

# Introduction

Everyone does metaphysics. Whenever we endeavor to understand the nature of reality we are doing metaphysics. Such an enterprise is not an abstract mind game—to the contrary, nothing could be more mundane, more practical than our operational understanding of reality. Even so, no operational understanding of reality is simply pragmatic; every time we plan or perform any activity in what we take to be a realistic manner, we do so by putting our confidence in a set of deeply held beliefs about the nature of reality itself.

As integral with realistic action as our metaphysical beliefs are, most of the time we do not explicitly think about metaphysics but simply accept the reality outlook that is assumed by our way of life. This is because—as sociologists ably point out—our deepest belief assumptions about reality are more like organic operational reflexes arising from the actual human communities in which we live than they are like clear and timeless conceptual propositions. Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that if we try to think clearly about what we really believe to be real, what often comes to the surface is how contextually plastic and defiantly impervious to first order explanation our metaphysical convictions actually are. Metaphysics is a notorious intellectual minefield.

As organically resistant to mechanical analysis as lived metaphysics no doubt is, even so, there are problems with simply accepting the validity of the reality assumptions that we have grown up with. The first problem concerns power. Because we are social beings, we inherit our operational assumptions about reality from the common practices, ideas, and values assumed by those around us. That is, the norms governing our interpersonal and cultural environment, and the political, legal, and economic norms that shape our public environment, define and limit our assumed field of realistic action. These operational norms and the assumptions about the nature of reality that go with them are at least partly shaped by the vested power interests of those who govern us. Thus shared reality

beliefs are intimately enmeshed in the necessary power structures, with all their vested interests, in which we live. This is by no means an inherently bad thing, yet even so it may well be that those power structures are as interested in promoting zones of illusion that hide oppression within our assumed understanding of reality as they are in facilitating the true flourishing, freedom, and dignity of our lives. Those who never question the realities with which they are presented are easily controlled by those who set up the power structures and wield influence in any given society. But secondly, if one believes that reality itself is meaningful and reasonable in a way that is “bigger” than the humanly constructed and often incoherent layers of our socio-cultural evolution, then incoherence and illusion are real problems. Now I know that many highly educated people today no longer believe that reality itself is meaningful or that some divine Reason above human minds upholds reality and makes it intelligible. To these people, metaphysical incoherence is not, in itself, a problem. This stance does not think that Meaning and Reason are there *in Reality*; rather it holds that all meaning and reasoning and all reality beliefs are human constructions and functions of use and power, rather than defensible claims concerning how things ultimately really are. However, if one is philosophical in the mainstream classical sense of that word, then philosophy is about the ardent pursuit of wisdom, and wisdom is a type of intellectual and practical harmony with the divine order, moral goodness, and innate purpose that generates and upholds the cosmos. So a philosopher, in this old and original sense of the word, cannot simply live with metaphysical incoherence as if there is no real meaning about reality to be known. Likewise, a religious person—certainly within the mainstream Christian traditions of the West—equally believes that reality is the creation of divine Reason (Christ the *Logos*), such that wrong metaphysical beliefs entail error, and life grounded in error falls short of truth in serious ways. The Christian maintains that the passive acceptance of culturally constructed errors regarding reality will result in false valuations, false loyalties, and futile and destructive lifestyles. Such error results in idolatrous impiety in the living of one’s life. So to philosophical and religious people, metaphysical incoherence, and treating metaphysics simply as an entirely natural function of the vested power structures and operational norms of any society, cannot be mildly accepted.

Taking the traditional understanding of philosophy and religion seriously, this book is an essay on Christian metaphysics. That is, this book is concerned with the Christian understanding of reality and with

the type of lived action compatible with the Christian vision of reality. Specifically, the central idea put forward in this book is that Christian Platonism is right about the nature of reality. This, I fully appreciate, is a very big claim. Not only is it big (who is entitled to say what reality is really like?) it is also, to put it politely, amazingly audacious. For by various scholarly estimates, Christian Platonism has been deemed redundant in mainstream Western intellectual circles for between eight hundred and two hundred years. However, in this book I shall argue that the Christian Platonist outlook on the nature of reality is simply the Christian outlook, so whether or not such an outlook is considered obsolete, Christians who want their thinking about reality to be integral with their beliefs and their actions should take it seriously.

Christian Platonism holds that the unseen God really is the present source and ongoing ground of all created reality. Further, Christian Platonism holds that the qualities of beauty, goodness, and truth, wherever they are in some measure discovered, are divine revelations of *real* meanings that give the world in which we live its value and purpose. That is, by modern functionally materialist and methodologically atheist standards, such a Christian view of reality is entirely laughable (magical, unrealistic). Yet such an outlook cannot be disentangled from mainstream Christian faith, and such an outlook is not obsolete because there are still many Western Christians who believe in the truth of the claims about God and reality that I have described above, whether or not they have even heard of Christian Platonism.

Yet—and this is the interesting thing—we modern Western people typically “believe in” discretely “religious” understandings of reality in a very strange way. For even if a doctrine is not obsolete as an article of faith, it can be functionally obsolete in terms of how we see and function within “the real world” of secular modernity. We have an astonishing capacity to happily believe Christian doctrines that are strikingly incompatible with the very materialistic, value neutral, and pragmatic realism that we largely accept as valid in our work-a-day lives. The conventions of the secular world have isolated our specifically religious beliefs such that they are now largely understood to be private convictions, held discrete from “the real world” of factual and public affairs. To amplify this, in ordinary speech “the real world” refers to quantifiable facts, amoral financial and political necessities, and the sheer instrumental power of spiritually indifferent techniques of mastery over nature. So the vision of reality that is presupposed in mainstream Christian doctrine is, for all

practical purposes, held discretely outside of “the real world” of today’s techno-consumer reality. But . . . what if it is really the *real* world that Christian doctrine is concerned with, and what if the value-neutral mechanical determinism of secular reality is in fact something of a bizarre fantasy that is not, after all, faithful to reality?

Before seeking to go further we must note that, in practice, posing a simple binary question such as, “either materialistic consumerism is real or Christian Platonism is real” does not help us much. For experience tells us that our usual readings of reality can contain different levels of meaning, and there is a complex relationship between what we collectively believe about the nature of reality and the human environments civilizations construct. So the “real world” of secular modernity is governed by the shared beliefs and practices of our day, and this is the actual world in which we live, whether we have reason to believe it fully accounts for the *real* world or not. Yet, if we happen to inherit a defective cultural vision of reality then three things follow. Firstly, there will be something hollow, something wrong about the world we inhabit. Perhaps the relentless rat race of working and spending, tied to merely tangible or financial “reality” is not a true reflection of reality. Perhaps the callous “realism” of how power often works in the workplace is not quite right, even if we think it is inevitable. Perhaps pop materialism has a hollowness to it that is exposed and challenged by something as simple as the smile of a child. Secondly, even if there really is “something wrong” with our human world, reality is still there, and still upholds us, even when we are deluded in our beliefs about reality, and even when many of the seemingly necessary activities we spend our lives doing are, in reality, exercises in futility. For however functionally materialist our actions and beliefs are and however spiritually futile our ambitions and aspirations in the world may be, the child still smiles, the beauty of nature still amazes us, and a deep qualitative vitality still reaches us. In such experiences of intrinsically meaningful reality a window in our soul opens up onto a larger world than mere facts and manipulative power and a breeze from the True Outside stirs our hair and enlivens our being with joy, however unable we might be to give that divine breath in real life a name. Thirdly, reality has its way of emerging even if we would rather it did not. A bit like a collective Freudian suppression, when the conscious social reality we live in is actually delusional, reality still pops up in odd, often distorted, sometimes profoundly challenging ways. If real reality is locked out from our understanding of “the real world,” reality then bites us from

behind in our daydreams and nightmares, in our fantasies and bored despair, in moments of extremity and disorientation, in experiences of startling delight, or in revelations of beauty, goodness, and truth, which the so called “real world” has no words for.

If thinkers like G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis are right, Reality has never left us. Reality is still there even when our day-to-day “real world” minds have largely turned from the divinely situated fount of meaning and purpose in the world. Our work-a-day gaze has shifted from the heavens to the earth, and from divine meaning to human power. We are like Nebuchadnezzar who lives like an ox and will not turn his eyes to heaven. This is the modern world. Yet the heavens and Reality are still there. All we need do is return to that which has never left us. But *can* the ox of modernity now turn its eyes to that which stands above human knowledge and power, and in so doing have its civilizational sanity restored?

Could it really happen? Could we imagine and enact another world from within the iron cage of modern bureaucratic efficiency? Could we now live without the celebration of enticing superficiality and the continuous priming of our acquisitive desires that is consumerism? Could we now reign in the blindly pragmatic realism of global financial and military power? To seek to imagine reality otherwise than how it is presently governed is to seek to exercise what the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls the prophetic imagination. And, of course, it is definitionally *unrealistic* to dream of another human world from *within* any powerful and pervasive system of constructed human reality. So could it be done? Could we indeed imagine and enact a world more faithful to the true world to come than the world governed by “oh so fallen” normalities? But this, surely, is what it means for the church to seek to live in the kingdom of heaven now, to live before the eschaton as a sign of the eschaton. If we are too comfortable in “the real world,” too defined by and relevant to the realism of our age, have we lost our eschatological vision?

But here another objection springs to mind. For while there may well be good gospel reasons for Christians to imagine and enact a counter reality to the “real world” of modern secular consumerism, is it yet simply wrong headed to dream of the kingdom of heaven in Christian Platonist terms? For surely such terms are defined by a philosophical and theological outlook that has long been obsolete and that only really had world forming power in a very different time and context to our own.

Given this concern, I should say a word about the notion of *returning* to reality. In this book I seek to re-habilitate a way of thinking about reality that was powerfully advocated by some of the best and wisest minds in classical, patristic, and medieval times, but which has largely fallen out of favor with the fashions of intellectual credibility in modern times. So I will indeed be advocating that we recover significant features of a pre-modern understanding of reality. Immediately I hear someone cry “ah, nostalgia!” as if it is my intention (*per impossibile*) to take us back to the life-world of the Middle Ages. This is *not* my intention. Fundamental to the Christian Platonist understanding of reality is that God, the transcendent source of the qualitative richness of the reality we inhabit, is beyond our rational capture. This means that all human attempts to understand God and to build a human world that has some analogical relation to reality, are situated in their own particular contexts, can never attain perfection, are always richly laced with historically specific and explicitly human creative motifs, and cannot be the same. To seek to live faithfully to reality now will not be a copy of previous attempts to do that by patristic and medieval thinkers and communities. There is something fundamentally new about each generation’s attempt to live in reality and for this reason the human worlds constructed within history are always moving feasts. But while no human world is the kingdom of heaven realized on earth, each attempt to build a world can be a partnership between perennial truths—if meaning is not merely a socio-biological effervescence—and the distinctive interpretations of that meaning by the great thinkers, artists, activists, power holders, and prophetic outsiders of any given place and time. If we are to be Christian Platonists *today*, and if we are to imagine and seek to enact the human world that best reflects the truths we hold to, then it will be a world that has things in common with all good worlds, but it will be distinctively *our* world and not the world of another time or place.

Another matter that must be brought up at the outset concerns the belief that it is terribly hubristic to make any strong claim about the true nature and meaning of what reality really is. If this book is claiming that Christian Platonism is, simply, right about reality, this must sound as a proclamation of preposterous hubris that way oversteps the bounds of what it is possible for any serious philosophical outlook to demonstrate.

This is a very interesting sort of objection for a number of reasons. Firstly, the modern understanding of small “r” realism (deeply tied to modern Liberalism) does not claim to be an understanding of the true

meaning of reality, it only claims to be an understanding of how one can use the tangible and immediately apparent world for whatever meaning or purpose each individual so chooses. But this is not as humble a claim as it might at first appear to be. In fact, there are two great prides bubbling away under such a claim. Firstly, this supposedly small “r” realism is often functionally a big “R” Realism because a pragmatic understanding of reality tends easily to presuppose that all meanings are merely subjective human projections onto a meaningless reality. That is, modern “Realism” really holds that reality (really) has *no* meaning. This is actually a very big, and very hard to defend “ultimate meaning” claim, yet this nihilistic orthodoxy is terribly offended by the idea that people might be so backward and unrealistic as to believe that reality has a meaning that transcends any human evaluation. Secondly, this metaphysical nihilism (often cloaked as pragmatic realism) is grounded in a very strong commitment to a particular outlook on the nature of human knowledge that is entirely anthropocentric. Modern philosophers will only believe something to be true if it is “smaller” than our minds, if it fits within what we can, at least in principle, master with our knowledge. Valid knowledge is only that which can be demonstrated in purely rational and empirical terms. This outlook assumes that when it comes to knowledge and meaning, we are at the top of the tree, and whatever we cannot see when we look down does not exist (like the ox Nebuchadnezzar, we never look above ourselves for knowledge and meaning).

Both of these proud stances are impossible for the Christian to believe, for it is basic to our faith that we are not the self-generating pinnacle of knowledge and meaning, but that only Meaning (Christ, the *Logos* of God) is primarily real, albeit beyond our capacity to master. So this means that Christian Platonism can be entirely frank about not being able to bottle meaning and reality in the terms to which contained human knowledge is adequate (so this position *cannot* be proud). Yet the Christian Platonist can still discover some analogical<sup>1</sup> understanding of

1. Very briefly, analogical knowledge is not the knowledge of direct correspondence, and yet it is real knowledge all the same. This idea comes from Thomas Aquinas who makes a distinction between using a word like “father” in a direct manner (referring to a male biological progenitor) and speaking of God as “our Father.” As with all analogies, the analogy of God as our Father is not *literally* valid—God is Spirit, neither male nor female, and God is not our biological progenitor—and yet as a divinely revealed truth, this analogy gives us a knowledge of realities that are *more* primary than the knowledge of immediate tangible perception. Thus God is our Father more perfectly than any tangible biological father, for biological fathers derive the essence of

the real meaning that is beyond merely human origin, something that no metaphysical nihilist committed to only believing what can be decisively demonstrated within the terms of human knowledge (precious little, by the way) would ever countenance. So it cannot be helped; Christian Platonism will claim *in some manner* to know truths about real meaning and this will offend the qualitatively nihilistic Realism of our day; but who is being proud and who is being deluded is a matter for serious debate.

One final comment: this book is firstly written with a Christian readership in mind. This is because Christians—so I believe—are already committed to the kind of metaphysics I am advocating. Indeed, I hope that Christians will find this book exciting to access, even though we live in an intellectual milieu that is remarkably averse to the type of metaphysical perspective I am advocating. Yet even though it has a predominantly Christian readership in mind, this book is making claims about reality. Thus, because I am making metaphysical claims that I believe to be true, this book does not have a restrictedly Christian or even religious audience in mind. So there is a complex texture involved in writing about the truth of reality in a manner that is firmly situated within one specific religio-philosophical tradition (and how else can any ultimate claim to metaphysical truth be made?), which claims to be valid and defensible to all comers, but which also expressly appreciates that no propositional formulation does the most ordinary experience of reality full justice. To write clearly while carefully respecting this complexity of texture is not easy to do; and if at times the road is difficult, this may well be because things that are genuinely complex can only be simplified so far.

### A Brief Summary of the Argument

Part One aims to be as accessible and clear as possible. Here the basic ideas of Christian Platonism are introduced without any reference to the likes of Augustine or Aquinas, and with little reference to the period of Western

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their father nature from the creative and providing nature of God. In Thomas' Christian vision of reality God is the grounds of all that is, so the spiritual is more basic than the material, though this in no manner demotes the material but rather exalts it. Plato too shares this outlook of the priority of the spiritual over the material. To Plato eternal intelligible realities inform all material bodies and so all material bodies gesture beyond their temporality and contingency to the unchanging essences that define their distinctive natures within their concrete, changing, and particular existence. In this sense, one could say that the material is an analogy of the spiritual and that the knowledge of divine things is more primary than the knowledge of immediate sensations.



history (some centuries ago) when the metaphysics of Christian Platonism was more or less assumed to be valid. Part One mainly draws on my daughter Emma and on C. S. Lewis and Tolkien to unpack what it is I mean when I talk about the vision of reality that arises from Christian Platonism.

Chapter 1 points out that the long traditions of Western metaphysics are divided into basically two camps. On the one hand, there are metaphysical traditions that assume that the only reality we can reasonably speak of is apparent reality. One might call this outlook the metaphysics of “what you see is what you get.” This is really the only form of the long tradition of Western metaphysics to survive in modern philosophy. The other type of metaphysics maintains that there is a strongly derivative relationship between the world that appears to us in our perceptions and the transcendent reality that goes beyond what we are able to directly perceive. Here the real is always seen in some measure *through* the apparent, but the apparent is never adequate to the task of fully containing and defining the real. To this outlook intangible qualities are more primary than tangible quantities, timeless truths are more basic than any temporal expression of truth, and true meaning, which is always of divine origin, is reflected partially in the human mind rather than generated there. To this outlook there is more to reality than simply what meets the eye. Here reality exceeds that which can be discretely quantified, mathematically modeled, or logically demonstrated.

Chapter 1 also notes that this second outlook on metaphysics is the most natural and obvious outlook of these two stances, even though the educated realism of our modern times tends to assume that the real is exclusively a function of the quantifiably apparent and the mechanistically necessary. Thus we live in times where a great deal that *is* immediately obvious (such as the radiance of a child’s smile) is often strangely held to be separate from the realm of factual and pragmatic reality. We often live in a context where there is a powerful disjunction between our ordinary experience of reality and the outlook of what might be called “scientific realism.” For example, when a person is standing in front of us we do not actually treat them as if they are just a gene machine constructed out of so many grams of carbon-based organic matter. In real life it is *obvious* to us that there is more to being a person than simply what is quantifiably apparent and mechanistically determinate. Further, as any child knows, the world itself is apprehended as full of meaning and value. Yet meaning and value are not considered to be real features of nature by the quasi-scientific realism of our day. Could it be, this chapter wonders, that

modern pragmatic realism is an abstract and unrealistic outlook on reality and that the outlook of a child is both more natural and more realistic?

Chapter 2 shows that Christian Platonism is not a distant academic curiosity unknown to ordinary modern people. In fact, via the rich fantasy stories of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, twentieth-century Westerners have a very good idea of what the basic metaphysical shape of Christian Platonism is. So this chapter seeks to make explicit what most readers of Lewis and Tolkien already know about Christian Platonism.

The bridge from Part One to Part Two notes that contrary to the imaginative visions of Lewis and Tolkien, modern philosophy and theology almost invariably maintains that Christian Platonism is obsolete, impossible, and corrupting. Part Two, then, looks to address these concerns in order to see if they are well founded or not. Part Two contains most of the argument and intellectual history of this book.

Chapter 3 looks more closely at why a distinctly modern outlook finds Christian Platonism incredible. The case is made that it is the very mythos of modernity that is the real grounds of objection against a contemporary understanding of reality being framed in Christian Platonist terms.<sup>2</sup> For it is indeed correct that the mythos of modernity is in most regards incompatible with the mythos of Christian Platonism. But this modern mythos is itself problematized in this chapter, and this makes it possible to consider Christian Platonism as a serious alternative to modern approaches (and modern anti-approaches) to metaphysics.

Chapter 4 briefly identifies where we can see some clearly Platonic ideas expressed in the New Testament. Chapter 5 then looks at the usual range of modern *theological* objections to Christian Platonism. The case is made that because modern theology operates within the mythos of modernity it is committed to willful mis-readings of Christian Platonism; these mis-readings are unjustified in the light of the actual history of what Christian Platonism stands for and how it evolved within early, patristic, and medieval Christianity.

Chapter 6 considers more closely what Christian Platonism entails intellectually, and at how the downfall of Christian Platonism actually happened in Western intellectual history. Five stages of the demise of Christian Platonism are outlined: Abelard's attack on naïve medieval realism; the trajectory towards the parting of faith and reason dating from 1277; the innovations of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham; the

2. "Mythos" refers to the collectively imagined stories that orientate meaning within any given cultural life form.

invention of “pure nature” in the sixteenth century; and—finally—the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. The long passage away from the Christian Platonist vision of reality needs to be well understood, for this is the genealogy of the rise of the modern vision of reality; and modernity—so I argue—starts rising from Abelard on and is in profound continuity with a particular stream of medieval metaphysical and epistemological innovation. If these cumulative innovations are to be challenged they must be well understood.

Bearing the expansive history of the medieval genealogy of modernity in mind, chapter 7 focused down on the last stage of the fall of Christian Platonism—the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. I draw on Thomas Kuhn, Michel Henry, and Lloyd Gerson to analyze and critique what really happened in the scientific revolution, and my findings are that this revolution was never philosophically justifiable in the terms of the distinctly modern outlook on reality it assumes, but is rather “justified” because of the pragmatic manipulative power scientific reductionism unleashed. Further, I argue that the modern understanding of scientific truth, and science’s key role in the very structure of modernity as the life-world in which we actually live, is not at all believable as the total vision of reality that it has functionally become. Indeed, Plato’s appreciation of the problems of epistemological foundationalism have proved to be entirely correct. Hence, there is no powerful philosophical reason why the reality vision of modernity need be taken seriously, or why the alternative understanding of reality that Christian Platonism adheres to should not be taken seriously.

Part Three is the last chapter of this book, chapter 8. Here I endeavor to imagine the impossible; what would our world look like if we tried to return to a Christian Platonist view of reality today? How would things look to us and how would we act in the world if we thought that reality itself was intrinsically meaningful, if we really believed that wisdom was more primary than manipulative knowledge? How differently would Christians live if our piety was not neatly contained in the sphere of personal belief and private morality as the supposedly value neutral sphere of the public and political realm in modern liberal secularism requires of us? I maintain that the metaphysics embedded in some key New Testament ideas—out of which Christian Platonism has arisen—is radical and revolutionary. I argue that if the church better understood the manner in which the New Testament vision of reality challenged the realism of its day, and equally challenges the realism of our day, then some radical

and revolutionary implications would follow. The church would be far more clearly differentiated from the world in its very mode of operation, and this differentiation would enable the church to better pursue its mission to be salt and light *for* the world. In this concluding chapter I hope to show how practically important the metaphysical vision of Christian Platonism could yet be for us in the Western church.

### **The Nature of this Book**

This book is enormously ambitious in its scope and argumentative intentions, and it is a work of overview and synthesis.

On the ambition front, I do not flinch from arguing that the much-maligned metaphysical lens of Christian Platonism gives us a far clearer picture of reality than the lenses we are now accustomed to wearing. Against the prevailing intellectual fashions, I also argue for the practical and theological significance of metaphysics *itself*. I think it compellingly clear that metaphysics is inescapably tied to the operational structures of every actual life-world in which people really live. Whatever the seductions and derangements that metaphysical thought may be prone to, we avoid thinking about metaphysics at our very great practical peril. And where theology is concerned with reality, and with primary reality, it is *inescapably metaphysical*. Further, if the metaphysical implications of Christian theology are not deeply embedded in the corporate practice of the Christian life, then, I argue, the church is profoundly theologically ill, with dire practical consequences.

Concerning overview and synthesis; this book is an introduction to the metaphysics and practice of Christian Platonism for our times, and this book is a critical re-telling of the genealogy of modern realism grounded in an interdisciplinary synthesis of our philosophical, theological, and sociological cultural history. The integrative and panoramic nature of this book does not allow for much detail on any given matter and must brush over many complex matters lightly. That is, this book is written as a broadly educative aid designed to prime and provoke your own further exploration.