensive unity to all existence. Such a form of metaphysical idealism as the metaphysics of the spirit reigned supreme in the early part of the twentieth century until it was challenged by realists, empiricists, and naturalists.<sup>8</sup>

However, it is quite natural to expect changes in the idealist metaphysical theory because the basic principles of idealism have been occasionally revised by the idealist thinkers themselves. The spirit in due course of time became the spirit of man and subsequently it became the mind or consciousness. In this sense, idealism has survived in many forms, even in the later philosophies of mind and consciousness like in Husserl's phenomenology.<sup>9</sup>

Even in analytic philosophy, the trends of idealism can be noticed in thinkers like Wittgenstein, Putnam, and McDowell, even though they have not adopted the metaphysical standpoint of either Hegel or Bradley or any other idealistic thinker. There is evidence of a subtle shift away from realism in these thinkers because of the influence of Kant. Linguistic philosophy itself owes much to Kant, because it gives primacy to language and thought in the understanding of reality. Linguistic philosophy has its origin in the realisation that man's language and thought in a way shape the nature of reality in so far as the latter owes its form to the former. This gives impetus to idealism because the mind-dependence of reality becomes evident in linguistic representations of the world. Language provides the key to the structure of reality.

What characterises idealist metaphysics is its assertion of the primacy of mind or reason or consciousness and its rejection of the naturalist and materialist view of reality. Besides, it makes inroads into epistemology and ethics to bring about a radical change in our understanding of our knowledge of the world and the moral values we ought to pursue in our life in the universe. Idealism is a total point of view that makes reality a spiritually and

rationally definable system of phenomena. Idealism therefore holds the promise of making the universe intelligible in terms of rational categories, as suggested by Kant<sup>10</sup> in the modern period and by Plato<sup>11</sup> in ancient times.

### 3. The Platonic legacy: the primacy of reason

The emphasis on the primacy of reason or logos in idealism is due to Greek thinkers, especially Plato who formulated idealist metaphysics on the foundation of his theory of Ideas or Forms.<sup>12</sup> Plato believed that the *logos* or reason can grasp Ideas, which constitute the principles in terms of which we can understand the universe.<sup>13</sup> The particular objects in the universe can be explained only in terms of universals, which constitute the non-changing and eternal realm of the Ideas or Forms. That is, the phenomenal world of natural facts and events is ontologically dependent on the realm of Ideas that are transcendent in character, and yet they provide the ground of the intelligibility of the universe. Thus, Plato provides the foundations for the metaphysics of the two worlds: namely, the world of Ideas, which is beyond space and time, and the world of natural phenomena, which are in space and time.

Plato's two-world theory went far towards making idealism the sure way of making the natural universe intelligible in terms of the supernatural Ideas or Forms that are ontologically real in a transcendent realm. Platonic idealism makes room for the supernatural transcendent realm that holds the promise of throwing light on how the natural world comes into being. The Ideas not only are real in themselves beyond space and time but also explain the reality of the natural world in space and time as its constituting principles. For Plato, the natural things in the space-time world participate in the Ideas in the sense that the Ideas are present in them and constitute their reality. The supernatural world of Ideas is not cut off from the natural world but makes the latter what it is. The reality of the world is not denied by Plato, but its reality is made relative to absolute Reality of the Ideas. In this sense, Plato lay down the foundations of absolute idealism that was developed later by Hegel.<sup>14</sup>

Now the question is, how can reason or logos be the primary reality in Plato and other Platonic idealists? The answer is that reason holds the key to the Ideas or Forms in the sense that the latter are not only apprehended by reason but also filtered through it in their application to the world of sense perception. The world of sense-perception is a matter of opinion (*doxa*) only, while the world of Ideas is the subject-matter of rational knowledge (*episteme*) through the dialectical operation of universal reason.<sup>15</sup> Reason or logos is universal in the sense that it is the cosmic receptacle of Ideas and is

operative in all rational human beings and the universe as a whole. Thus reason or *logos* is the immediate source of all Ideas, which make possible our empirical knowledge of the world. The Ideas are eternal and so is the universal reason or *logos*.

Plato's idealist metaphysics is a landmark development in the history of idealism because it laid the foundations of objective or absolute idealism for all time to come. Platonic Ideas are the ideal principles that have been held as the source of all rational and scientific knowledge of the world. This laid the foundation of the idea of a rational universe with a well-ordered structure later discovered in science and mathematics.<sup>16</sup> Modern philosophy and science owe immensely to the Platonic metaphysics of the eternal Ideas.

#### **4. The primacy of the subject: the Kantian legacy**

Idealism took a new turn in the eighteenth century in the philosophy of Kant<sup>17</sup> who brought the subject or self to the forefront of idealist metaphysics. Kant recognised the thinking and knowing subject as the source of the consciousness, concepts, and principles that constitute the world. Thus idealism was turned inward into the structure of reason to discover the structure of the world. This is called Kant's Copernican revolution,<sup>18</sup> which became the model of idealist thinking in the following two centuries.

What the Copernican revolution achieved in idealist epistemology and metaphysics can be summarised in the following way:

1. In the knowledge situation, it's the knowing subject that is primary and not the world known. This is because the knowing subject, through its faculties of sensibility and understanding, makes knowledge of the world possible.
2. The world as phenomenally given is constituted by the categories of understanding out of the sense-manifold given in space and time. Thus, the world is centred around the subject or self.
3. The world as an ontological entity has a relative status in relation to the subject, because the latter has primary metaphysical reality; the world is constituted in terms of the representations made by the subject.
4. Idealism takes a transcendental turn by initiating the new metaphysical way of situating the world in the subject and its consciousness.
5. Transcendental idealism makes the metaphysical distinction between the phenomenal world and the noumenal world, that is, between the world as it appears and the world as it is in itself.

Thus, Kant's Copernican revolution ushered in transcendental idealism, which combines the Platonic concept of a transcendental reason and the Cartesian notion of the self as the thinking and rational self in order to explain how the empirical world is possible. The self in Kant becomes the self-conscious subject from whose faculty of rational thinking follow the categories and principles to constitute the world.

The importance of Kant's transcendental idealism is mainly due to the very idea of transcendental consciousness, which opens up the way for a new interpretation of the external world. Kant has shown that it is the mind or consciousness that holds the key to the nature of reality. That is the reason why he argues that the world of appearances, as distinct from the world-in-itself, is constituted by the mind. Thus the phenomenal world is transcendently dependent on the mind by virtue of the fact that the sense-impressions that are received in the a priori forms of sensibility, i.e., space and time, are synthesised into the object by the understanding in terms of categories.<sup>19</sup>

Kant brings out the fact that no objective reality of the world is possible if it were not the case that the subjectivity of consciousness is the transcendental condition of the world. Our a priori knowledge of the world reveals how the world itself emerges out of the original self-consciousness. The metaphysical primacy of self-consciousness signals the fact that the world has to be constituted only in terms of the understanding and its categories, which are deduced from pure reason. The Platonic Ideas now appear as the categories of reason to make the world intelligible keeping the primacy of reason intact. Idealism thus goes beyond realism by bringing the knowing and thinking subject to the centre of the metaphysical world view.

## **5. The transcendental subject and the unity of self-consciousness**

Kant's idealist turn in epistemology and metaphysics has brought into focus the idea of the transcendental Ego or subject, which becomes the new pivot of the entire idealist movement in the post-Kantian period. The transcendental subject is the central presupposition of the idealist metaphysics of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, Kant is the father of modern idealist metaphysics in the West.

Idealism in Kant opened the way for cognising not only the self-consciousness of the Ego, but also the understanding of the world. The duality between the subject and object or between the Ego and the world took a new turn with the arrival of the idea of transcendental consciousness. Kant had for the first time challenged the realist metaphysics of the pre-Copernican philosophers who had accepted the absolute reality of the

Newtonian world. Without rejecting the Newtonian world in space and time, he turned the table against the realists by suggesting that this world is only a phenomenal world dependent on our mind. For this, he introduced the idea of a noumenal world that is beyond the limits of our sense-experience and the categories of understanding. The Newtonian world is now shown by Kant to be constituted within the consciousness of the transcendental Ego.

The so-called absolutely real Newtonian world lost its pre-eminence in metaphysics because it is not independent of the human mind. The world or nature with all its phenomenal structure is due to the mind, which has the faculty of sensibility and understanding. The mind or reason becomes the source of the structure of the empirical world. In this sense, Kant reinterpreted the world of science in terms of the transcendental principles of idealist metaphysics. He made room for the idealism of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel in understanding the world or nature in terms of the principles derived from the transcendental Ego. The world became the Ego's world or the world dependent on the transcendental Ego or the subject.<sup>21</sup>

The transcendental Ego-consciousness or the transcendental unity of consciousness<sup>22</sup> becomes the source of the world, thus paving the way for the new understanding of the world against the realist metaphysics of the world. This idealist notion of transcendental consciousness gave rise to the notion of the absolute spirit in later post-Kantian metaphysics.<sup>23</sup> Kant situated transcendental consciousness outside the boundary of the world as the absolute presupposition of the latter. The transcendental unity of consciousness facilitated the constitution of the world through the instrumentality of the categories derived from the understanding or the faculty of thought. Thus, the world remained bound to the transcendental subject or Ego because of the latter's constitutive rational capacity.

The biggest challenge for any idealism is the status of the world. It was this challenge that Kant faced squarely in his transcendental idealism with a view to unravelling the nature of the world. His idealist revolution in metaphysics and epistemology consists precisely in this: the realist conception of the world misrepresents the nature of the world, because it takes the world as independent of the human mind. Realism from time immemorial has been pleading for the mind-independent status of the world. This is what is challenged by idealism that Kant carried out in his metaphysics of the world.<sup>24</sup>

## **6. Reason and the world**

Idealism since Plato has always been interested in the relation between reason or mind, on the one hand, and nature or the world, on the other. This

is because it is believed by all idealists that the world itself is rational in nature and that reason plays a key role in the understanding of the world. Kant has shown how understanding plays the most creative role in the shaping of the world. Kant's slogan is *understanding makes nature*. This is because understanding in Kant's sense, which is part of the mind or reason, contributes the categorical structure to the world in its synthetic activity. Post-Kantian idealists have developed a full-fledged account of this relation highlighting the way reason or mind takes over the function of the faculty of sensibility and the faculty of understanding.

Kant's distinction between sense, understanding, and reason serves its purpose in showing how from sense and understanding the world takes shape and how reason supplies unity to the world through its Ideas. This triple structure brings a unified account of the world or nature. Kant writes:

Reason is never in immediate relation to an object, but only to the understanding; and it is only through the understanding that it has its own (specific) empirical employment. It does not, therefore, *create* concepts (of objects) but only *orders* them, and gives them that unity which they can have only if they are employed in their widest possible application, that is, with a view to obtaining totality in the various series.<sup>25</sup>

Reason for Kant is the faculty of concepts that have a regulative use in obtaining the highest unity in the world. "Just as the understanding unifies the manifold in the object by means of concepts, so reason unifies the manifold of concepts by means of ideas, posting a certain collective unity as the goal of the activities of the understanding, which otherwise are concerned solely with distributive unity."<sup>26</sup> Thus reason is assigned the highest function of unifying nature under its own regulative principles so that the universe as a whole receives maximum coherence and intelligibility.

In post-Kantian idealism, especially in Hegel, reason has become more unified in providing the world with concrete unity in terms of the latter being thoroughly rational in character.<sup>27</sup> Hegel, along with Fichte and Schelling, took idealist metaphysics in a new direction in which nature is no longer a stranger to reason, but is a part of the progressive development of reason itself. Idealism did not shy away from shunning the Kantian noumenal world in favour of the total reality of the world given to reason for its manifestation. Nature or the world is the counterpart of reason, in which the former becomes the realm in which reason or the mind is active in projecting itself in the objects of the world. Reason is no longer a mere faculty of thought or ideas but the creative principle of organising the world into a unified rational structure. The real is the rational and the rational is the real, according to the Hegelian scheme of things.<sup>28</sup>

The metaphysical account of the universe in terms of reason is the hallmark of idealist thought in general, precisely because reason or mind becomes the sole source of the concepts and principles that make the universe intelligible. That is why idealists hold that the universe itself is a manifestation of the universal or cosmic reason or mind. This hypothesis of a universal mind operating in the universe is the high point of idealist metaphysical speculation.

## 7. The rationality of the universe

That the universe has a rational structure is accepted by both rationalists and idealists, because, unless we assume such a universe, neither science nor philosophy will be able to make the world intelligible.<sup>29</sup> The universe has retained its intelligibility for all kinds of explanations of the phenomena because in order to explain the universe we must presuppose its law-governed character.<sup>30</sup> The laws of the universe, as explained by Kant, are all contributed by the cognitive mind. Idealist metaphysicians are in the forefront in espousing the rational order of the universe because they without doubt presuppose a universal mind to underlie the universe.<sup>31</sup> To be more precise, there has been a universal agreement among idealists on the rational order of the universe.

The origin of idealism in Plato, and its subsequent development by Kant and Hegel, shows that there has been a metaphysical urge to see the universe or nature in terms of a universal principle called reason or spirit that is manifest immanently in the universe. Reason or spirit explains the organic unity of the universe and shows that the multiple phenomena in the universe are bound together by the cosmic mind or reason or spirit as we may prefer to call it. Datta writes:

First, we find here the example of a unity that tolerates, nay is upheld by, multiplicity. The spirit is one, but at the same time it is a subject, as well as an object. The multiple characters of subjectivity and objectivity are essentially necessary for the spirit's being what it is. The dualism between mind and matter which raises insoluble puzzles in metaphysics can, therefore, be solved and the respective importance of mind and matter can be retained, if reality be understood as a spirit.<sup>32</sup>

The idealist stance regarding the mind and matter shows the importance of the idea of the spirit that retains both as manifestations of the spirit. Both mind and matter are transformed into spiritual entities in different degrees because they owe their origin to the higher reality called the spirit.

Idealism presses forward the idea of the whole or the absolute reality to explain the nature of reality, which includes both matter and mind. The whole of such a nature is of the organic type in which the parts are integrally included in it. "For in a spirit we find that its constituent elements, subjective and objective, are related in such an intimate way that the spirit depends, for what it is, on its subjective and objective aspects, and the latter are in turn dependent, for their existence, on the spirit of which they are the aspects."<sup>33</sup> Thus the absolute idea of the whole or the absolute spirit becomes the new metaphysical principle that explains the unity of the reality that includes mind and matter. In this way, the metaphysical concept of the absolute spirit becomes the mainstay of idealist metaphysics in Hegelian and post-Hegelian philosophy.<sup>34</sup>

Idealism inevitably becomes absolute idealism because there is no way we can escape from the idea of a cosmic mind or spirit in the absence of which all idealism will collapse into subjective idealism. The idea of an absolute spirit or reason alone can save us from the subjectivism and relativism that will follow if we make the world dependent on individual minds. The rationale for the conception of an absolute spirit lies in the metaphysical urge to retain the universe as a systematic unity of phenomena.

## 8. The absolute spirit

Idealism has been concerned with the absolute spirit or mind since Hegel because this concept carries the central importance accorded to the notion of absolute reality. Reality, in the absolute sense, has been one of the key notions of metaphysics especially in the idealist tradition. This is necessitated by the fact that nothing can explain the universe except the idea of an absolute reality of which the universe is a part. The idea of an ultimate reality, which is beyond the universe, be it the spirit or the mind, has to be accepted because there is nothing to show that these ideas are self-contradictory. As Hegel has shown, the idea of the absolute reason or spirit cannot be dismissed as of no consequence, because it gives the highest unity and intelligibility to the universe.<sup>35</sup>

The idea of the absolute mind or spirit can be traced through idealist arguments both epistemological and ontological.<sup>36</sup> If we start with the knowing subject or the mind, we arrive at the infinite mind that is beyond finite minds, because it is the latter that presuppose the former. An infinite mind becomes absolutely necessary, because, without it, we cannot explain how the total knowledge of the world is possible at all. The finite mind cannot know the universe in its totality; it can know only a fragment. If the universe as a whole is to be known, then a universal infinite mind is



necessary. It is the latter that can know the universe in its wholeness and totality. Idealists do not accept the realist argument that our knowledge is always fragmented and that we can never know the whole reality. For the idealist, this is true, if we take our mind to be ultimately a finite mind that cannot be transcended. But the fact of the matter is that the finite mind can be transcended by the infinite mind. The latter is the source of the absolute knowledge of the reality that is the goal of metaphysics.<sup>37</sup>

However, metaphysics itself arrives at absolute reality through an ontological argument that shows that the finite world cannot be the ultimate reality and so we have to conceive of an absolute reality that is not limited in space and time. Absolute reality is of the nature of spirit or mind because that alone can explain the multiplicity of the universe. The whole universe is an all-inclusive organic whole, which needs a higher mind to explain it. Absolute reality is the spirit that includes the whole universe in itself and becomes the sole reality, which is infinite and unlimited.<sup>38</sup>

Idealist metaphysics is logically committed to the infinite reality that includes within itself finite objects, be they minds or material objects. The finite objects, which are only empirically real and so are only appearances, are relatively real within absolute reality.<sup>39</sup> Absolute reality becomes the new idealist principle to account for the world. The relative reality of the world becomes the stepping stone to the realisation of absolute reality. Idealist metaphysicians after Hegel have found it necessary to postulate absolute reality as the absolute spirit or mind for the purpose of explaining the world and its phenomena.<sup>40</sup>

## 9. Appearance and reality

Idealist metaphysics in general is committed to the distinction between the reality as it appears and the reality in itself. This follows from Kant's distinction between the phenomenon and the noumenon with the difference that all idealists do not accept the Kantian idea that the noumenon can never be known. Hegelians and neo-Hegelians alike accept that reality in itself is known, and that it is metaphysically absolute reality. This is because appearances have to be only relatively real and must be part of absolute reality. Kant's distinction is superseded by the idea of absolute Reality as distinct from appearances.

Bradley<sup>41</sup> made the distinction between appearances and reality with the full recognition of the fact that appearances, which constitute the empirical world, are ultimately part of absolute reality. Though he did not inherit Hegelian dialectical logic, he nevertheless made it a part of his idealist

scheme that the Absolute alone is the ultimate reality, which comprehends the totality of the appearances. Bradley writes:

There is but one Reality and its being consists in experience. In this whole all appearances come together, and in coming together they in various degrees lose their distinctive natures. The essence of reality lies in the union and agreement of existence and content, and, on the other side, appearance consists in the discrepancy between these two aspects. And reality in the end belongs to nothing but the single Real.<sup>42</sup>

This brings out the idea that the ideal whole, called the Absolute or Experience, in the comprehensive sense, is reality. It is the one that underlies all the appearances that are part of the Absolute. The world as it appears is fragmented into parts that depend on the whole for their existence. Bradley further writes:

The Absolute is present in, and, in a sense, it *is* alike each of its special appearances; though present everywhere again in different values and degrees.<sup>43</sup>

Thus the Absolute is present in all its appearances partially by degrees without nullifying the reality of the appearances.

Appearances, as conceived here, constitute the face of reality, which is fragmented, contradictory, and relative. This aspect of reality, which we call the empirical world, is an appearance, because the things in it are all self-contradictory and therefore are relatively real like space, time, causality, quality, relation, etc. Bradley finds that the entire empirical world, including mind, body, consciousness, and so on, is nothing but an appearance. From this conclusion, there follows the idea that idealism cannot take the world at its face value, and that there must be a higher reality than the world in order for us to be able to truly assess the status of the world vis-à-vis absolute reality.

Though all idealists do not accept that the world is an appearance of the Absolute, idealist thinkers nevertheless will not agree with realists in giving absolute status to the world. As in Plato, the world needs a higher reality in terms of which it can be made intelligible. The world has been variously construed in different idealist systems of thought as having a relative status in relation to the Absolute.<sup>44</sup>

## 10. The metaphysical status of the world

The world as an appearance poses the most challenging question as to its origin and nature, because there is no way to explain how the world comes into existence at all. If all appearances are to be merged into the Absolute, then the world must be so merged without having any independent status of its own. For Bradley, as for other idealists like Bosanquet, Radhakrishnan, and Sri Aurobindo, there is no independent status of the world, because the world is finite and relative in nature. The world, as a system of appearances, cannot claim any absolute status and, therefore, it must always presuppose an absolute reality higher than itself. The world is relatively real and hence is called an appearance. This is not to deny the empirical reality of the world; it only shows the relative status of the world from the transcendental point of view.

Bradley's main argument regarding the status of the world is that in space and time it suffers from contradictions and therefore remains a fragmented and relative reality. It is in itself a divided reality and hence is an appearance.<sup>45</sup> It loses its unity as soon as it is separated from the Absolute, which is of the nature of a whole. The Whole carries unity and harmony, which are missing in the world as an independent reality. Because of its finite nature, the world loses unity and harmony when separated from the Absolute. The Absolute alone has unity and harmony. The world gets back its unity within the all-inclusive structure of the Absolute.

However, the origin of the world remains a difficult problem, because we do not know how the physical world came into being in the first place. Now the question arises: does the world come into being before the Absolute itself comes into being? Or does it exist because the Absolute itself brings it into existence? However, none of the questions is meaningful for Bradley, because there is no world either before or after the Absolute. The world has meaning only in relation to the Absolute. The empirical question of the origin of the world makes no sense within the transcendental structure of the Absolute. The world appears as a limited whole for us, who have limited vision; however, from the transcendental point of view, the world is part of absolute reality that is one and infinite.<sup>46</sup>

Idealist metaphysics does not take seriously the scientific question of whether the world is physical in nature. The world as a part of the Absolute becomes completely transformed into a supra physical reality. The Absolute cannot be physical because it is not in space and time as a material substance. Therefore the Absolute is the Experience in the supra physical sense of the term.<sup>47</sup> As such, it is inclusive of willing, feeling, and thinking,

which constitute the totality of experience. It is not mere sense- experience in the empirical sense of the term and therefore it must be spiritual in nature.

In the Vedantic idea of the all-inclusive absolute consciousness, Brahman reaffirms the idea of the all-inclusive spiritual consciousness that explains the relative status of the world as a part of the ultimate reality.<sup>48</sup> This leads to the idealist conclusion that the universe can be understood only in terms of the higher reality called Brahman or spirit or consciousness. The universe is to be understood only in terms of consciousness as the ultimate reality and not in terms of any material principle that is suggested by the physical sciences.

## **11. Mind and the world: the spiritual unity**

The mind of man is the key to the understanding of the world and the Absolute. This is because the human mind has faculties like understanding and reason to reveal the nature of the world and the Absolute. Idealism does not disown the world as unreal, though it is taken as an appearance.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, there is no reason to call the world an illusion,<sup>50</sup> even though it is recognised that the world itself belongs to the Absolute as a constituent of the latter. Following the Hegelian line of reasoning, one can go to the extent of saying that the world is an expression of the absolute spirit.

Bradley takes the Absolute as Experience, because it is of the nature of the mind or spirit, though not in the limited sense of the human mind. The human mind is limited, and it suffers from the finitude and relativity that all appearances suffer from. In that sense, the human mind is an appearance,<sup>51</sup> though it ultimately belongs to the Absolute. All mental experiences belong to the Absolute, as does the rest of the world. Therefore, both mind and the world are part of the Absolute; thus, they get transformed within the latter. This explains why the Absolute itself has the character of experience or consciousness as the all-inclusive whole of reality that contains everything and leaves out nothing.<sup>52</sup>

Now the importance of the mind or spirit in idealism is self-explanatory, because idealism does not admit the fact that the reality or Absolute could be material in nature. The decisive argument in favour of idealism is that the reality as such is mental or spiritual in nature.<sup>53</sup> It is the spiritual unity of the universe that is the axiomatic truth in idealism. In the absence of the spiritual unity, one cannot make sense of harmony and symmetry in the universe. Idealists like Hegel and Bradley emphasise this spiritual unity in their conception of absolute reality. Bradley has therefore made it necessary that the Absolute be viewed as Experience, just as Hegel views it as the spirit and the idealist Vedantins call it absolute consciousness or Brahman.

From this one can argue that, whether we view the Absolute as the spirit or Experience or Consciousness, it ultimately means that the reality is spiritual in nature.<sup>54</sup>

From mental consciousness to absolute consciousness, there is a graduation from the rudimentary consciousness of a limited nature to the unlimited kind culminating in absolute consciousness. This is the general understanding of human knowledge in general. We start with limited knowledge and end with absolute knowledge. Idealists in general have a preference for absolute knowledge so far as the knowledge of the Absolute is concerned.<sup>55</sup>

The idea of the spiritual unity of the universe has been at the crux of idealist thought not only in the West but also in the East. Indian Vedanta has been at the forefront in the metaphysics of the unity of the universe in its doctrine of Brahman as absolute reality.<sup>56</sup> Indian idealist metaphysics is well known for its unification of the universe under the single principle of Brahman, which is the absolute consciousness pervading the universe.

## 12. The primacy of consciousness

Idealism in general is committed to the primacy of consciousness in the scheme of reality. This is because it assumes that ultimate reality must be spirit or consciousness. The idealist argument is that, if absolute reality is spirit or consciousness, there is no way we can disown the fact that consciousness is the primary reality from which everything follows. That is, we have to accept within the idealist framework that consciousness lies at the foundation of everything, and that it can explain everything including the so-called material objects that abound in the world.

With Kant the move towards the primacy of the mind or reason became evident, because Kant was convinced that nothing can be real except that which is shaped by the mind. The mind assumes the importance of having the a priori thought-structures that ultimately give rise to what is called the phenomenal world. If this is so, then the mind or reason becomes the source of the structure of the world. Thus, idealism takes its roots in Kant's philosophy and continues to be the guiding light of post-Kantian thinkers including Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. The mind becomes the sole guiding principle in idealist metaphysics and continues to dominate philosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

What the primacy of mind or consciousness implies in metaphysics are the following:

1. Mind or consciousness becomes the ultimate reality and is the foundation of all that is real in the world.

2. The world or nature is constituted by the mind or consciousness.
3. Mind or consciousness has constitutive powers in the form of the structures of thought and reason.
4. The structures of thought and reason are the a priori elements in the system of the mind or consciousness.
5. The conscious mind in its universal and cosmic form is the Absolute Spirit that encompasses everything from the material world to the world of all living beings.

Thus, reason or the mind explains everything real and possible in the universe and therefore it admits of nothing higher than consciousness as real. The absolute consciousness becomes the sole reality that becomes the ultimate ground of everything.<sup>57</sup>

Now the question arises: how can we explain the nature of absolute consciousness when human consciousness in its finite sense is all that we have? Can finite consciousness conceive of infinite consciousness? The answer lies in the fact that the very existence of finite consciousness presupposes infinite consciousness, because, without the infinite, we cannot think of the finite at all. Idealist thinkers accept the reality of absolute consciousness because the finite human mind, metaphysically, presupposes absolute consciousness.

Now the question may arise, What is the nature of absolute consciousness and how is it related to the relative and finite consciousness? All of us admit that finite consciousness is our individual consciousness, which is limited and conditioned. The individual consciousness found in each of us is bound by the body and its functions including the brain. The brain is the chief instrument of the body that conditions consciousness and limits it to the bodily organism. In this sense, brain-related consciousness remains confined to the body so far as its reality is concerned.<sup>58</sup> But the fact remains that individual consciousness is not the end of the matter; there is a higher domain of consciousness that is universal and cosmic in nature. It is this universal consciousness that is absolute consciousness according to idealists. The universal mind or consciousness is not finite and limited to any particular body. It pervades the cosmos and so is transcendent to individual consciousness.

However, absolute consciousness is not cut off from individual consciousness; it is embodied in individual consciousness. The latter is a manifestation of the former. In that sense, the universal mind is not alienated from the individual mind. The universal mind is beyond the individual mind, and yet it is manifested in the latter. The finite mind gets its full expression in the universal mind. Idealists believe that individual mental