

Towards a Rediscovery of Classical Values: The Ethics of the British Idealists. A Passport across Cultural Borders

Dana Tabrea
A.I. Cuza University of Iasi

William Sweet, ed., *The Moral, Social and Political Philosophy of the British Idealists*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2009

Keywords: moral philosophy, political philosophy, theory and practice, community, common good, self-realisation, virtue

The edited volume in question here reunites thirteen captivating studies in the practical side of the British Idealism, especially its moral and political aspects, signed by Avital Simhony, Philip MacEwan, Darin N. Nesbitt, Carol A. Keene, Stamatoula Panagakou, David Boucher, Leslie Armour, Jan Olof Bengtsson, Tom Brooks, James Connelly, Efraim Podoksik, Elisabeth Trott, and last but not least William Sweet.

The book is organized by the leading idea that theory and practice should stand together. Without reserve and without the fear of getting wrong, we can consider this to be a general principle of the philosophy of the British Idealists; also, the chapters follow one another in such a manner as to suggest how practical issues were of importance for each generation out of three generations of British Idealists: the first generation of British Idealists (especially T.H. Green and Edward Caird), the second generation (naming as its contributors F.H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, William Wallace, and R. L. Nettleship, but also Henry Jones, D.G. Ritchie, A.S. Pringle-Pattison, John Watson, R.B. Haldane, J.M.E. McTaggart, J.S. Mackenzie, and J.H. Muirhead) and the third generation of British Idealists (consisting of authors such as R.G. Collingwood, A. R. Lord, C.C.J. Webb, H.J.W. Hetherington, and G.R.G. Mure, also C.E.M. Joad, A.C. Ewing, R.G. Mure, C.A. Campbell, Michael Oakeshott, Dorothy Emmet).

The editor even establishes an all totalizing purpose of the book, that is to configure the major lines of an idealist ethical theory, and also to examine whether (how) it may function today, that is similar to saying that we have all the reasons to inquire whether it can be (made) vital for the present times.

Avital Simhony, author of the first text in the volume, *A Liberal Commitment to the Common Good. T.H. Green's Social & Political Morality*, argues that T. H. Green's account of the idea of the *common good* is crucial to its moral and social philosophy, and that it is assumed by modern liberal political debates. By trying to transcend the dualism between the *liberal politics of rights* or the rightness – common good, that is a common good in terms of the right, and the *communitarian politics of the common good*, or the goodness – common good, Green enters a debate that is still present nowadays. The solution that Green offers in order to surpass the dualism between the two is showing how the right derives from the good and how the right is constitutive for the good and also imperative for its realization. Avital Simhony argues how the ideal of a moral community of reasonable individuals that are ends in themselves is essential to the realization of the common good society concerned with the self-realization of all its members, and based on both justice and citizenship.

In a text on Edward Caird (i.e., chapter two of the volume), Philip MacEwan argues that Caird's social philosophy can be derived from his study of Auguste Comte's positivism, while his moral philosophy can be seen as the practical side of his epistemology. His merit consists in showing how moral accomplishment is a process developed in stages and this refers to individuals as well as to whole societies.

The third study in the volume is dedicated to D.G. Ritchie's ethics, and it is signed by Darin R. Nesbitt. Member of the second generation of British Idealists, Ritchie was influenced by Green and Caird, upholding the idea of the inseparability of society and individual, of the moral nature and purpose of the state, and assuming the notions of self-development and self-realization.

Carol A. Keene considers the moral philosophy of F.H. Bradley in a fourth chapter of the volume - *The Interplay of Bradley's Social and Moral Philosophy*. The author takes Green's ideal of the realization of the self as the starting point of Bradley's own account from *Ethical Studies* where the quest for the true self to be realized (as in the question "What is the self to be realized") gives rise to the ethical theory of *my station and its duties*, that exceeds its own purpose of answering a moral question, and even fails to establish the true self. According to Bradley, *society is an organism and a moral organism*, apart from which the individual is a mere fiction. His moral theory of *my station and its duties* (that individuals have various statuses and accordingly different duties to accomplish) is not without defect and the author thoroughly explores its shortcomings.

Stamatoula Panagakou is interested in *The Religious Character of Bosanquet's Moral and Social Philosophy*, which is the fifth chapter of the volume under review here. The author suggests that Bosanquet's moral philosophy is not to be found in works dedicated directly to ethics, but it can be drawn out of his account of religion. Stamatoula Panagakou's essay has three leading points: the immanentist perspective; the true conception of the spiritual world; and ethics, self-realization and the social nature of the *kingdom of God*. The first leads to a conception that reunites the order of what is and the order of what should be into the positive purpose of human life to accomplish self realization and perfect itself through moral life, through human hood that contains in itself a divine element, and through citizenship. The second shows us the content to be attained through the realization of the self, i.e. the realm of beauty, truth and goodness. And the third establishes the practical side of the *kingdom of God*, meaning the individual's living under the guidance of the good will, or leading a good life. I remark the ability of the author to explain concepts and to use illustrations (as in the example used in order to explain "one's station" and "its duties").

Professor David Boucher offers us a brilliant piece of writing on the only Welshman of the British Idealist, namely *Henry Jones: Idealism as a Practical Creed*, in the sixth chapter

of the volume. The author comes forth with a complete image on Jones's metaphysical as well as on the moral and social principles that guided him along when discussing both theoretical and practical issues.

Chapter seven (*Metaphysics, Morals, and Politics McTaggart's Theory of the Good and the Good Life*) reissues the theory of the good that was previously discussed in political terms by Avital Simhony at T.H. Green and in religious terms by Stamatoula Panagakou at Bernard Bosanquet. This time, Leslie Armour examines Mac Taggard's philosophy in order to point out its perplexities: his political and social views do not match any standards; his moral theories are grounded upon his metaphysics, which is not very common either. Among the principles upon which Mc Taggard's metaphysics is based (such as the principles of sufficient and exclusive description, the principle of substantial predication, the principle of divisibility, the principle of determinacy), of greatest importance is his metaphysical principle of morals. In Mc Taggard's view there are timeless loving spirits joined together in natural communities that make up reality, including us, but our consciences do not experience reality as such but only illusions of it. However, there is something that human beings as conscious and sentient creatures are endowed with and this is described as *love - a relation of perfect sharing, such that each participant enjoys the experience of the other and neither seeks any advantage beyond this sharing*, apart from simple benevolence or sympathy. Consciousness is valuable and its value consists of love. By sharing the same ultimate reality, we are all equals and we can practically lead a good life of caring for each other.

Personal idealism opposes Hegelian absolute idealism when it comes to the role and function of individuality (person) within the economy of the system of reality. In the eighth chapter of the volume, Jan Olof Bengtsson approaches the conception on ethics, political and social philosophy of three main representatives of the personal idealism within the British Idealism - Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, James Seth, and Clement C. J. Webb.

Less known figures among the British Idealists such as John Henry Muirhead, Sir Hector James Wright Hetherington,

and John Stuart Mackenzie are introduced by Thom Brooks in the ninth chapter of the volume - *Muirhead, Hetherington, and Mackenzie*. Disciples of Green, the three mentioned are not considered by critics to have a voice of their own. Since there are hardly any books entirely dedicated to any of them, the author proposes to analyze the major themes of their philosophies.

James Connelly proves once more his eloquence in arguing when stating against those that charge Collingwood with somehow embracing a form of ethical *intuitionism*, that he should better be considered to be a representative of ethical *particularism* in *Collingwood's Moral Philosophy Character, Duty and Historical Consciousness*, as the tenth chapter of the volume. When asserting this by *intuitionism* James Connelly means a position that claims the impossibility of defining the good as well as the fact that moral principles are intuited. Or in Collingwood's opinion any concept is definable and thinking is much more important than intuiting and James Connelly deeply explores this idea by also providing the relevant passages of quotation. Particularism derives from the acceptance of the idea that reasons may change when an alteration in context is produced. When discussing the moral reasoning of self-consciously dutiful moral agents Collingwood can be attached to particularism: *The consciousness of duty is thus the agent's consciousness of his action as a unique individual action relevant to a unique individual situation*. Very much Kantian in the position that he upholds, Collingwood is looking for that purely moral deed (the morally good act) and he identifies it with one's doing one's duty as a rational virtuous act apart from right as the latter has no intrinsic value of its own. Collingwood ethics is based on the idea of the free agent that has the liberty of choosing what to do.

The interest in the third generation of the British Idealists continues with the eleventh chapter of the volume dedicated to Michael Oakeshott; I am referring to Efraim Podoksik's essay on *Without Purpose or Unity: Moral and Social Life in the Thought of Michael Oakeshott*. For the first time with Oakeshott, moral, social and political aspects interweave forming a whole: political science tends to understand social life, meaning the life of human beings in society, but in order to

do so it must be a moral and not a natural science – a political philosophy whose subject matter is *the nature of meaning of human association and the principles that underlie it*. Oakeshott's thought passed through different stages from a teleological and holistic understanding of the meaning of association connected with a teleological view concerning morality and practical life in his 30's (*Experience and its Modes*) to a pluralistic, traditionalist, conservative, anti-teleological view on moral and social life in the late 40's and the 50's and culminating with a third stage starting in the middle 50's, when his social and moral philosophy really configures in *On Human Conduct* (1975). The study of human conduct as the product of intelligent agents is undertaken when trying to understand the *practices* (sets of rules) to which the particular actions subscribe. But this is not a unique way of perceiving human actions; a complete understanding of human conduct can be also done in terms of *substantive performances* – the agent has a choice whether to do *this* or *that*. Consequently, there are these two ways of approaching human conduct through the practices, leading to a social theory and by studying substantive choices of particular human beings at certain moments in time and specific places in space, naming history. Accordingly, human associations are of two kinds: one way of understanding social intercourse is by considering the substantive element of the human conduct and the other in respect of the formal character of human conduct. First, there may be the associations in quest for the satisfaction of specific wants (transactional association, enterprise association), and second, the associations considered in terms of the practices that govern human actions (moral association, defined by internal criteria and not in relation to some external goal to be achieved). The civil association is a moral association whose practice is a system of general rules (*lex*): any self-chosen action should subscribe to these conditions.

The twelfth chapter of the volume (*John Watson and the Foundation and Applications of Moral Philosophy*), written by Elizabeth Trott, captures our attention with a representing figure of the British Idealism who, although born a Scottish, wrote and taught in Canada, far from the British island.

The same intention of showing how British Idealism survived on different continents guided William Smith when writing the thirteenth essay, *British Idealism and Ethical Thought in South Africa and India*, which closes the volume. After generally considering central figures for the intrusion in the 19th and 20th century, and persistence of the British Idealist tradition within the African and the Indian thinking, the author dedicates to showing how the different but in some concerns similar moral and social conceptions of R.F.A. Hoernlé and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan serve British Idealism. Hoernlé was born a German but studied in Britain with the best British Idealist tutors of his time and finally got to teach among other places at Cape Town and Johannesburg. He constructs an ethics of freedom, claiming that liberty belongs to the individual (free agent) as a moral and social being. The sole purpose of this liberty is to allow individuals to lead a good life, accomplishing the *common good*. As for the Indian case of assuming the British Idealist tradition, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who was President of India (1962-1967), promoted an integrative way of understanding philosophical traditions on the behalf of the idea that all shared some common principles. He considered that practice should precede dogma or theory and that Hinduism provides us with a specific way of life that involves engagement in the world. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan provides us with an interpretation of the Vedas in terms of the absolute British Idealism, which made a unique and controversial figure among the Hindu scholars out of him. He succeeds in bringing the Occident and the Orient together by finding a link between the British Idealism and the Hinduism when examining the metaphysical principles that underlie the ethics of the Vedanta. Paradoxically, the Idealism as a school of thought lasted longer in South Africa and India than it did in Britain!

I salute the idea that gave birth to such an impressive collection of good writing – the British Idealists may be brought together by their common interest in practical (moral, social and political) issues. Apart from the many differences to be found within their complex insights into the human world, as the authors of the essays of the present volume have pointed out, all the philosophers considered were preoccupied in one

way or another with the idea of the realization of the common good. This way we get a glimpse of the idea that a general ethical theory of the British idealist can be traced along the lines of the arguments here presented. William Sweet strongly encourages this idea and even establishes several characteristics of such an ethics: it focuses on practice and not on theory, it is an ethics of the community and the individual depends on this community (for the most religious of the British Idealist, e.g. Bosanquet, the community is identified with the kingdom of God on earth), the individual agent also has an important role within this community, as a free and virtuous creature. The relation of the individual to the community is given by the very idea of the common good, as the general purpose of all the members of the society. This general scope is to be achieved by developing certain qualities (character or virtues) and by performing certain responsibilities – doing one's duty. The good is to be understood primarily in metaphysical terms as the whole, the absolute, the rational, or the complete, and then as the perfecting of the human character. Its moral meaning comes to be derived out of its metaphysical.

Although the British Idealism altogether has disappeared from the philosophical scenery, and therefore the volume under review here is undertaking an historical inquiry rather than an argument that engages into contemporary debates on moral, social and political issues, it can still be of special interest to those specialists or specialists-to-come engaged in a research that involves an author here discussed. It can also familiarize students with the work of the British Idealists and even stir their attention to their texts. We also got to know how professors and doctors in the Anglo-American cultural space approach specific topics in the philosophy of the British Idealists and fight their way through passages not very accessible nowadays in order raise questions of importance to the philosophical community they belong to and find solutions to problems that the interpretations of the British Idealists' philosophy may entail. I consider this volume to be an imperative to read the British Idealists for the preciousness that their texts carry in is inevitable: liberty to think and act within a

society based on the values of tradition, fulfillment, duty, virtue and character.

Intercultural and trans-contextual endeavors in thinking and writing are encouraged especially by the editor's own effort to bring together different cultures and traditions starting from a simple fact: there were professors of British Idealism and disciples of the British Idealistic school of thought that transgressed borders both ways from Europe to far away territories (South Africa, India) and from other continents to Britain and tried to find links between the Occident and the Orient, and British Idealism happens to be one interesting illustration of such a link.

Address:

Dana Tabrea

Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi

Department of Philosophy

Bd. Carol I, 11

700506 Iasi, Romania

E-mail: dtabrea@yahoo.com