

Chapter 1

Beginnings

Overview

The nineteenth-century American, Mary Baker Eddy, is well known in the United States for having founded the religion Christian Science, but she is not generally regarded as a philosopher, let alone an original one.

Many factors may have contributed to history's mis-framing of Eddy. Her gender, the period in which she lived, and her notoriety in connection with the creation of a new religion made her appear non-conformal with the image of a philosopher. In the twenty-first century, interest has grown in the 'lost' female philosophers of history, although these figures have typically been overlooked due to their lack of visibility, rather than their prominence in another role. This book forms a part of the rediscovery of the contributions of female philosophers.

Eddy's Christian Science develops an empirical metaphysics which marries a radical form of idealism and scientific method by putting a priori metaphysical axioms to the test of experience. Christian Science's denial of the existence of illness, for which she is mostly known, is merely a fragment of a daringly ambitious, radical idealism denying the existence of matter and much more besides.

Eddy wrote in a nonlinear style, incorporating existing terms whose meaning she had redefined, making a careful restructuring and rephrasing of her work a necessary first step. Subsequent analysis of her system's internal consistency and its coherency reveals three

potentially fatal flaws in her system of thought; a considerable part of the text therefore addresses these problems and offers possible solutions to them.

Mary Baker Eddy attained worldwide fame and notoriety in her lifetime, and, additionally to her system of thought, created in the Christian Science Church an international institution which still exists today. It is also true that her work, and that of people following in her footsteps, was and continues to be of great cultural significance, but despite the system which she created being underpinned by ideas very similar to the metaphysical idealism of certain German and British idealists, Eddy is not regarded as a philosopher in the same sense as the famous men of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it is this injustice which this book both demonstrates and begins to rectify.

Although only publicly associated with healing, Christian Science asserts something quite remarkable considering its distance from academic philosophy: illness, suffering and the entire physical universe are not real, the only true reality being spiritual. The events which led Eddy to these and other highly counterintuitive conclusions will now be introduced.

The beginnings of a philosophical system

On 1 February 1866, a period in Eddy's life began in which she developed her own system of healing, initially with similarities to that of Phineas Quimby – a clockmaker turned hypnotist who developed a form of mental healing and who had briefly been her teacher¹ – but with a radical philosophical underpinning which went far beyond anything her mentor had considered. The date is that of a fall during very icy weather at Lynn, Massachusetts in which Eddy suffered a spinal injury, serious enough to have been reported in the local paper two days later². Three days later, she wrote afterwards, she had 'the healing Truth' dawn upon her; Christian Scientists refer to the date of her fall as the date of the birth of their religion³.

In the years following the fall Eddy began to charge students very considerable fees to learn her own healing technique (and additionally

1. Gottschalk 1973, p. 106; for Quimby's work see Dresser 1921.

2. Voorhees 2021, p. 57

3. Eddy 1891, p. 24

committing them to pay ten per cent of any income resulting from their knowledge), and by 1872 she had written the first 60 pages of a description of both her method and its philosophical foundations, which in 1875 was published as the first edition of her first book, entitled *Science and Health*. This self-published edition was 456 pages in length, and in its final form in 1910, after an astonishing 400-plus editions, attained 700 pages. It is in this form that the book has been published ever since that date.

Perhaps one of the reasons that there has been so little serious philosophical work on Eddy until very recently is that she was publicly hostile to the subject of philosophy as a whole, having declared it ‘ninety-nine parts of error to the one-hundredth Truth’⁴. On the subdiscipline of metaphysics she wrote that ‘Such miscalled metaphysical systems are reeds shaken by the wind. Compared with the inspired wisdom and infinite meaning of the Word of Truth, they are as moonbeams to the sun, or as the Stygian night is to the kindling dawn’⁵.

Gottschalk⁶ seems to have concluded on this basis that ‘inconsistencies within her writing make a reduction of it to closed metaphysical system impossible’. However, Steiger, in his 1946 PhD thesis, ‘A Philosophical Investigation of the Doctrine of Christian Science’, found much of interest. Since the later work of many eminent nineteenth-century German idealists was so at odds with that of their earlier publications, while not diminishing from their reputations as philosophers, Gottschalk does seem overly harsh in this respect.

Eddy herself referred to Christian Science as a ‘system’, and, despite her idiosyncratic use of the word ‘metaphysical’ (which for the purposes of Christian Science understandably has more prominent theological overtones than is normally the case in academic philosophy), did not misrepresent her work by describing it in this way. Christian Science is a religious metaphysical system, but it is nevertheless underpinned by a thoroughgoing idealism which goes much further even than Fichte. It is Eddy’s metaphysical daring in linking idealism with scientific method, and the consequences which logically follow from it, which I believe offer the opportunity for further research in this mistakenly neglected area of study.

4. Eddy 1887a, p. 21

5. Eddy 1887a, p. 22

6. 1973, p. 33

Science and Health

Science and Health was largely written between 1872 and 1874, towards the end of a nine-year period from 1866 when Eddy had been almost entirely occupied by metaphysical matters and their relation to Christian Science. The book, from Eddy's viewpoint, was at one and the same time a textbook of Christian Science and its 'evangel'⁷. Eddy's second longest work, *Miscellaneous Writings, 1883-1896*, she later referred to as good preparatory reading for students of Christian Science before undertaking the task of reading and understanding *Science and Health*. Although Eddy regarded the ideas expressed within *Science and Health* as revealed Truth, she nevertheless had to establish a quasi-technical vocabulary for communicating these ideas. Hand in hand with the development of this technical language, which gave new and precise meanings to terms borrowed from a variety of physical sciences, medicine, theology and philosophy, came the opportunity to develop these new ideas, as the terminology permitted both a more exact expression of her existing ideas and the possibility of setting forth entirely new concepts, which would have proved difficult in the immediately preceding years owing to their sheer novelty. As Eddy explained in *Science and Health* itself⁸: 'The inadequacy of material terms for metaphysical statements' was the cause of the principal impediment in communicating the ideas of Christian Science. 'Expressing metaphysical ideas as to make them comprehensible to any reader'⁹ would sometimes require hours of deliberation over a single word.

As Gottschalk¹⁰ untactfully explained in almost clinical detail, '*Science and Health* is not written in a linear-rational style, with one idea succeeding the other in orderly progression. The statements... do not necessarily have any logical sequence, and in many cases there is no particular reason why one sentence should be placed just where it is.'

Nevertheless, no less an authority than Mark Twain described Eddy, with whose work he was very familiar, as:

In several ways the most interesting woman who ever lived,
and the most extraordinary... She has launched a world

7. Eddy 1913, p. 113

8. Eddy 1910, p. 115

9. Eddy 1910, p. 115

10. 1973, p. 43

religion which now has 663 churches, and she charts a new one every four days. When we do not know a person – and when we do – we have to judge his [sic] size by the size of his [sic] achievements, as compared with the achievements of others in his [sic] special line of business – there is no other way. Measured by this standard, it is 1300 years since the world has produced anyone who could reach up to Mrs. Eddy's waistbelt.¹¹

Notwithstanding, he considered *Science and Health* 'Strange and frantic and incomprehensible and uninterpretable', descriptions which may have been influenced by tensions within his own family: his own daughter Clara Clemens not only joined the Christian Scientist Church, but ultimately wrote a book on the subject¹².

Thomas¹³ suggested that Eddy's ideas could have, at the very least, been influenced by the American transcendentalists, who had amongst their numbers many respected authors, such as Emerson and Thoreau, and that in Eddy's case, of particular importance was Bronson Alcott, the father of Louisa May Alcott (author of *Little Women*, and as a result the funder of her father's work). A further source for some of her central ideas both quoted and acknowledged in *Science and Health* from the 24th to the 33rd editions, is Vedanta philosophy. Ideas from the Upanishads indirectly asserting the unreality of both suffering and the material universe were employed¹⁴, though from approximately 1885 Eddy sought to emphasise the differences between Hinduism (and other Eastern religions) and Christian Science; *Science and Health* from the 34th edition onwards no longer contained either the quotes or any references to Eastern religions.

W.F. Evans (a Swedenborgian minister and healer who along with Eddy studied under Quimby and who was an already well-established author when Eddy launched her Christian Science) had written extensively on the action of the mind in relation to illness, and was well versed in both theology and metaphysical philosophy, making him aware of the potential links between 'mind-cures' and Hegelian and Fichtean idealism, as well as the philosophy within Hinduism

11. Twain 1907, pp. 102-103.

12. Clemens 1956

13. 1930

14. Farnsworth 1909, p. 5

and Buddhism. To what extent, if any, Evans' work influenced Eddy is hard to assess with any accuracy, but whatever the truth, Eddy was far more radical and her system of thought in many ways the opposite of Evans': he believed matter to be perfect, whereas Eddy denied its existence; Evans held desire to be the key to self-realisation, but Eddy considered the eradication of desire to be essential (Gill 1998, p. 313).

There are clearly areas of commonality between the American transcendentalists of mid-nineteenth-century New England and the ideas foundational to Eddy's Christian Science, developed a few decades later. American transcendentalism evolved from a merging of concepts from German romanticism and idealism of the years either side of 1800, albeit as interpreted by British authors. Alcott was initially very impressed with the first edition of *Science and Health* in 1875, seeing it as an important new development in the resistance against philosophical materialism. However, in 1878, after what would be his last meeting with Eddy, it was her sheer radicalism which unsettled him, and he later wrote that there 'is perhaps a touch of fanaticism, though of genial quality, interposed into her faith'¹⁵; given Eddy's extraordinary degree of financial success and considerable oeuvre of published work, he may well have been correct.

Emerson, originally perhaps the most radically idealist of the transcendentalists, had by the 1870s backtracked on the position he had previously expressed in *Nature*¹⁶. Eddy, therefore, was not only more extreme in her idealism, but also moving in the opposite direction to the by then ageing transcendentalists. It can be argued that she was more consistent than they had been, in that she accepted the logical consequences of idealism, rather than balking at the counterintuitive implications.

The content and structure of the text

This book demonstrates the following aspects of Eddy's thought:

1. There are two components to Eddy's metaphysics: the aprioristic and the empirical. Her application of what is arguably scientific method (although one may dispute the choice of her experimental data, which ignores cases in

15. Shepherd 1938, p. 489.

16. Emerson 1836, pp. 1-4

which ‘healings’ have not occurred) creates what might be termed ‘applied metaphysics’.

2. There is coherence in her thinking and a commitment to accept some highly counterintuitive consequences arising from it; this is particularly the hallmark of a philosopher.
3. Her claims and her method of arriving at them correspond to those of earlier and later academic philosophers.
4. Although her system of thought leads to objections that she may not be able to counter, this does not imply that no coherent philosophical argument is present. Many idealist philosophers can be refuted, and within general philosophy virtually all of the conclusions of the still-studied, highly respected Presocratic philosophers are no longer accepted without this affecting their status as philosophers.

The subsequent chapters are as follows.

Chapter 2 Christian Science and Eddy’s idealism

Distilled from the million-or-so words of Eddy’s writing, this chapter begins the summarising of her philosophical system, its context and its interconnections, and presents an outline of Eddy’s work, providing sufficient depth and breadth to indicate the possibility of reframing the conceptual core of her magnum opus, *Science and Health*, as idealist philosophy. I also briefly discuss the only two PhDs which appear ever to have been written regarding the philosophical basis of her work.

Chapter 3 Eddy from near and far

This chapter considers the contributions made to Eddy’s system of thought by Evans and Quimby and their ideas. Initially sharing a set of questions relating to mind, matter and gender, Eddy ultimately diverged from these and other major figures. Recent important biographical studies are also referred to, providing a counterbalancing element of twenty-first-century thought. After a detailed synopsis of its contents, I will establish a minimal representative subset, and then restructure and rephrase the text so as to reduce the redundancy (due to considerable repetition) and ambiguity (due to imprecise language) present in the original.

Chapter 4 Robert Peel and the conceptual bridge

The work of Robert Peel provides the conceptual bridge between Eddy's philosophical system and its application as a form of healing. A lifelong Christian Scientist himself, Peel could see both sides of this divide in his daily life. His three-volume biography of Eddy is by far the longest and most detailed of any written so far, and the many healings of which he had direct experience led him to pursue analytically the challenge Christian Science clearly presents to a conventional understanding of the physical sciences, such as physics, chemistry and biology.

Chapter 5 The philosophical analysis of Christian Science

A multiplicity of relevant general texts exist concerning idealism which are of obvious use in assisting with the identification of idealism in Mary Baker Eddy's writing. Narrowing the remit concerning these general texts on idealism is essential, as the field is far too large to conveniently survey and only certain types of idealism are helpful for this analysis.

In order to represent it clearly, this chapter contains a minimal subset of the 'propositions' at the heart of Eddy's system, and corollaries which follow from them, leading to an exhaustive comparison of each of the possible pairings of the elements from this subset, testing every possible pairing of propositions for consistency.

Chapter 6 Christian Science as a philosophical system

This chapter is a philosophical exploration of the restructured and rephrased expression of the ideas present in *Science and Health*. It demonstrates the radical idealism upon which the work is based, and identifies and makes explicit the subtly different forms of idealism which are present. Following on from the presentation of Eddy's system in a concise form, this chapter contains a higher-level analysis of her work, identifying and then focussing particularly on a number of possible problems which, if unresolved, could entirely demolish her intellectual edifice. In brief, these are:

1. Her occasional use of seemingly antithetical physicalist/materialist language and the concepts to which it relates;
2. Her use and understanding of the word 'everything'; and