

**The creation of a British Idealist circle in the wake of T. H. Green's courses
at Balliol College, Oxford, in the 1870s.
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This paper aims at shedding some light on the creation of the 'Essay Society' devised by R. L. Nettleship, the two Bradley brothers (F.H. & A.C.) and other Oxford students in the 1870s. An examination of the preceding philosophical context will be provided to explain why the philosophical reform desired by Hamilton in the 1830s, in line with a Scottish connection, eventually found its expression in Oxford and under the inopportune help of Hegelian ontology. Arguably, this 'Essay Society' provided a set of ideas that was instrumental in shaping the development of the British Idealist movement in the late-Victorian period.

Introduction

Idealism is not a mainstream philosophy in Britain, and there are also different forms of idealism. This is why I would like to define the scope of my understanding of the British Idealist movement from the outset, before suggesting a strategy to study it. In other words, before proceeding to the analysis of the defining elements of the 'Essay Society', an informal circle of idealists created at the beginning of the 1870's, I wish to sketch the main perspective in which it is possible to say this creation was bound to be a meaningful moment in British intellectual history.

There was a sudden convergence of different forms of idealism towards Hegelian philosophy in the middle of the 1860s, and this coincided with four interesting features of the history of ideas in Britain. First of all, James Hutchison Stirling's *The Secret of Hegel* was published in 1865, and its great success made it possible for Hegelian thought to become an obvious philosophical reference. Secondly, it was also in 1865 that the 'Relativity of Knowledge' controversy broke out with the publication of J. S. Mill's book on Hamilton's

philosophy¹, and the battle that followed exhausted the nerve of the Scottish Common Sense philosophy and of the Empirical tradition. Then, the period also met with the rising star of what Matt Carter termed 'T. H. Green's Moment'² at Oxford, and which imposed the voice of a new conception of philosophy, clearly set in the idealist form. And lastly, it was in 1865 that F. H. Bradley's philosophical training started at University College, Oxford.

It is my intention to show that even though the 'Essay Society' consisted of a rather closed coterie of idealists including R. L. Nettleship and the Bradley brothers, it nevertheless articulated a basic manifesto that can be considered as a philosophical platform, binding its members into developing a theoretical foundation for British philosophy. I also want to emphasize F. H. Bradley's key role in the inception of such a foundation, not only because, from a Hegelian standpoint, it is a good policy to be concrete, and to suggest that the truth of the idealist movement in space and time is best expressed through the particularity of the life and works of one of its main representatives, but also because Bradley's philosophical record commends itself in the first place.

As a matter of fact, Green had died too early, Edward Caird did not possess Bradley's metaphysical power, and Bosanquet remained somewhat faithful to Hegel whereas Bradley distanced himself very soon from the purely Hegelian perspective, thus bringing his idealism slightly more in accordance with the English philosophical tradition. In line with this, the scope of the movement was so to speak even determined and framed before the British Hegelians introduced themselves as a distinctive group with the publication of *Essays in Philosophical Criticism* in 1883³. The Preface of this book, written by Edward Caird, adumbrated a future split between different forms of idealism, but by the time it was written, F. H. Bradley had already taken liberties with Hegelianism: instead of being *entirely* Hegelian in his philosophical endeavour he had advocated a return to the Neo-Platonic tradition in *Ethical Studies* in 1876⁴, and stated the case of the necessity to produce a genuine English

¹ J. S. Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy, and of the Principal Philosophical Questions Discussed in his Writings* [1865], London, Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1873 (third edition).

² Matt Carter, *T. H. Green and the Development of Ethical Socialism*, Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2003, p. 11-14.

³ The book was dedicated to the memory of T. H. Green.

⁴ It is always difficult to qualify a non-Hegelian stance. Neoplatonism, for instance, is in agreement with the spirit of Hegelianism. In his *Ethical Studies*, Bradley used the Hegelian dialectic and Hegelian themes such as the *Sittlichkeit*, but this does not necessarily mean he was a Hegelian. Actually, Hegel's whole system has to be accepted to make such a claim. Bradley used dialectics to explain a progression of doctrines (hedonism in Essay 3, the Kantian categorical imperative in Essay 4 and the Hegelian theory of the State in Essay 5) more than he accepted the genuine Hegelian movement of the real towards the Absolute. Moreover, whereas Hegel presented philosophy as the final stage of the absolute spirit, Bradley refused this statement, considering instead that religion was the end. In other words, religion is not the result of any internal and dialectical necessity but its cessation, an abandon of the self in the Absolute, which means that the conflict of doctrines and the finiteness of man are only solved in the totality of the Absolute in a non-discursive decision. For a study of the main aspects

philosophy at the opening of his *Principles of Logic* in 1883, to the dismay of Bosanquet who thought that the movement ought to side closely with the Hegelian philosophy. Lastly, and in order to insist on the idea that Bradley was, so to speak, the 'soul' of the idealist movement, it must be insisted that it was Bradley's philosophy which was the first to suffer from the general rejection of idealism in the twentieth century, and that it was perhaps from the 'rediscovery' of Bradley in the 1980's that renewed interest for British Idealism has drawn its main impetus ever since.

The 'Essay Society'

In June 1872, R. L. Nettleship, who was at that time tutor and fellow of Balliol, F. H. Bradley, fellow of Merton, his brother Andrew and other students, sent a petition to T. H. Green. They asked him to support the 'Essay Society' they had just formed in order to consolidate a new idea of philosophy that Green himself had inspired while teaching at Balliol in the 1860's:

What some people feel the need of now in Oxford: (1) belief in principles, instead of the present eclecticism; (2) earnest effort to bring speculation into relation with modern life instead of making it an intellectual luxury, and to deal with various branches of science, physical, social, political, metaphysical, theological, aesthetic, as part of a whole instead of in abstract separation; (3) co-operation instead of the present suspicious isolation; (4) fearlessness in expression of opinions amongst men who really have opinions, instead of the present deadly reserve. Feeling these views strongly among ourselves, we wish to know whether you do the same, and if so, whether you are sufficiently convinced of their importance to do something towards supplying them by joining us in an essay society.

We have formed ourselves into an Essay Society to do what we can towards the objects described in the paper you have seen. We do not represent, or wish to represent, any specific philosophical principles, except so far as common belief in the possibility of philosophy constitutes a principle. But we are all in one way or

of F. H. Bradley's departure from a purely Hegelian standpoint in his adoption of Neo-Platonic thought - an exploration which far outpasses the limits of the present article - see our analysis in Jean-Paul Rosaye, *F. H. Bradley et l'idéalisme britannique: les années de formation (1865-1876)*, Arras, Artois Presses Université, 2012, p. 257 sq.

another your debtors, and look to you as the man who does more than anyone else in Oxford to teach men to think. We therefore write to ask you whether you sympathise with our attempt, and, if so, whether you would give it a start next term by reading us something in connection with it.⁵

The text of this petition was mentioned by Melvin Richter in his biography of Green, and it was reproduced in the first pages of the *Selected Correspondance* of F. H. Bradley by Carol A. Keene. In a strategic position, arguably, as it induces the reader to think that Bradley's philosophical life incarnated such an act of faith in philosophy.

The words of this petition reflect the concerns Green had exposed in his courses at Balliol, and in particular in his *North British Review* article on “Popular Philosophy and its relation to Life”, published in 1868: the seriousness of the philosophical quest, the centrality of the speculative ideal and the idea of wholeness. To this, we must add the feeling that it is necessary to act collectively and to publicize a genuine commitment, if not to create a school of thought under the auspices of a renowned master. While indicating another manuscript source written by A. C. Bradley and presenting the group as ‘a little essay club’, Richter described the 'Society' as ‘[...] one of those esoteric discussion groups, which at Oxford is always to be found at the heart of any significant movement’⁶, and he minimized its importance in suggesting that it essentially revealed the nature of the relationship between Green and his students, and that it evidenced a link between Green and F. H. Bradley. Incidentally, this latter idea is important as a retroactive examination must needs deduce that F. H. Bradley was bound to take over Green's precedence after his first two books on critical history and ethics⁷. Anyhow, as Richter credited the idea that the 'Society' had produced a modest manifesto, I think it is possible to stretch it a little further and declare that they actually initiated something, that the principles they formulated determined the terms and conditions of the idealist movement in some way.

⁵ *The Collected Works of F. H. Bradley, vol. 4 Selected Correspondance (June 1872-December 1904)*, Carol A. Keene (Ed.), Bristol, Thoemmes Press, 1999, p. 1-2. See also Peter Nicholson's editorial note, in T. H. Green, *Collected Works*, ed. R. L. Nettleship and P. Nicholson, (5 vols.), Bristol, Thoemmes, 1997, vol. 5, p. 446-448 (n65). The editorial note suggests that this letter was made of two drafts, and mentions two other members (Charles Buller Heberden, Robert Grey Tatton) of this 'small circle'.

⁶ Melvin Richter, *The Politics of Conscience : T.H. Green and his Age*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964, p.159 & p. 392.

⁷ *The Presupposition of Critical History*, Oxford, James Parker and Co., 1874 ; *Ethical Studies*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1876.

In his *Memoir of T. H. Green*, published posthumously at the beginning of the twentieth century, Nettleship remembered the days when this Society had been conceived and he recalled its key principles - the speculative impulse, the idea of wholeness, the importance of philosophy, and the diffusion of their ideas:

There are a few in every generation of men at the university to whom contact with a real thinker is like a new experience. That which for want of a better name we must call the speculative impulse, a thing in its nature as distinct, unanalysable, and incommunicable as the passion for goodness or for beauty, was in Green so fused with the rest of his personality that ordinary observers hardly felt the edge of it ; but when it touched minds of the same temper, it struck fire. The enthusiasm so kindled was not for any definite project or idea, nor had the eight or ten men whom it brought together the design of propagating any particular doctrines of their master. A not unkindly wit named them 'a society for looking at things as a whole,' and perhaps the chief bond between them was a common intolerance of superficiality. If they had been asked what they believed in, they could only have answered ' in philosophy'; but the belief was not the less real because it was vague, and its gradual diffusion put a new life and seriousness into much of the teaching at Oxford.⁸

Nettleship also characterized the students' fiery philosophical passion, but it might be contested that he did not describe the circle much further, and that he also minimized the idea that they tried to spread the word of their gospel. But given the lack of unity of the idealist movement in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century, there was perhaps no point in insisting on the aims and the concrete actions of the 'Essay Society', even though Nettleship remained committed to idealism all his life⁹.

To say that Green's courses stimulated his students into finding in philosophy the elements to intensify their own lives would be an understatement: it is also likely that they crystallised a growing concern for Hegelian thought and more particularly for Hegel's metaphysical ability at a time when it was badly needed in Britain. As a result, the question of

⁸ R. L. Nettleship, *Memoir of T. H. Green*, « Tutorship at Balliol », London, Longman's Green & Co., 1906, p. 96-97.

⁹ See A. C. Bradley's insistence on this point in the *Biographical Sketch* he wrote on him: *Philosophical remains of Richard Lewis Nettleship*, edited with a Biographical Sketch by A. C. Bradley, London Macmillan, Second Edition, 1906, p. xlviiii-xlix.

the importance of the 'Essay Society' has to be reconsidered: there are reasons to believe that the members of this informal circle made their voices heard; and furthermore, that their basic programme at the beginning was in reality given ample development through F. H. Bradley's philosophical work.

In *The Shotover Papers, or Echoes from Oxford*, a magazine containing reviews, poems and other essays written and produced by Oxford students in that period, there is an interesting passage, visibly aimed at commenting on the philosophical atmosphere at Oxford around 1874, that is to say two years after the creation of the idealist circle:

Philosophy, the handmaid of Truth, is like a mirror dashed in pieces, whose each several part reflects new phases of the great To Be. The time has come for a system which shall restore the fragments to a harmonious unity, and point out the errors and shortcomings of previous workers in the illimitable sphere of the Unconditioned [...] What then is Philosophy! We start with our quest for a definition : and across the ages and through dusty tomes echoes the sullen murmur of a Past, maddened with the worship of Mind - Philosophy is Science, Philosophy is Truth, Philosophy is Religion, Philosophy is Thought. Let us scorn the delusions of sects and boldly declare that Philosophy is Humbug.¹⁰

This is a rather classical kind of criticism on philosophy, echoing Cicero's famous dictum that 'there is no statement so absurd that no philosopher will make it', but this common sense approach stigmatizing the fallacious appeal of idealist philosophy, was indeed the work of those 'workers in the illimitable sphere of the Unconditioned' who suffered now from obliteration. At least, this parody, aptly entitled "What is Philosophy", showed the trend towards Idealism and more particularly Hegelianism, and also displays some insistence on speculation, the importance of philosophy and the idea of wholeness. As a matter of fact, it sheds light on the obvious influence of the 'Essay Society' since it repeated the same ideas introduced by the Society's manifesto.

Admittedly, this society was not an isolated case as 'essay and discussion societies' bringing together students and fellows were a common feature at that time. As a matter of fact,

¹⁰W. E. W. Morrison (Ed.), *The Shotover Papers, or Echoes form Oxford*, Oxford, J. Vincent, 90 High Street, 1875, p. 56.

Edward Caird's *Witanagemote*, gathering Caird's 'young lions' at Glasgow¹¹, should be mentioned as it worked in a similar idealist strain. But this latter group was formed later than the Oxford circle, and even if there were many centres of idealism in Britain emerging from the end of the 1860s, Oxford, Glasgow and Edinburgh being the most important ones at the beginning, the Oxford group seems to have been the first, probably initiating some kind of emulation.

New Ideas for a New University

As the point of the existence of an idealist group and of their influence at the beginning of the seventies has been made, there might be another way of undermining their originality, and the good fortune of their ideas, in setting them entirely in the context of the period, making them a by-product of the conflicting intellectual situation at Oxford¹².

As a matter of fact, this situation was a little tense in the sixties and the seventies. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Oxford Colleges had been the target of much criticism and forced to reform statutes which dated back to the time of William Laud. The introduction of a new examination system at the beginning of the century and its constant readjustment had started to shake the old complacency of the clerical system, accused of corruption, obsolescence, and blamed for the idleness of the undergraduates, of the fellows and of the professors. Two government commissions had been created in the 1850s to tackle the reorganisation of the collegiate system and to impose a new vision of the importance of teaching and research in a context of industrial and ideological competition between nations¹³. A third commission was set in 1871, at the time when the 'Essay Society' was constituted. It has been argued that these commissions had crystallized rival conceptions of the university, and that conflicting visions opposed one another in the period. In particular, the old tradition of liberal education refusing the philistine or utilitarian precepts contrasted with the new professional vision, which was trying to enforce the principles of individual merit and

¹¹ See Henry Jones and J. H. Muirhead, *Life and Philosophy of Edward Caird*, Glasgow, Maclehose, Jackson and Co., 1921, p. 89-91.

¹² For more information on these questions, see W. H. Walsh, « The Zenith of Greats », in Trevor Henry Aston (Ed.) *The History of the University of Oxford : The Nineteenth Century*, Oxford, O. U. P., Vol. VII Part 2, 2000, and A. J. Engel, *From Clergyman to Don : The Rise of the Academic Profession in Nineteenth-Century Oxford*, Oxford, O.U.P., 1983.

¹³ In the 1860s, J. R. Seeley had complained that British philosophy lagged behind the philosophy of the other European nations. The notion of the country's national efficiency was already a matter of concern. Cf. Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds. Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2006 , p. 70.

effectiveness. All this was obviously at odds with the ancient gentlemanly perception of the advancement of learning.

The need for serious teaching and serious research had been a dominant concern since a first series of critical articles published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1808. In 1831, and in the same review, William Hamilton had repeated the insistence on the deficiency of the Oxford system and alluded to the ideal of the German professional system. Hamilton was also necessarily conscious of what Victor Cousin was doing for French universities, since it was on the basis of his rejection of Cousin's Spiritualist and Eclectic philosophy that he had written his famous text on the *Philosophy of the Unconditioned* in 1829. The criticism of Eclectic philosophy, which brought together systems incompatible with one another, was also a demand for a serious attempt for truth, that is to say making the teaching of philosophy, and research in that field, a most important necessity.

How far the 'Essay Society' reflected the conflicts of the time is to be seen in their insistence on the importance of philosophy, in their desire to catch-up with German Idealism, and in their conformity with the ideal of seriousness of teaching and research.

Indeed, there were also people who complained of the importance given to the teaching of philosophy, and especially of speculative philosophy¹⁴. But this trend was acclaimed by Mark Pattison, who had criticized the unscholarly teaching of philosophy in Oxford colleges and had supported the idea of an “endowment of research” in his *Suggestions on Academical Organization* in 1867. Pattison had also insisted, in his article “Philosophy at Oxford” published in the first issue of *Mind* in 1876, on the necessity to develop the speculative ideal, and he had underlined the work done by the idealists in this direction thanks to Green's courses at Balliol¹⁵. To this, we should add the crucial intervention of Benjamin Jowett, master of Balliol who, realizing the great potential of Hegelian philosophy, had asked Edward Caird and Green to integrate Hegel in their teaching duties.

The Originality of the 'Essay Society'

The end of Oxford's traditional endorsement of the Anglican orthodoxy was an established fact after the Tractarian movement and the final acceptance of German High Criticism. Accordingly, it is not far-fetched to suggest that the 'Essay Society' was profiled in

¹⁴ A. J. Engel, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

¹⁵ Mark Pattison, « Philosophy at Oxford », in *Mind*, Vol. I – 1876, p. 82-97.

the general trend, and that it expressed elements of the latest conflictual situation. But it is difficult to see how the 'Society' expressed the position of any specific camp except its own, with its irreducible particularity. In a letter to Mrs Green, John Addington Symonds explained how her husband “thought it all important to saturate the English with German ideas – to hold fast the essential solid qualities of the English mind in politics and piety, but to give them a new vigour and intensity, adapt them to a *Begriffsphilosophie*”¹⁶. There are distinct features of the 'Society' which alienated it from the Coplestonian tradition of liberal education in Oxford Colleges and made it at the same time close to the monastic ideal antagonistic to the utilitarian values of the day.

The Hamiltonian solution for catching up with the Germans had to stop at the threshold of the Unconditioned, but the members of the 'Society' could not concur with this solution even though they supported the idea of seeking truth with the utmost seriousness. While they met with the national efficiency requirements in integrating foreign elements of which it was proved that they possessed some superiority to the local elements, they overstepped the limits imposed by the existing schools of thought in introducing ontology in their speculation. As a matter of fact, it is not possible to dilute the 'Essay Society' into the casual conflicts of the age over the restructuring of Oxford University. Instead we have to confer it the status of an emerging novelty, not directly stemming from contemporary intellectual positions, but also rooted in some deeply set scholastic tradition, buttressed on the congenial freshness of German Idealism in general and Hegelianism more particularly.

The idea of a speculative impulse is a clear indication of the acceptance of the Hegelian project, insofar as Hegel's philosophy, through the idea of speculation, can be said to represent *the* idealist system, a reflection of itself in itself, its own cause being *the* final cause, set on the necessities imposed by Reason, and not limited, as in Hamiltonian philosophy, to mere understanding, and to the realm of the conditioned. Hence the importance of the notion of wholeness, which determined the rise of monism in Britain in the wake of the principles set by the 'Essay Society'.

One other idea pointing to the originality of the movement is that it came unexpectedly, with a logic of its own that its originators could not contain. As Peter Robbins noted, in his book on the British Hegelians:

¹⁶J. A. Symonds to Mrs Green, 10 October 1882, quoted by Melvin Richter in *The Politics of Conscience, T. H. Green and His Age, op. cit.*, p. 91.

Jowett's letters and unpublished notebooks makes it clear that he came to regard Hegel as a man “drunk with metaphysics” and capable of a metaphysical fanaticism as pernicious as the more familiar religious kind [...] Jowett was especially disappointed by Green, whom he had originally singled out to be the hammer of the philistine empiricists, such as Bain and Spencer. Unfortunately, as Jowett saw it, Green was infecting others with his own scholasticism.¹⁷

Green himself came to be dissatisfied with Hegel, and it cannot be said that F. H. Bradley, at the time when the 'Society' was constituted, completely endorsed Hegel's philosophical system. But it is not less evident that the terms and conditions of the philosophical exercise as it was viewed by the members of the 'Society' were set in the Hegelian vocabulary. In a letter to his brother Andrew in February 1873, Bradley exposed his incompetence as a Hegelian scholar, while already indicating, in Hegelian terms, the limits in which he was prepared to accept the Hegelian system:

I don't suppose in what I said in my letter I made myself clear, & that was simply because I am not clear; but I didn't intend to convey the notion that you could choose between thought & sense [...] All that I was talking about was the theoretical question. I am not competent to say whether Hegel has answered it or not: or whether the question has any *sense*! The question is simply “Can you account for nonsense?” & perhaps that is nonsense. Can you from thought generate the world? Of course you cannot because you are finite. But if God is thought, does that account for the existence of *such* a world as ours? Of course not in detail, but can we see far enough to say that God or the thought wh. makes the world a system is the creative prius of the matter of sense, so that nothing is lost but that the sensuous world is (*as a whole*) beautiful & rational & that the rational isn't the dry bones of it merely?¹⁸

Obviously, as soon as February 1873, Bradley had already expressed some uneasiness about Hegel's solution, known as ‘what is rational is real, and what is real is rational’, the famous phrase from the preface of Hegel's *Principles of the Philosophy of Right*; a long time

¹⁷ Peter Robbins, *The British Hegelians (1875-1925)*, New York & London, Garland Publishing, 1982, p. 44.

¹⁸ *The Collected Works of F. H. Bradley, vol. 4 Selected Correspondance, op. cit.*, p. 4.

before his often quoted passage from *Principles of Logic*, echoing the meaning as well as the imagery of his 1873 letter:

Unless thought stands for something that falls beyond mere intelligence, if "thinking" is not used with some strange implication that never was part of the meaning of the word, a lingering scruple still forbids us to believe that reality can ever be purely rational [...] Our principles may be true, but they are not reality. They no more make that Whole which commands our devotion, than some shredded dissection of human tatters is that warm and breathing beauty of flesh which our hearts found delightful.¹⁹

What was the objective then, of the members of the 'Society' when they set their principles in the Hegelian tongue? There are two possible answers: first, there was a necessity to provide a re-foundation of British philosophical thought, and secondly, this meant an immersion and a thorough study of Hegelian metaphysics even if, eventually, the Hegelian system had not to be taken directly into the English philosophical idiom. William Wallace had stated the case with great clarity:

If the form of German polity be not transferable to this side of the Channel, no more will German philosophy. Direct utilisation for English purposes is out of the question: the circumstances are too different. But the study of the great works of foreign thought is not on that account useless, any more than the study of great works of foreign statesmanship.²⁰

F. H. Bradley and the 'Essay Society'

In the years following the constitution of the 'Essay Society', the task fell principally into Bradley's hands, and his performance is impressive from his first pamphlet, *The*

¹⁹ F. H. Bradley, *Principles of Logic* [1883], Book III, Part II, Chapt. IV, § 16, Oxford, O.U.P., 1928 (2nd corrected edition) p. 591. This passage appears in the second edition of *Principles of Logic*, but it conveys an idea already expressed in the Preface of 1883: "I fear that, to avoid worse misunderstandings, I must say something as to what is called "Hegelianism." For Hegel himself, assuredly I think him a great philosopher; but I never could have called myself an Hegelian, partly because I can not say that I have mastered his system, and partly because I could not accept what seems his main principle, or at least part of that principle" (*Ibid.*, p. x).

²⁰ William Wallace, *The Logic of Hegel, Translated from the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, with Prolegomena*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1874., p. xix.

Presuppositions of Critical History to his first book, *Ethical Studies*. Perusing through his aborted essays “The Relativity of Knowledge” or “Progress”, written about 1874 and in which he systematically reduced the positions of what he ironically named the “two great schools” of thought in Britain, it strikes one how far he was committed to the ambition professed by the members of the 'Essay Society'. The context of contested sinecures at Oxford may possibly have urged Bradley to produce his heavy work on philosophy, especially as he was one of the last to be offered a life fellowship with no educational duties, but this has more to do with the general feeling among the 'Essay Society' that enthusiasm for serious study was a satisfying purpose in itself. The introduction to *Appearance and Reality* and also the beginning of the “Appendix” to the second edition makes it clear: intellectual satisfaction was for Bradley perhaps the only valuable pursuit in life because of its connexion to reality, and for him philosophy alone could satisfy what he called ‘the mystical side of our nature’²¹. For someone who decided to embrace a quasi-monastic lifestyle, this was indeed a chosen way to promote the advancement of knowledge, and this logic is admittedly in accordance with the ideals of the 'Society'. In other terms, Bradley was a bridge between the 'Essay Society' and the idealist movement which spread from the 1870s onwards, and we must now explain first how he viewed his own role and then what logic underlay it.

In June and July 1914, Bradley wrote two letters to Wilfred Ward, who had just published a book on the decline of Mill's influence and the Hegelian takeover²², to give his own reading of what had happened in that period. In the first letter, he set Mill's disrepute in the context of a rising concern for the serious study of philosophy; and in the second one, he drew attention on the fact that those who were influenced by Hegel were not only devotees, and that they had already started to criticize him, since the main objective, as stated in the aims of the 'Essay Society' was to start a philosophical re-foundation in England:

In the later half of the sixties what authority Mill had had at Oxford was much impaired. The study of philosophy was becoming a serious affair. There were lectures &c. on German philosophy, and also by Green on Hume. I don't think that *any* of the younger teachers (who made any mark) followed Mill. In the early seventies this movement advanced rapidly. I don't think that by the middle of the

²¹ F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality, A Metaphysical Essay*, London, Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1908 (2nd ed. Revised, with an appendix), p. 6.

²² Wilfred Ward, *Men and Matters*, London, Longmans, Green, 1914.

seventies Mill counted as anything. So far as I remember his posthumous work was *nothing* to us. You see that Mill gave not only the impression of being a second-rate man, but what was even worse, his pronouncements on Greek & German philosophy excited ridicule [...] for me it is clear that the moment philosophy began to be studied Mill would be discredited [...]

Where I don't think you are fair is in not crediting those in Oxford who were influenced by Hegel with any serious attempt to take account of the criticism passed already upon Hegel as well as to criticize him themselves. I don't deny for a moment that there was too much of setting up one's idol in the place of another. This always happens with every change of fashion. But I hope & believe that there was far more than that. It seems to me that beginning in the seventies there has been an increasing effort in England to study first principles critically. The result of course has been that at present no one school of philosophy is dominant [...] There is however, I venture to think, some philosophical thinking now which promises well & is at a far higher level than was to be found many years ago.²³

It is a well-known fact that Bradley was acclaimed because he had done great things for English philosophy, at least until his work suffered from neglect later in the twentieth century. Brand Blanshard spoke of Bradley as a *Mahatma* to describe his influence at Oxford²⁴: it might be added that Bradley was more like a *Buddha*, and that he had to be killed for the English philosophical scene to attain liberation. We can wonder whether Bradley did not hope for such a situation to happen, and from a Hegelian viewpoint, this would satisfy the negative principle. At least, we must accept the fact that what mattered most for Bradley was not the strict adherence to one doctrine, but the critical attitude and, according to the principle of identity in difference, this meant that the movement he was working for would dissolve into a plurality of forms.

Bradley referred to his intention of helping English philosophy awaken from its dogmatic slumber with some constancy in the prefaces or introductions of his books. As he explained to G. F. Stout at the end of the century after reading articles of James Mackenzie

²³ *The Collected Works of F. H. Bradley, vol. 5 Selected Correspondance (January 1905-June 1924)*, Carol A. Keene (Ed.), Bristol, Thoemmes Press, 1999, p. 200-201 & 203.

²⁴ Brand Blanshard, "Bradley: some Memories and Impressions", in Richard Ingardia, *Bradley: A Research Bibliography*, Bowling Green, The Philosophy Documentation Center, 1991, p. 8-9.

and McTaggart, two idealists who disagreed with Bradley's supra-personal form of absolute Idealism: "I am really very happy about the prospects of philosophy in England & glad to think I have helped in the progress so far as I could"²⁵.

Conclusion

What is significant, when we try to keep the idealist movement in perspective, is that its members were not committed to one philosophy, but to one attitude towards philosophy. That is to say, they took philosophy seriously, considered the speculative imperative with respect, and exploited the paradigm of wholeness, whether they resolved it into an all-inclusive whole or simply in personality; and in so doing, they concurred on the Society's manifesto, committed themselves to plurality and drifted from British Hegelianism into British Idealism.

In a letter quoted earlier, Bradley explained that Hegel may have been an idol at the beginning, but since the objective was to rejuvenate philosophical studies in England and not to transplant Hegel's philosophy as such, Bradley quickly moved outside Hegel's system: as soon as 1873 in fact, as his letter to his brother showed. He adopted a Neo-Platonic viewpoint at the end of *Ethical Studies*, and also took an evident interest in the philosophy of Lotze - who represented a derivation from the Hegelian philosophy - in his *Principles of Logic*. Bosanquet, who was the first to translate Lotze in English, observed that Hegelian metaphysics had started to be repudiated in Germany, where a 'return to Kant' was evident after 1870. Bradley's move was therefore criticized by Bosanquet insofar as it undermined the unity of the Hegelian group²⁶. But it must be remarked that such attitude towards Hegel's

²⁵ Letter to Stout, 21 August 1894, *The Collected Works of F. H. Bradley, vol. 4 Selected Correspondance (June 1872-December 1904)*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

²⁶ (...) there are signs of a philosophical movement in this country which may assimilate what is really great in European philosophy, without forfeiting the distinctive merits of English thought. But with this forward tendency in England there coincides in time a philosophical reaction in Germany—a reaction partly determined by those very influences of English speculation, which we hope that the present generation has in some degree outgrown. In the country of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, such a reaction will do much good, and can do little harm. It does not imply that their work is being undone, but only that the plan of the great masters is being handed over, to be carried out piecemeal by the journeymen. In England, where constructive idealism has never yet had free play, the prospect is very different. It would be a misfortune if sympathy with the German reaction should restore the rule of traditions which we are just beginning to lay aside. Adherents of commonplace empiricism would in such a case simply imagine that their German neighbours had regained a sound mind, and had admitted idealism to be a blunder. In such a state of the philosophical world Mr. Bradley's work has a twofold significance. In essentials, he belongs to the movement in advance, and is an effective pioneer of that English philosophy which we hope for—a philosophy distinct and national, not from sheer ignorance of foreign thought, but by the characteristic appropriation of the world's intellectual inheritance. But in some external matters, and in some which are more than mere externals, he attaches himself, to an extent which perplexes me, to the writers of the German reaction ; who, in spite of their extraordinary good sense, knowledge, and industry, appear to me to be

philosophy was already logically inherent in the attitude commanded by the members of the 'Essay Society'.

Apart from Bradley, it is arguable that the influence of the 'Essay Society' was such as to set the tone of what William Mander termed 'a metaphysical orthodoxy' based on the idea of the Absolute: "For if not doctrinal identity, undeniably there was close enough kinship between them [Idealist philosophers] to make it permissible to speak of a common metaphysical worldview - the philosophy of the Absolute."²⁷

R. L. Nettleship remained faithful to monism and was increasingly interested in Plato and Spinoza, while A. C. Bradley - who taught Poetry in Oxford and became a famous Shakespeare scholar - maintained an idealist position which did not markedly differ from that of his brother.²⁸ Questions pertaining to the possible influence of German idealism point to the needs and the intrinsic configurations of idealism in Britain. It might be interesting of course to explain what these needs and configurations are like. Idealists like John Muirhead²⁹, William Sorley³⁰, or Dean Inge³¹ have referred to a very old idealist, Platonic or Neo-Platonic tradition that has regularly come back to the surface in Britain to confront the dominant and mainstream philosophical discourse. There may be some need for refreshing the story they have told, but this falls beyond the scope of the present paper.

fatally deficient in philosophical thoroughness. Bernard Bosanquet, *Knowledge and Reality: A Criticism of M. F. H. Bradley's "Principles of Logics"*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1885, "Preface", p. v-vii.

²⁷ William Mander, *British Idealism: A History*, Oxford, O. U. P., 2011, p. 133. Mander, though, does not mention the 'Essay Society' and provides an extended study of the main representatives of the British Idealist movement, mentioning in a note the philosophy of George Jamieson, who conceived a philosophy of the Absolute in opposition to the philosophy of Hegel and Kant (see his note on page 133).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

²⁹ John H. Muirhead, *The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy : Studies in the History of Idealism in England and America*, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1931.

³⁰ William R. Sorley, *A History of English Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1937.

³¹ W. R. Inge, *The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought*, New York & London, Longmans Green and Co., 1926.