

## Chapter 2

# Christian Science and Eddy's Metaphysical Idealism

Distilled from the million-or-so words Eddy used to describe her system of thought, this chapter summarises Eddy's philosophical ideas and their interconnections.

As with all religions, Christian Science is defined by its particular set of beliefs and practices, which in this case are part of the metaphysical family of religious movements. In addition to the Bible, it has another book which is considered an inspired text: *Science and Health* (1910), the principal work of its founder and in which the main tenets are explained. Eddy wrote over a dozen other books addressing specific issues: *Manual of the Mother Church* (1895); *Miscellaneous Writings* (1897); *Retrospection and Introspection* (1891); *Unity of Good* (1888); *Pulpit and Press* (1895); *Rudimental Divine Science* (1887); *No and Yes* (1887); *Christian Science versus Pantheism* (1898); *Message to the Mother Church, 1900* (1900); *Message to the Mother Church, 1901* (1901); *Message to the Mother Church, 1902* (1902); *Christian Healing* (1886); *The People's Idea of God* (1883); *Poems* (1910); *Christ and Christmas* (Eddy and Gilman 1894); and *The First Church of Christ, Scientist and Miscellany* (1913). I list these here to illustrate the breadth and depth of Eddy's work and, so as to further emphasise this point, it may be necessary for readers outside the USA to learn that in a poll of the *most influential Americans of all time*, i.e. in any field of endeavour, not 'just' religion, she was included in the top



100<sup>1</sup>. Her degree of importance is not in doubt; it is the nature of that importance I address.

As mentioned earlier, amongst the most important of Christian Science beliefs is the idea that illness is an illusion (which can be corrected, not cured, as it does not exist, only by prayer), but even more critical to the later analysis is the Christian Science assertion that this fact is simply a consequence of the entirety of material reality being illusory.

### **Mary Baker Eddy as an idealist philosopher**

Idealism in all of its various forms – subjective, objective, absolute, magical, personal and many less well-known other types – rejects the physicalist (materialist) notion that ultimate reality consists of the entities familiar to ‘common-sense’, naïve models of the universe, i.e. that our awareness of objects is as they actually are, and that they are composed of matter, occupy space and obey the laws of physics, including those which relate to the categories of energy, space and time<sup>2</sup>. Instead, it regards its ultimate constituents as non-material entities; for example, love and souls<sup>3</sup>. Eddy’s world view thus fits precisely within this paradigm, in that she too rejected the physicalist concepts in favour of these idealist forms. Fundamentally, by denying the supposed evidence of our senses, and recasting them as false cognitions, Eddy was able to redefine the common-sense understanding of reality described earlier as ‘error’<sup>4</sup>.

Idealists fall into one or other of two categories, either being descriptive or revisionist metaphysicians, with the former group rejecting the materialist epistemological understanding of the nature of reality<sup>5</sup> and the latter group denying the materialist ontological model of reality<sup>6</sup>. This categorisation is entirely sufficient for the purposes of this chapter, but acknowledged as being simplistic and arguably incomplete.

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1. *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2006.

2. Putnam 2012, pp. 39-50.

3. McTaggart 1927, p. 156.

4. Eddy 1910, p. 13.

5. e.g. Berkeley 1710, §§XVII-XXI.

6. e.g. Fichte 1800 in the Preuss translation 1987, p. 104.



Eddy, although superficially a Fichtean, went much further, rejecting the nature of Kant's things-in-themselves and all the apparent evidence of our senses, replacing them with an alternative set which she believed to be grasped by an innate, spiritual sense and to which she was convinced that individuals could be awakened by the methods of her Church, officially referred to as The First Church of Christ, Scientist<sup>7</sup>.

Many of the early critics of Christian Science appreciated that the conceptual framework at the centre of Eddy's work was a very much more radical form of idealism than had been previously espoused. For example, Wolcott pointed out that Berkeley 'never reduces idealism to absurdity attempting to apply it to the affairs of everyday life, and the conclusions of universal experience'<sup>8</sup>. Berkeley, of course, in explaining his own form of idealism had stated that 'I do not argue against the existence of any one thing that we can comprehend either of sensation or reflection; that the things I see with my eyes and touch with my hands do exist, I make not the slightest question. The only thing whose existence I do deny is that which philosophers call matter or corporeal substance'<sup>9</sup>.

Eddy, however, denied exactly the component of reality which Berkeley so explicitly left untouched, and equally explicitly made this distinction between herself and Berkeley entirely clear<sup>10</sup>. Also, she states: 'that by knowing the unreality of disease, sin and death, you demonstrate the allness [*sic*] of God'<sup>11</sup>. This assertion was made on the basis that 'As human thought changes from one stage to another of conscious pain and painlessness, sorrow and joy, – from fear to hope and from faith to understanding, – the visible manifestation will at last be man governed by Soul, not by material sense'<sup>12</sup>.

Eddy's radical ideas resulted from a very lengthy search for a successful treatment for her many and varied health difficulties. In 1861 Eddy discovered the method created by Phineas Quimby, who had developed his techniques for healing after abruptly recovering

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7. Stark 1998, p. 193.

8. Wolcott 1896, p. 15.

9. Berkeley quoted in Buckley 1901, p. 23.

10. Eddy 1901, pp. 23-24.

11. Eddy 1887, p. 9, 10.

12. Eddy 1910, p. 125.



from what had been diagnosed as tuberculosis<sup>13</sup>. Quimby's approach was initially based on mesmerism, the nineteenth-century term for a form of hypnosis, after Franz Mesmer. Mesmer had been working at a time when magnetic and electrical phenomena were being scientifically investigated for the first time and were a fashionable interest for many leading figures in European and American society. Influenced by the zeitgeist, Mesmer had interpreted his genuinely impressive results as being due to a hypothetical magnetic fluid permitting living things to affect one another by a process which Mesmer termed 'animal magnetism'<sup>14</sup>. Quimby, however, working several decades later in 1847, when electrical phenomena were becoming better understood, considered that the effect of suggestion, rather than any magnetic or electrical process, was responsible for the occasional cures he was achieving. Having determined that neither a hypothetical 'fluid' nor 'animal magnetism' was involved in the process, he instead considered that illness was in reality a state of mind – a perfectly reasonable deduction given that the 'cures' appeared to be resulting from suggestion.

Quimby also found theological justification: the well-known Biblical account in which Christ heals a paralysed man, was, Quimby claimed, an example of something similar. He explained it as follows: "There is no intelligence, no power or action in matter of itself... the spiritual world to which our eyes are closed by ignorance or unbelief is the real world... in it lie all the causes for every visible effect in the natural world."<sup>15</sup> Quimby's method, therefore, was to explain to the patient that their own mind could control their symptoms.

The influence which Quimby had on Eddy's direction of thought was considerable, but despite his genuine success with his own professional activities as a healer, he was a largely uneducated man who knew nothing of the idealists. Eddy's subsequent contact with the Methodist minister Warren Felt Evans was very different in nature, however. Evans had read widely on metaphysical philosophy and theology, and was well aware of the connection between his ideas regarding the effect of the mind, the work of Fichte, Hegel and Edwards, and the various philosophies underpinning Eastern

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13. Dresser 1921, pp. 28, 29.

14. Mesmer 1779, in the 1948 translation p. 31.

15. Quimby quoted in Dresser 1921, pp. 319-20.



religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, eventually arriving at Swedenborgianism<sup>16</sup>.

Of the German idealists, Fichte comes closest to providing a formal framework for much of Eddy's ideas, notably in *The Vocation of Man*<sup>17</sup>.

### **The use of the word 'science'**

In the 1870s, at the time Eddy wrote *Science and Health*, the physical sciences were already beginning to be seen as the reference standard for claims regarding knowledge. A modern critic of Christian Science, therefore, might reasonably suppose that Eddy chose to use the word 'science' in the name for her new discipline simply to gain it extra authority and increase its standing among the general public, but this would be to do Eddy a great disservice. From her point of view, Christian Science was exactly what she claimed of it – a science – not just in the Aristotelian sense of knowledge in general, and certainly not in the pseudoscientific sense in which the word is sometimes now misappropriated, but in precisely the way that the word had become used by the rapidly advancing sciences of physics and chemistry, yet applied to a different 'data set': it offered claims which were testable, yet related to a metaphysical rather than mechanistic reality.

This genuine commitment to the true principle of science explains the very considerable antipathy which Eddy felt for mysticism and mind cures, with which she was sometimes wrongly conflated, and from which she believed her philosophy to be wholly separate. Prayer, for Eddy, was 'an act'<sup>18</sup> within a spiritual universe, and the change in experience thus resulting was evidence – scientific evidence – for its effectiveness.

Although the mechanistic understanding of our experiences of the hypothetical 'physical reality' is now almost universal, it is nevertheless a theoretical construct. Assembling a set of (assumed-to-be) sense perceptions into a unified whole is a purely mental abstraction, in which we posit the existence of solid objects in an objective, external universe with causality as its foundational principle. Developments in the 1920s in the field of quantum physics

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16. Evans 1869, pp. 220, 221.

17. Fichte 1987.

18. Gottschalk 1973, p. 281.



have provided extra evidence (extra to that of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism, that is) that a naïve realism (realism here being used in the philosophical sense, i.e. the opposite of philosophical idealism) is far from an accurate representation of reality. Einstein showed that physical measurements such as velocity and distance are subjective, depending on the frame of reference of the observer<sup>19</sup>, and even causality is an illusion created by the statistics central to the uncertainty principle<sup>20</sup>. As Bradley put it:

To speak generally, the mechanical view [i.e. mechanistic] is non-sense [*sic*], because the position of the laws is quite inconsistent and unintelligible. This is a defect which belongs to every special science... but in the sphere of Nature reaches its lowest extreme... since these laws are not physical, and since on the other hand they seem essential to Nature, the essence of Nature seems, therefore, to be made alien to itself.<sup>21</sup>

The point which Bradley is making here is that a nineteenth-century physicist would assert that only matter and energy exist, yet the laws of physics are neither, thus immediately demonstrating that something non-physical has to exist even in a pre-Einsteinian, naïvely mechanistic universe model. In the literal definition of ‘metaphysics’ – from the Greek μετά (meta, meaning ‘after’ or ‘beyond’) – the laws of physics would appear to fit rather well, and somewhat counterintuitively could themselves be seen as representing a first step into a larger world.

## **Eddy’s historic misrepresentation**

Another facet in the complex set of reasons which have prevented Eddy from being fully recognised as an idealist philosopher so far is her claim, variously and repeatedly expressed, that her principal work, *Science and Health* was an ‘inspired book’<sup>22</sup>. Having previously disparaged 99 per cent of the academic philosophy that might have

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19. Einstein 1905.

20. Heisenberg 1927.

21. Bradley 1893, p. 354.

22. Gottschalk 1973, p. xxi.



been thought to underpin her magnum opus, now she *appeared* to be additionally removing herself from its authorship. This is just one of the many reasons why her work has not been perceived as philosophy, others being documented later.

The complexity of Eddy's historic misrepresentation is sufficient to warrant a small taxonomy in its own right. The main reasons for this century-long injustice appear to fall into the following broad categories:

1. Sexist prejudice: self-evidently still present in the twenty-first century, but far worse in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries;
2. The theological prominence of Christian Science outshining the philosophical content upon which it is based;
3. The politics of envy: Eddy's great financial success;
4. Inappropriateness of status: Eddy held no degrees or appointments outside of the institution which she had created;
5. Linguistic inexpertise: Eddy's ideas ran beyond her ability to express them;
6. Outlandishness: the sheer originality and extreme nature of the philosophy underpinning Christian Science creates a barrier between critics and a genuine attempt to engage with its ideas;
7. Offensiveness: conservatively minded clerics were genuinely offended by some of Eddy's redefinitions and reinterpretations, e.g. regarding the nature of the Trinity and Christ's purpose on earth; and
8. Eddy's notoriety as a public figure, caused by (but independent of) the fame engendered by her role as the 'discoverer' of Christian Science (e.g. "In the year 1866, I discovered the Christ Science")<sup>23</sup>), creating an identity far from that stereotypically expected of a philosopher.

Some of these reasons are evident from the contemporary and extensive published criticism of Eddy and Christian Science, some are inferences from Eddy's own writing, and the remainder are *prima facie* conjectures.

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23. Eddy 1910, p. 107.