Author's Introductory Essay

This collection of papers has been made possible by the initiative, kindness and hard work of Professor George Roberts and Professor Smucker. At their suggestion I have added this introductory essay, indicating the sort of unity that binds together the items of this collection. Inevitably such an essay has grown in the course of preparation: for it has become not simply a partial description of what is contained in the papers which follow, and the different *foci* of interest to which they bear witness, but an interpretation of past work in the light of present preoccupations and indeed of intention for publication of much more extended and sustained work, now almost ready to appear. So I do not simply describe or characterize; I try to show where the thought here embodied has led and is leading me. Especially in the concluding section I have argued for a viewpoint to which increasingly I would commit myself publicly, namely that if we live in an age in which we must acknowledge faith to be precarious, we also live in an age in which our perception of the objects of faith may be renewed.

The papers which this volume contains bear witness to three related preoccupations; the first is philosophical, the second theological and the third ethical. But the three are in fact related. Thus, if I say that in philosophy my chief concern has been with the question of the limits of experience, of intelligible, descriptive discourse, with the kind of questions discussed by Kant as that philosopher is presented in Mr P. F. Strawson's recent book *The Bounds of Sense* and by Professor Wisdom in some of the papers contained in *Paradox and Discovery*, I know that this preoccupation has deeply affected and been affected by my besetting theological concern with issues of Christology. Again, where ethics are concerned, it is with the group

of issues that certainly raise very sharply the adequacy of utilitarian norms of judgment, which very soon remind the reflective student of the tragic elements in human life, of the sorts of deeply personal dialectical self-interrogation in which, in the concrete, the issue discussed in traditional moral philosophy under the rubric "conflict of duties" is sometimes worked out that I have largely occupied myself. In Plato's highly significant quarrel with the tragedians we find the birth of a kind of ethical reflection which deliberately eschews the method of description and re-description and substitutes the quest for an authoritative transcendent norm which at once supplies a standard of judgment and a resting place for the interrogative spirit. More than perhaps we realize we are in bondage to the consequences of that revolution. And it is at least arguable that when the tumult and the shouting dies it will be seen that the role of the existentialists has been to set a question-mark against it, and to raise (as of course Hegel in his *Jugendschriften* may be said to have raised) the question of the ontological import of the tragic dialectic. I say that this issue has been raised; it has been raised but not resolved. For even if we substitute a quite different system of projection for the expression of our discontent with ethical naturalism, we shall still have to face the question of truth and falsity, the question whether what we represent in any sense corresponds with what is.

So the three issues to which I have continually returned are mutually involved one with the other.

Take first, however, the philosophical questions which have chiefly engaged me. In a sentence, what has concerned me is the question of the experiential significance of factual concepts. It is undoubtedly one of the central themes of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and one with which he is able to deal with particular acuteness by means of his rigorous demarcation of categories from other concepts. There is no doubt whatever that he assigns a special role, a role that he characterizes as necessary in the sense of indispensable, to certain notions and concepts, for instance the notion of spatio-temporal unity and the concepts of substantial permanence and causality. For him we know *a priori* (in a sense he tries painfully and not always unsuccessfully to define) that whatever enters our experience as a physical event, however remote in time or distant in space, must find its date and place in the same time order as the writing of this essay. Again he agrees we know apart from the detailed and various deliverances of our experience that whatever is to qualify as an objective constituent

of that experience must manifest certain pervasive factors; and the necessity of their presence he is at pains to make a matter of proof. If we do not *know a priori* what the world is like in its rich variety and its complex and vastly detailed history, we know the forms to which that detail must conform; we know what conditions must be satisfied if anything is to be treated as a constituent of the world to which we belong. Yet he insists that even where these structural notions are concerned, it must be possible to qualify the conditions of their use in relation to our experience. Without the notion of the conformity of events to law, we cannot spell out the order of our world; we cannot even through our senses have commerce with anything worthy to be called a world. Yet the significance of the notion is exhausted by the continuity it enables us to introduce into that with which our senses make it possible for us to have commerce, a continuity without which what the senses disclose would be empty of objective significance for us.

I mention Kant here although I do not ignore the extent to which his Analytic of Principles has been criticized by modern logical empiricists technically competent in respect of the tremendous transformations effected in our understanding of the natural world since his day. One cannot work and teach in Cambridge without being made continually aware that it is in the laboratories of the molecular biological research unit and in the Mullard Radio astronomical observatory rather than in the libraries and lecture rooms of the Divinity School that the frontiers of human knowledge are being pushed back! But even as these frontiers are extended, so men still find themselves, if they are technically competent, able to assimilate and make their own what is learnt; assimilate and assess, distinguishing the merely speculative from the partially confirmed, the tentative from the relatively certain, the kind of reorganization of theoretical concepts demanded by increase of understanding over against the system supposedly to be replaced.

The modern logical empiricist, however deeply he may quarrel, e.g. with Kant's adherence to the authority of Euclidean geometry, must admire his sharp perception of the special status and role of structural concepts or categories. For this perception enabled Kant to pioneer a kind of empiricism that was not in bondage to the illusion of supposing the complexities of the actual public world to be constructible out of the short-lived, fragmentary, private simplicities of individual sense-experience. It was a part of his achievement to enable the empiricist

principle of the necessarily experiential import of factual concepts to be stated without any suggestion of the falsehood that conceptual activity is a sort of ghostly surrogate for the vivid actuality of sense awareness.

It is for these reasons as well as for others that his criticism of the possibility of transcendent metaphysics remains classical. I say "as well as others"; for it was a sample of his great insight that he recognized how much metaphysics was bound up with a nisus from the relative to the unconditioned, an urge that sought satisfaction by a delineation in theoretically satisfying terms of the ultimate order of being, of things as they are. And it was the intellectual illusion on which this aspiration depended that he sought to uncover, but to uncover with a profound sympathy for the dimensions of the human spirit evidenced by this preoccupation with the unattainable.

It is with the range of philosophical problems to which Kant's view supplies one way of entry that I have been chiefly concerned. If the canon of experiential significance obtains, what claim can we make for what we say, however subtle, even idiosyncratic our manner of expression, concerning the unconditional and the transcendent? Certainly we must press through *à l'outrance* our sense of the sort of indirection that we must anticipate in any suggested system of projection we may adopt or seek to develop. There is no substitute here for sheer hard work, for the kind of hard work that is involved in tracing precisely what it is that metaphysicians are about with the concepts they frame, and the uses to which they put them. "Every sort of statement has its own sort of logic"! It was a weakness on Kant's part to be so deeply in bondage to generalized forms of expression, whether his field was theory of knowledge or ethics. His work is suffused by a hostility to the particular, even though, of course, we must allow that in his ethics he cultivated so extreme a formalism in order to capture in the most diverse types of human action what was present in all of them as source of sovereign moral authority throughout all the changes and chances of concrete individual life. Yet if we concede that the serious moral philosopher must be prepared to listen to those who describe, and himself to describe and redescribe in detail, we must also insist that he has to guard against the illusion of supposing that mere subtlety and elaboration in description somehow of themselves confer validity. The question remains of the frontiers of intelligibility; if we find, for instance, a point of departure for metaphysics in discontent with the ethical naturalist models of the human situation, if we go on to clothe

that discontent in expression as rich and effective as the first part of the second book of Plato's *Republic*, we still have to ask, concerning the claims of truth and falsity, what we thus convey to ourselves. A mere appropriateness of linguistic form is not itself a guarantee of factual import.

We do well never to forget that in this respect, if in none other, the work of those philosophers, mainly to be found more in central Europe before its subjection to Nazi domination and in the U.S.A. than in the United Kingdom, who are properly called "logical positivists", was of great value. For all the carelessness of which they have been proved guilty in their philosophical pamphleteering, their most serious work was informed by a profound insistence that philosophers should take seriously the canons of verification recognized where the admissibility or the inadmissibility of scientific hypotheses was under discussion. In Popper's *Logik der Forschung* and in the many papers in which his fundamental thesis has been developed and refined by himself, by his pupils and associates, the demand has been converted into a general recognition of the supreme importance to be attached to a proposition or hypothesis or suggested natural law being regarded as vulnerable to falsification. It is, of course, no accident that Popper (not only in his quarrel with those who emphasize, as he does not, the roles of induction and confirmation in scientific discovery) admits a deep indebtedness to Kant in his clear recognition of the interplay of spontaneous intellectual and imaginative construction, and empirical observation in the advance of our knowledge of the world. And if I mention Kant's name before that of any other philosopher in this section of my essay, I do so because a critical study of his work, among many other fruits, alerts the student continually to the depth of the need that what we claim to be the case shall somehow be vulnerable to specifiable methods of proof or disproof. Whether we can to any extent succeed in indicating what form such methods may properly be expected to take is a supremely exacting problem; but there is no flight possible from the logical empiricist's insistence that what the metaphysician or religious believer is concerned with lies beyond the fields in which true can be distinguished from false. Admittedly there is a paradox in asking the question how statements relating to that which transcends the frontiers of intelligible factual discourse may be verified; but it is a paradox that we have to employ in order to fasten our attention on the fact that if there is no sense whatsoever in which in a metaphysical statement we are concerned

with what is, or is not, the case, the whole enterprise is vacuous and without significance.

There is no substitute here for hard work; and the same obtains when we come to the related topic of Christology. I say related, and this may seem a mistake. Yet if I ask myself why I remain in some sense a Christian, it is because of the questions set to me by the person of Christ. Of course these are theological, not metaphysical, questions; yet in framing them the problem of metaphysics is immediately raised again. For instance, if a man asks what Jesus means when in the words of the Fourth Gospel he says that "he and the Father are one" *(hen)*, he is immediately involved in questions touching the content and limitations in significance of the concept of substance or entity. The part of philosophy called ontology, according to Professor P. T. Geach, is concerned to give as satisfactory and complete an account as possible of our ultimate conceptual scheme; in the working out of the doctrine of the person of Christ, such an ultimate conceptual scheme has been taken for granted, and the legitimacy of its use in principle in respect of the transcendent has not been queried. It has been bent to new purposes; the concept of substance has been enlarged and stretched in its use in the representation of Christ's relation to the Father. But that which it has been used to convey in outline is regarded as transcendent of the order of the world, as belonging indeed to the very arcana of the transcendent in itself.

Yet even before the movement of Christological thought involved the theologian in the inescapable subtleties of the passage beyond an economic to an essential Trinity, we are by contemplation of the person of Christ involved in perplexing questions of significance. If we say that in the Gospels we are confronted with a figure whose ground and source is not in himself, who continually points beyond himself, who confronts men with the paradoxical claim, conveyed brilliantly in a phrase of the late Dr W. R. Inge, of an "infinite self-abnegation", we are gripped fast by the issue of the significance of what we say. We refer, of course, to a concrete historical individual, with an identifiable *Sitz im Leben*, on whose mission critical historical analysis and advancing archaeological exploration may throw new light, as they have done and may continue to do on Solon and Pericles, on Sulla and Julius Caesar, on Hannibal and Cleopatra. There are whole sections of the life and teaching of Jesus that are, however we conceive the source material, matter for the professional historian; for instance, the relation of the judicial processes by which he was tried,

the relative responsibility of Pharisees, of priests, of Roman officials for his execution. But when we ask what, if anything, is meant by speaking of him in the concreteness of his human existence as the Truth, we face not only paradoxical innovation in the use of the notion of truth: we face the question of the sense in which a concrete individual may not simply teach or reveal what is true, as Jesus did to the Samaritan woman and to others, but be the Truth. And if this is not the same question as reflection on transcendent metaphysical speculation raises, it has analogies thereto.

It is, of course, tempting to say that a study of Christological language forms an important chapter in a general investigation of ways in which the frontiers of factually significant discourse have been transcended. Such an investigation would of course also include detailed treatment of Kant's claim that where the moral universe was concerned we were free to use concepts in expounding the "postulates of pure practical reason" in ways free of the restrictions laid down in his first critique. We may well conclude that his account of the morality that elicited the laying down of these postulates must be judged at once too formal and too narrowly conceived to do justice to the complexities of human existence. Yet we can reject this aspect of Kant's moral theory, while still taking most seriously his insistence that it is in the moral life that we enjoy commerce with the transcendent. We have to reckon with a whole range of different styles of thrust beyond the limits of experience, which have their sources in the actual lives of men and women: the kind of thrust of which Professor Wisdom[1] has well remarked we find expressed in great literature, in Sophocles and Shakespeare, in Conrad and Flaubert, in Racine and Lawrence rather than in the speculative writings of professional philosophers. In such a liberalized inventory of essays in the transcending of the frontiers of empirical significance, Christology has its place. Yet it is not in any of the forms in which it is expressed, whether the quasi-narrative descriptions of the Synoptic Gospels, suggesting an origin

1. I should like here to acknowledge how great my debt is to Professor Wisdom, both in respect of what I have learnt from his writing and of what I have learnt from him in discussion. Although he is a philosopher and not a theologian, I am deeply aware of the extent to which this section of my essay has been affected by his teaching and I should like to acknowledge a debt that extends a long way beyond the actual references to his published writings.

for their central figure resistant to the kind of location proper to the place of his human birth and nurture, and the kind of dating which in principle we must be able to assign to his birth and to the precise identification which again in principle we must suppose possible, where his parentage is concerned, or the relatively precise ontological formula of the Nicene definition of his relation to the Father, to be regarded as a kind of imaginative enlargement of human material. Dr Norman Sherry[2] has given us, where a number of Conrad's novels are concerned, including not only *Almayer's Folly* and *Outcast of the Islands* but also *Lord Jim* and *The Shadow Line*, a fascinating account of the material that the novelist organized to such remarkable effect. His *Conrad's Eastern World* is valuable to any student of the working of the creative imagination. We could indeed say the same of the late Dr Ernest Jones' study of Shakespeare's writing of Hamlet in Freudian terms in his well-known book *Hamlet and Oedipus*. If it is not literary criticism it is a valuable suggestion of the role fulfilled in the writer's biography by the writing of one of the most elusive of his tragedies, advancing unquestionably understanding of the work, even if Jones fails in the end to reckon with it as an achieved whole. Both Sherry and Jones in their different ways direct their readers' attention to the labours of composition (in Shakespeare's case, as Jones understands him, one could say the spiritual travail) out of which their respective subjects' work was born. In each case one could say that it was from their power of reflective assimilation of their material that their work sprung; they both enlarged our understanding of the human scene by way of their imaginative re-ordering of that which they received; in the case of Conrad the life he met and read about in his Eastern world, in Shakespeare's case a tradition of tragic drama on which he set the seal of his own experience and through which, by deep reflection, he was enabled to come to terms with himself.

There is a very influential current in contemporary theological thinking which emphasizes the extent to which in the figure of Jesus the Christ, of whose historical existence it is alleged that we know next to nothing, we have to reckon with a series of essays in spiritual experience wherein the Church, whether collectively or in the persons of individual members of a genuine creative originality, has sought to come to terms with itself, with its life and the questions an inherited tradition of faith and practice thrust upon it, in its own

2. *Conrad's Eastern World*, C.U.P., 1966.