The Real God

1. Two God’s-eye views

In Christian understanding God and human beings are likened to one another – in certain respects. The previous three chapters have tried to elucidate some of the respects in which the likeness is a sound one and some in which it is misleading. In the previous chapter I argued that believers do not regard God as a moral agent or person, or indeed any other kind of causal force. But then how is God capable of love? The question is misleading. God is not capable of love. But this is not because he is incapable of it. Rather, God is love, as opposed to an agent performing loving acts.¹ But what does it mean to say that this God of love itself exists independently of human beings and the world (as we normally take God to do), that, as I have said, God is a kind of reality, an ‘existential’ reality? Here I have space only for the sketch of an answer, but the reader has a right to know where I am coming from.²

Philosophers often talk of and aspire to a ‘God’s-eye view’ of the world. They mean a perspective on the world that is unconditioned by embodiment, by individual or social history, or by spatial and temporal limitations. Much of this book is deeply critical of that aspiration in the work of philosophers of religion. Despite this, there is another sort of God’s-eye view that I am sympathetic to. The conventional philosophical understanding of the God’s-eye view is one operating in the impersonal mode of thought outlined in Chapter 4. That view is one affording a description of reality that is impersonal, a matter of expertise, that does not require authenticity and that endorses the formal universalisability of judgements. Modern materialism’s ‘completed science’ is an example of that description. Certain forms of theistic metaphysics – for example, that which might seek support from the arguments
of ‘intelligent design’ – while not detailed descriptions of the world as a whole, are nevertheless world pictures of a very general sort in the impersonal mode. Not everything in the category of the impersonal falls in these camps though. As I said in Chapter 4 mathematics and black-letter law are other realities that satisfy its defining tenets.

In contrast, there is an understanding of the God’s-eye view that is existential in the Chapter 4 sense: its manner of thought is non-objectifying, is not subject to expertise, requires personal authenticity and does not endorse the formal universalisability of judgements (though there may be substantive universalisability of some judgements). Sometimes it is called a view of the world sub specie aeternitatis, or a view of the world from the perspective of eternity. What we see from the impersonal perspective of the first God’s-eye view is the world understood in terms of objectifying factual description. What we see from the God’s-eye perspective of eternity is the world understood as possessing a very different kind of significance. For example, the impersonal perspective sees the fact that we die as a purely biological phenomenon about which we might ask certain sorts of causal questions: what causes death and how might we prolong life, and so on? The existential perspective sees death as a phenomenon raising questions about the meaning of our lives: what sort of human being have I been, have I wasted my life, how can I spend what remains of it in a worthy way, and so on? The impersonal perspective understands the magnitude and contingency of the world at large as requiring another set of causal explanatory questions, perhaps very general cosmological or metaphysical theses. The eternal perspective understands them through such responses as awe, wonder, a dizzying sense of our own contingency, a requirement for gratitude and so on. The existential significance is that revealed from the perspective of a standpoint – eternity – that is not subject to these ‘Big Facts’ (as they are sometimes called). We perish in the world (the impersonal, objectifying physical world) but the significance of our lives does not; that each human life is sacred is not a truth that varies with time or tide, or that is subject to fate. Our careers, aspirations and hopes prosper or fail and ultimately are extinguished in the world, but in eternity the moral significance of an act of kindness or of cruelty is never diminished or affected (‘it lives for ever’, as we sometimes say). Our bodies become dust, our lives are forgotten, in the world, which continually passes on to new things, but in eternity no life is forgotten or un-memorialised. The world is the possession of big-shots, tyrants and tycoons, but eternity the home of the humble and meek. The world is prisoner to lies, eternity the home of truth itself where all our