1

A Philosophical Autobiography

ROBERT MERRIHEW ADAMS

My colleagues at Yale, generously organizing a conference in my honor, asked me to give an address at the banquet. I found it difficult to decide what to talk about. The idea came to me only the day before: when, if not on such an occasion, would it be appropriate for me to indulge in autobiographical reflection in public? Writing up my remarks in the present essay, I am rethinking as well as reconstructing them from the page of notes I had written down before the talk.

Is there a unity to my philosophical concerns? Their diversity made it hard to find a thematically unified title for the conference. To me, however, they seem to hang together; and one of my aims in narrating my life as a philosopher is to trace ways in which they have become integrated over the years. Still, I don't want to impose too complete a unity on them, either in narrative or in life. Each philosophical question demands attention in its own terms; and if one goes on learning, integration of one's views is a never-ending task.

I

I begin the story with my earliest memory of engaging in philosophical reasoning of any consequence. When I was fourteen or fifteen I became an idealist of a Berkeleyan sort. I had not heard of Berkeley, but I had recently been taught the modern, subjectivist view of colors, tastes, smells, and other so-called 'secondary qualities', which forms a starting-point for idealist argument in his *Three Dialogues*. I remember sitting on the lawn on a bright summer day, and wondering what a blade of grass could be like in itself. What could be its intrinsic qualities if the vivid green color and

the fresh grass smell were merely aspects of the way the grass affected my senses? The size and shape of the blade of grass were still supposed to be 'primary qualities', and real enough. But I was left with the question what it was that existed inside the space defined by those geometrical properties. What could it be like, in itself, for grass to exist in that space, rather than something else or nothing at all? I couldn't imagine what qualities could fill the space with reality if colors, tastes, and smells were ruled out as subjective.

Such questions led me to idealist thoughts. Should I really believe there is anything the grass is 'like' in itself? Maybe its reality is located where the vivid qualities are. Perhaps, that is, it exists only in my seeing, feeling, and smelling. I won't claim that I worked out a complete idealist theory. But I remember that I did ask myself why different people have similar perceptions (as I unskeptically assumed they do) if what we perceive has its reality in our personal perceptions. And I gave myself the same theological answer that Berkeley had given.

A year or so later, in reading, I encountered Berkeley's name, and the formula that 'to be is to be perceived'. I was ready to call myself a Berkeleyan. I wouldn't say exactly that about myself now. I suspect that Leibniz, in his panpsychist version of the ontological primacy of the mental or quasi-mental, may have been closer to the truth than Berkeley. But I continue to have broadly idealist views. I still doubt that any wholly unperceiving thing could exist as a thing in itself.

But that is not the main thread through my philosophical biography. A more organizing theme can be found in the reading I was doing when I finally met Berkeley's name and the words *esse est percipi*. It was in a book of theology by Paul Tillich. My later teenage years and my early twenties were a time of both deeper appropriation of Christian faith and intense wrestling with religious doubts and puzzlements. I was driven to theology, and eventually to philosophy, by a religious need to think through for myself questions about God and about Christianity. When it came time to choose my undergraduate major, I seriously considered history and classics as well as philosophy. I didn't think I would enjoy history or classics less; I chose philosophy because it seemed more important or more urgent. At a personal level it was what I needed to think about. As a matter of religious vocation also I had decided before going to college that I should become a minister; by the time I chose my major I had come to think it would be part

of my vocation to be a theologian. And it seemed to me that philosophy was the most important intellectual discipline for theology. I still hold that view about the relation of philosophy and theology, unfashionable as it may have become in theology.

II

Philosophically I was fortunate to enter Princeton University as an undergraduate in 1955, the year in which Gregory Vlastos and Carl Hempel arrived to play their central part in building the great philosophy department that Princeton has had for many decades now. The two philosophy courses I took in my first year were historical, but by the end of the year I had begun to be clued in to analytical philosophy. I bought A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*, and read it during the following summer. I was immensely impressed by it. When I first had to face a class as a teaching fellow, several years later at Cornell, I was surprised at how difficult it was to explain why I had ever thought the verifiability criterion of meaning plausible enough to be worth worrying about. But in the summer after my freshman year at Princeton, I was almost persuaded of the fundamental soundness of Ayer's version of logical empiricism. And for several years I saw myself as thinking about philosophy, including the philosophy of religion, in an empiricist framework.

Among several outstanding teachers at Princeton, the one who did the most to excite and deepen my interest in analytical philosophy was Hilary Putnam, then an assistant professor there. I think the best philosophy course I ever took was a course in 'Advanced Logic' that Putnam co-taught with Paul Benacerraf, then still a graduate student. Their lectures covered a lot of logical theory, concluding with a fairly full sketch of Gödel's proof of his famous incompleteness theorem, and a discussion of its implications. That was excellent, but even more important for me were the 'preceptorials' (discussion sections), which I had with Putnam. Each week we read and discussed one of the great papers in philosophical logic from the previous six decades or so, including: Russell, 'On Denoting'; Frege, 'On Sense and Reference' (on *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*); Tarski on truth; Carnap, 'Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology'; Quine, 'On What There Is' and 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'; and others. From my years at Princeton, and especially

from Putnam and Hempel, I retain a conception of analytical philosophy that owes more to its German than its British roots, and was shaped by interests in logic and philosophy of science.

At Princeton in the late 1950s all undergraduates wrote two junior essays that were term-long projects, and a senior thesis that was a year-long project. My junior essays were both historical, on Kant and Aristotle. Vlastos thought well enough of the Aristotle essay that he offered to advise me in the project if I wanted to develop it further as a senior thesis. I would have been wise to accept the offer. And I might have been even wiser to expand my essay on Kant's argument for the causal principle into a senior thesis. I think it was the most interesting thing I wrote as a student, graduate or undergraduate. I was essentially self-taught on Kant. I took on the project because I saw Kant as a philosopher I really needed to understand, and my introduction to him, in a Descartes to Kant course, had been by way of his *Prolegomena*, which has always seemed to me to leave out too much of what is most interesting and illuminating in the critical philosophy. I worked enormously hard on the argument about causality in Kant's first *Critique*, and came up with an interpretation similar to those that Peter Strawson and Jonathan Bennett were soon to publish, though of course much less fully developed than theirs.

For my senior thesis, however, my sense of my vocation led me to choose the topic of the use of language in prayer. The result was a disappointment to me, and I suspect to my advisers, Hugo Bedau and Sylvain Bromberger. It was an occasion for beginning to learn that in choosing a topic for philosophical work, the importance of the topic can matter less than the likelihood that one will have something to say that makes a difference to the discussion of the topic. It took me a long time to learn the lesson; and I fear I have remained subject to temptation in this area. Of course, it is also permanently difficult to discern what one will have something worth saying about.

III

The six years that followed my graduation from Princeton University in 1959 were devoted first to the study of theology for two years at Oxford and one year at Princeton Theological Seminary, and then to the practice of

ministry for three years as pastor of a small Presbyterian church in Montauk at the eastern tip of Long Island. During that whole time I continued to study philosophy as well as theology.

My theological program at Oxford was demanding, and I attended few classes in the philosophy faculty that were not about philosophy of religion. I went to all of J. L. Austin's 'informal instructions' in the last term he taught before his untimely death, and was awed by the performance, though I'm not sure how much philosophy there was to take away from it. I managed to go to hear Strawson and Ryle only once or twice each. I did philosophy of religion as a 'special subject', however, for my theology degree at Oxford. I went to all of Ian Ramsey's graduate classes in philosophy of religion. His approach to reconciling theology with logical empiricism was hopeless, but he was a hugely generous sponsor of stimulating and valuable discussion. And at Princeton Seminary I was fortunate to have a philosophy of religion seminar taught by John Hick, as I was at Oxford to attend Austin Farrer's lectures, for two terms, on philosophical topics in Thomas Aquinas' theology. I consider them two of the most outstanding philosophical theologians who have been at work during my lifetime, very different in their approaches; and it has been a privilege and an inspiration to know Hick over the years since then.

John Marsh, my tutor in philosophy of religion at Oxford, got me working on Anselm's so-called ontological argument for the existence of God. I noticed the modal form of the argument in Anselm's response to Gaunilo, and was intrigued by it, but at the time I couldn't find out enough about modal logic to do much with it. John Hick encouraged me to keep working on the argument, and pointed me to Charles Hartshorne's work on it, which contained the basics of the relevant modal logic; and I put in quite a bit of effort studying that during my years in Montauk.

IV

In 1965, roughly as I had planned, after three years in the pastorate, I became a student again, in the Ph.D. program in philosophy at Cornell University. The chair of the Cornell philosophy department at the time was Norman Malcolm, and his ordinary-language-based Wittgensteinianism was the dominant influence in it. In philosophical methodology, that influence did

not prevail over the more Carnapian formation I had received at Princeton. I did welcome the loosening of the grip of empiricism on analytical philosophy, but did not think it needed to take a Wittgensteinian form. What I appreciate most about my education at Cornell was the unremitting demand for clarity and rigor in thinking and writing. When I arrived at Cornell, with rather grandiose ideas about what I might accomplish and how quickly, I had hardly begun to realize how hard philosophy is. When I left three years later, I had a much better understanding of that most important philosophical lesson.

A main reason why I went to Cornell was that Nelson Pike was teaching philosophy of religion there. He was a great encouragement, both in the seriousness with which he took theological and metaphysical ideas, and in his insistence that they be treated with clarity and rigor. He was also a great adviser, supportive and accessible, wise about philosophical strategies, demanding good philosophizing but not agreement in views. I considered writing a dissertation about the relation between religion and ethics, which was really the subject that most interested me. A very good ethics course I took as an undergraduate at Princeton, from Douglas Arner, got me thinking about it, and I had thought a lot about it at Oxford. But I had written little or nothing about it, and had much less worked out about it than I had on the ontological argument. That led me to conclude that it would be wiser, with a view to finishing my degree in good time, to write on a modal form of the ontological argument. I did that, and I did indeed manage to leave Cornell with a practically finished dissertation after only three years there. Within a few years I had quarried the dissertation for one published article and a significant part of another. But while my dissertation was thoroughly competent and (I still believe) largely correct, I have never felt there was enough important news in it to warrant working the whole of it up for publication as a real book.

The most obviously important thing I got out of my work on the dissertation, besides the timely completion of a Ph.D., was a pretty good grounding in modal logic and metaphysical issues related to it. I was essentially self-taught in modal logic, as I had been at Princeton in Kant. I knew no one at Cornell who knew as much about modal logic as I did, except Arthur Fine, who had just arrived to teach philosophy of science; it was helpful to check my understanding of it with him. The closest I found to a usable textbook in modal logic was Arthur Prior's philosophically

admirable *Formal Logic*, with its difficult Polish notation; the textbook by Hughes and Cresswell was not quite out yet. But it was clear to me that the literature on the subject was growing rapidly and modal logic was opening up as a very exciting field. It would be 'where the action was' in the 1970s, and my dissertation work left me prepared to have a bit of the action.

Of possibly greater, though less obvious, significance for my philosophical biography was the largest positive conclusion to which I found myself tending in my reflections on the modal argument for theism. That argument never seemed to me likely to persuade anyone of the existence of God, because any doubts about its theistic conclusion so easily turn into doubts about its premises. But in reflecting more broadly on issues of necessary existence I found myself drawn to the view that in thinking about logic and mathematics we are tracing structures whose existence is as necessary as the truths of logic and mathematics. Thinking about what sort of being those structures could have, I was drawn further to the thought that they are structures of God's thinking. I drafted a chapter on the argument for God's existence that Leibniz had based on this thought. In the end I did not include it in the dissertation, perhaps for the good and sufficient reason that the dissertation was about a different argument; or perhaps I was not yet ready to go so far out on that metaphysical limb. A quarter of a century later I did include in my Leibniz book a chapter on the argument 'from the reality of eternal truths'; and the argument, and the sort of theistic Platonism it represents, figure prominently in work that engages me still.

V

In 1968, I left Cornell to take up my first full-time faculty position at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. My four years at Michigan were pivotal in my philosophical formation. I don't think that after only three years in graduate school I had fully become a professional philosopher. I think I had by the time Marilyn and I moved to UCLA in 1972. I'm not sure that six- and seven-year Ph.D. programs, now the de facto norm, are desirable; but we will have them as long as academic employers prefer fully formed professionals for entry-level jobs.

Michigan hired me primarily to teach the history of modern philosophy—specifically, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and that

teaching proved to be, philosophically, the most formative part of my experience at Michigan. Relative to my own interests and sense of vocation, it was also one of the more contingent turning-points in my philosophical biography. I had taken a lot of courses in the history of philosophy at Cornell, and certainly considered it one of the things I was prepared to teach, and interested in teaching. A seminar on Locke, Berkeley, and Hume that Jonathan Bennett taught as a visitor at Cornell had reawakened my interest in Berkeley; and my serious interest in Leibniz began in a seminar on him that Norman Malcolm taught. Malcolm was at his best on Leibniz; he really wanted to understand the great philosopher, and the material did not engage the intolerant rigidity that too often emerged when Wittgenstein was in view. But I had done even more work on ancient philosophy, and thought I was as ready to teach ancient as early modern. And of course my number one specialization, my dissertation field, was philosophy of religion.

Michigan already had a philosopher of religion, one of the leaders of the field, George Mavrodes. They were willing for me to spend half my teaching time in philosophy of religion, or any other field of philosophy in which I might be interested and competent. But what they really wanted me to teach was the history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy, and they were insistent that I should spend half my teaching time in that field. Finding the Michigan philosophy department very attractive, I took the job and committed myself to the teaching in early modern. I have never regretted it.

About half of the teaching I have done in my career as a whole, including a majority of my doctoral dissertation advising, has been in the history of modern philosophy. The field did not loom so large in my research plans at first. Almost all the writing that I did in it before the late 1980s began as lecture notes for teaching; but I eventually published a whole book on Leibniz.

It was quite specifically part of my job at Michigan to teach the one-semester survey course on early modern philosophy that was required of all undergraduate philosophy majors. I had very largely to invent the course for myself, as I had not taken any course that was based on the views I was coming to have of the structure of the history to be studied. Planning the course and preparing the lectures the first time I taught it was an enormous effort; I have never worked harder than I did that semester.

The work was also enormously rewarding, and a major part of my own education in philosophy. In the late 1960s, analytical philosophers who wanted to think about metaphysics were still struggling to figure out how to do it. I found that the great philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had engaged metaphysical questions quite directly, and had done so, in their best work, with the sort of clarity and rigor to which analytical philosophers aspired. They became my models for thinking about metaphysics and, in effect, my teachers in metaphysics.

I think that teaching the history of philosophy has also had more general effects on my conception of philosophy. The canonical figures in a survey of early modern philosophy were systematic philosophers. Their systematicity is one of the attractions that has kept them in our canon. We would like to be able to put the world together in our minds, and we are interested in ways of trying to do it. As Tyler Burge remarked to me years ago at UCLA, it is an attraction of teaching the history of philosophy that it offers the chance to expound and discuss a large philosophical system (or more than one of them) even if one has not yet worked out a system of one's own.

Systematicity is not just an aspiration. As one studies the systems of great philosophers in the receptive but critical frame of mind that is necessary for getting the most out of them, one experiments with them, pulling a string here to see what moves over there, so to speak. What happens to the system as a whole if this thesis is dropped, or that implausible or clearly outdated doctrine is revised in one or another way? One learns that some doctrines can survive credibly without the system, and the system without them, and that others are not so detachable. In the process one discovers not only the internal connectedness of the views of this or that philosopher, but the intrinsic systematicity of the subject-matter, the interrelatedness of the problems of philosophy.

I had been trained in an 'article culture' that thought of analytical philosophy as 'piecemeal philosophy', a social project like the natural sciences, in which we are not trying to build our own individual systems, but each trying to contribute a bit here and a bit there to the progress of a cooperative intellectual enterprise. That model has surely been salutary in important ways for the health of our discipline. And, clearly, since none of us can do everything at once, it is important to learn to discern topics and issues that can be at least provisionally excluded from any philosophical project one is working on. But philosophy also resists piecemeal treatment. Except

for the most straightforwardly empirical facts that figure in philosophical reasoning, philosophical theses tend to be fragments of actual or potential systems, and to look quite different in different systematic contexts. I think that is one of the reasons why the undergraduate courses that seemed to me most successful, in my teaching of philosophy, have generally been courses that focused on great books of at least moderately large scope.

I believe it is also salutary that serious work in the history of philosophy leads one to think about major philosophical issues, not just in one way, but from the diverse points of view that are represented in the history one studies. A good philosophical understanding of a philosopher's work is never uncritical. We need to explore objections to the work in order to put the philosophy through its paces and discern its implications and motivations. But the aim of the philosophical historian's critical examination is not to determine what is the true theory or the best point of view. It may be healthy to try to make such judgments for ourselves; but our endorsement of them, as distinct from the arguments we contrive for them, is not likely to be a particularly important part of our professional contribution to the discipline.

That is largely because the progress of the discipline is not to be found in such judgments. Few of the big questions of philosophy have been permanently settled. Few of the main theoretical positions have been conclusively determined to be right or wrong. Philosophy has been much more successful in exploring possible ways of thinking, giving us a clearer, deeper, and fuller understanding of them, than in generating agreement as to which of those ways of thinking accord best with reality. It is plausible to think that will continue to be the case, because it is plausible to suppose that the contents and relations of philosophical views and questions are more accessible to us intellectually than many of the facts that would make the views true or false as representations of reality.

This is not to say that we should not expect philosophy to help us deal with reality. Even if we do not have agreed answers to large issues of metaphysics and metaethics, a philosophical understanding of concepts and arguments related to those issues may help us think in clearer-headed and uncontroversially better ways about particular scientific and ethical questions. But I do not think that is the deepest reason for studying philosophy and its history. The realm that philosophy is likeliest to succeed in exploring, the realm of possible ways of thinking, is full of objects of great beauty. It is worth loving for its own sake.

It is hard to date my falling in love with philosophy. It probably began in my undergraduate years, as I found in the clarity and rigor of analytical philosophy's formulations and arguments the same sort of beauty I had learned in high school to see in mathematical proofs. That is of course one of the forms of the experience, and love, of beauty that are celebrated in the speech of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. In the theistic Platonist's view it is also a glimpse of the beauty of the divine mind. I began to study philosophy, no doubt, with the thought of using it to serve other interests of a religious sort. But I have come to think that the deepest religious significance of philosophy demands that it be loved and practiced for its own sake.

VI

I think of three further ways in which the four years in Ann Arbor set directions for my future philosophical work. Two of them I will discuss rather briefly; the third will open a longer discussion in the next section. (1) During my theological studies and my years of ministry in Montauk I had devoted considerable time to reading nineteenth- and twentieth-century religious thinkers, of a generally 'Continental' philosophical orientation; but I arrived at Michigan with no intention of working further on them professionally. Quite likely I never would have, had it not been for the influence of Jack Meiland, a senior colleague at Michigan. He persuaded me of the pedagogical value of teaching such material to undergraduates, and in my second term in Ann Arbor I gave un undergraduate seminar on four nineteenth- and twentieth-century Continental religious thinkers. I continued to teach this material throughout my career, and greatly enjoyed the way it engaged undergraduates' interests. At Michigan and UCLA I did not find much graduate student appetite for courses in this field; one of the things I enjoyed, much later, about my situation at Yale was the opportunity to teach seminars on Schleiermacher to groups composed of doctoral students in theology as well as undergraduates. This area has not been a main focus of my research, but over the years I have published about half a dozen essays on Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and Buber.

(2) One of the doctoral students I had the good fortune to advise at Michigan was William A. Polkowski. I learned a great deal from his thesis

research on 'The Possible Evidential Value of Religious Experience', and particularly from his use of Bayes' Theorem in the calculus of probabilities, which he had studied at Michigan with Arthur Burks. I became very interested in the relevance of Bayesian considerations to metaphysics and epistemology. Seeing the ineliminable place of 'prior' assignments of absolute and conditional probability in Bayesian reasoning helped to make clear to me that I should not any longer count myself as an empiricist about the justification of belief.

VII

During my first term in Ann Arbor I taught a topical survey of the philosophy of religion as an undergraduate lecture course. It was a pedagogical disaster, pitched way over the students' heads; but a lot of my later work grew out of it. In it I began to open up the topics in the relation between religion and ethics that I had prudently set aside at Cornell in order to write a dissertation I could finish quickly. One of these topics was the divine-command theory of the nature of moral obligation. My first published essay on that subject, 'A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness', was written at Michigan in response to an invitation obtained for me by my senior colleague Bill Frankena to contribute a paper to an anthology on religion and ethics. In my own view none of my contributions to philosophy is more significant than the work I have done, beginning with that essay, towards the development of a viable theistic metaethics.

The development of my own position on the subject has not exactly followed a direct path. I published a few further essays on divine-command theories, casting them in different lights. But they did not add up, in my own opinion, to a complete metaethics, because they presented only theories of obligation, or of right and wrong, and I was not ready to offer a theory of the good.

I had some thought that a theistic metaethical theory of the good might be sought in reflection about God's goodness and love, a subject which interested me also in relation to work I was doing on the problem of evil. Accordingly, during my first year at UCLA, in 1972–3, I began writing about the nature and ethical significance of love, both divine and human;

and I conceived the project of writing a book on the subject. That was my project for 1974–5, the first year that Marilyn and I took leave from UCLA, with the aid of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities. We spent the year in Oxford, and it was immensely fruitful for me. The reading I did there, and discussions I had, especially with Derek Parfit, laid major foundations for all the subsequent work I have done in ethical theory. I also drafted several chapters on love; but it was clear to me at the end of the year that they were not adding up to a book, and I was not ready to publish them. The only piece from the project that I published in the immediate aftermath of the leave was my article 'Motive Utilitarianism'. In relation to my larger project, it was originally conceived only as a prolegomenon, defending the independent significance of the ethics of attitudes, or more broadly of 'agent ethics', as distinct from the ethics of actions. I went on for years teaching classes and seminars on the ethics of love, but it took further catalysts to bring my ideas on the subject into a synthesis (a larger synthesis) that I found satisfying.

Two catalysts stand out in my memory. One was an invitation to give the Wilde Lectures on Natural Religion in Oxford. I accepted, with the plan of giving them on the relation between religion and ethics, committing myself to something more like a book on the subject. The other catalyst was supplied in a discussion I had, late at night at a conference during the 1980s, with Bill Alston and Al Plantinga, in which they pressed on me the question why I should not think that the goodness of things is to be understood in terms of resemblance to God. I don't remember with confidence how the discussion started, but I think it was connected with thinking Bill had been doing on the relation between Platonic metaethics and theistic metaethics. As I planned my Wilde Lectures I became more and more interested in a theistic Platonism in which God occupies something of the role that the form of the Good (or of Beauty) occupies in Plato's 'middle dialogues', and more and more convinced of the centrality of the idea of intrinsic excellence, both for ethical theory and for theology.

The Wilde Lectures that I gave in Oxford in the spring of 1989 started with those ideas, and developed a metaethical view that gives the idea of excellence priority in relation to the idea of obligation. I worked on the lectures for practically ten years more (alongside other projects) before I finally had a book on the subject. Our move to Yale in 1993 provided a helpful situation for this work, one in which I had occasion to teach more

in ethical theory than I had before. It was also helpful that Yale's lively interdisciplinary culture put me in conversation about ethics with students and colleagues in theology and religious studies, political theory, and law, as well as philosophy. When *Finite and Infinite Goods* came out in 1999, the metaethical theory presented in it also provided a context in which (as I had realized only in 1997) much of the work I had been doing on the ethics of love could form part of a coherent whole. Not that it completed the development of my views in agent ethics. I left the nature of virtue somewhat to the side as a topic in that book, but have focused on it more recently, writing *A Theory of Virtue*, published in 2006.

VIII

One main context for my thinking about the relation between religion and ethics has been the Society of Christian Philosophers, which a number of us formed in 1978 with a view to helping and encouraging each other to integrate our Christian faith and our philosophical vocation. It has certainly helped and encouraged me to do that. Personal integration is a difficult business in any case, and the integration of personal identity as a religious believer and as a philosopher is particularly delicate. Not that I have ever seen philosophy and religious belief as inherently opposed. On the contrary, in common with major traditions in the world's most developed religions, I believe that religious thought, and even spiritual meditation, can advantageously take a philosophical form. But even where faith and philosophy are married, each has its own integrity, and there will be tensions. It requires some courage for the believer to acquire the experience that teaches the limits of what philosophy can do either for or to religion. And it is a potentially crippling temptation for religious philosophers to adopt a primarily defensive and protective stance in relation to religious doctrines, where what is really needed is creative and imaginative thinking about religious questions.

I do not believe in drawing a sharp line between philosophy and theology. Especially in ethics I think one ought to bring one's whole self to one's thinking. What I have written in moral philosophy since the early 1980s has certainly been influenced by Christian beliefs and sources, and has sometimes touched quite explicitly on theological themes and issues. At the

same time I have usually written for a general philosophical audience. In that context I have not wished to presuppose commitment to Christianity, and I hope that Christian ideas may shed light on ethical views that will commend themselves also to people who are not Christians.

Philosophy of religion is among the areas that have benefited most from the tremendous development and broadening of analytical philosophy in the last half century. When I began to study the subject in the 1950s, I could easily carry in my hands the small pile of volumes containing practically all that had then been written in contemporary analytical philosophy about religious issues. On the whole it was not a very satisfying library. Today there is a large analytical literature in the philosophy of religion, of the sort that I wanted to read, and rarely found, in my student years. I am pleased to have been able to contribute something to that development.

IX

More broadly, I am proud of the contributions of my generation in analytical philosophy. To find a fit comparison for the flowering of rigorous philosophizing, in English, on an ever-widening range of topics and ideas, in a context of mutually illuminating discussion, in the last 100 and especially the last fifty years or so, one might have to go back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For me the most exciting philosophical development in my adult lifetime was the explosion of interest and activity in the 1970s connected with the so-called 'new theory of reference' (or *direct* reference) and possible world semantics for modal logic. Those developments began, of course, in logic and philosophy of language, but I was most interested in possibilities they opened up for metaphysics. The idea they generated that has stayed with me the longest (and eventually became central for my treatment of metaethics too) is that of ways of separating questions about the natures of things from questions of meaning.

I began working in this area during my last year or so at Michigan, where engagement with David Lewis's paper on 'Anselm and Actuality' led to my writing a first draft of my paper on 'Theories of Actuality'. After we moved to UCLA, the philosophical atmosphere there, and especially discussions with David Kaplan, were a great stimulus to further work on modal metaphysics and related issues about identity. I continued writing in

the area, and expected during our second leave from UCLA, in 1979 and 1980, to produce a book of which a major part would develop my views on these subjects.

Once again I found that I was not ready to write a projected book. That was largely due to the fact that the project was not simply to write a book about modal metaphysics, but to solve the theological problem of evil, using ideas about identity and its modality as a central part of the machinery for doing so. During the 1970s, I had published a couple of papers based on the Leibnizian thought that if evil had never existed, you and I would never have existed either, but, at most, as other individuals similar to us. I initially saw that idea as offering a promising framework for theodicy, but during 1979 and 1980 I was forced to conclude that it would not solve enough of the problem. The only thing I published in the project area as a result of that leave was my paper on 'Actualism and Thisness'.

I still think the Leibnizian idea about the connection between evils and our identity is relevant for thinking (and feeling) about the problem of evil. And I have recently published another, somewhat chastened and (I hope) better focused paper on that subject. But I doubt that I will publish a book on the problem of evil. Marilyn McCord Adams, my wife, has provided a much better framework for thinking about the problem. I believe her book, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, is the deepest and most satisfying treatment of this inherently unsatisfying subject that we are likely to have any time soon.

About ten years ago, after a number of years of focusing on other areas, I began to work again on analytical metaphysics, this time with a primary focus on ontology, and no special connection to the problem of evil. When I wrote about actuality in the 1970s, I intended to go on to write also about existence, which I regarded, and still regard, as a distinct topic from that of actuality. I have been writing about existence, and related issues about substance; and I related them to ideas about God as 'being itself', in a series of four Gifford Lectures on 'God and Being' that I gave at the University of St Andrews in 1999.

The thought that connected the topics of God and being in my Gifford Lectures connects my current interests in ontology also with my theistic Platonist metaethics. Very much as I think of the goodness of other things as (very imperfect) imitation of God, theistic Platonists in the medieval and early modern periods tended to think that all the fundamental attributes

of finite things are imperfect imitations of attributes of God. That idea is the basis of the conception of God as *ens perfectissimum* or *ens realissimum* in the writings of Leibniz and Kant, for example. I have been thinking and writing about the prospects for that way of conceiving the relation between God and the structure of finite things. I hope to produce a book of metaphysics, but it remains to be seen just what form it may take.

X

I conclude this essay with the same summary of my philosophical convictions that concluded my autobiographical remarks at the conference at Yale. I believe that there is a metaphysically significant difference between appearance and reality; that there is a capital '*R*' Reality that grounds everything that appears; that it is mental; that it is good; and that doing philosophy can be a way of loving it.