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SAMUEL ALEXANDER'S EARLY REACTIONS TO BRITISH IDEALISM

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Abstract: Samuel Alexander was a central figure of the new wave of realism that swept across the English-speaking world in the early twentieth century. His *Space, Time, and Deity* (1920a, 1920b) was taken to be the official statement of realism as a metaphysical system. But many historians of philosophy are quick to point out the idealist streak in Alexander's thought. After all, as a student he was trained at Oxford in the late 1870s and early 1880s as British Idealism was beginning to flourish. This naturally had some effect on his philosophical outlook and it is said that his early work is overtly idealist. In this paper I examine his neglected and understudied reactions to British Idealism in the 1880s. I argue that Alexander was not an idealist during this period and should not be considered as part of the British Idealist tradition, philosophically speaking.

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Alexander was a central figure of the new wave of realism that swept across the English-speaking world in the early twentieth century. Alongside G.E. Moore (1903), Bertrand Russell (1912), and the New Realists of America (Holt, et al. 1912) he developed a form of epistemological realism according to which the act of perception is distinct from and independent of the object of perception (Alexander 1914: 4-7). He saw in this direct realism the presence of a deeper, metaphysical realism. The mind thus ontologically separate from its non-mental objects entails that the mind is just another finite, equally real thing. Alexander's realism was formulated in reaction to British Idealism and in direct reply to Bernard Bosanquet's idealism (1913). Alexander's efforts to fill out a realist metaphysical system based on a monistic theory of space-time were completed at the end of the 1910s and published as *Space, Time, and Deity* (1920a, 1920b). This was the first grand statement of a metaphysical system by a realist of this era. It made a substantial impact on the realist tradition and invited a protracted set of replies by idealists. May Sinclair, for instance, describes her experience of reading *Space, Time, and Deity* as follows:

> The encounter with *Space, Time and Deity* is the most thoroughly uncomfortable, the most upsetting and dislocating experience that the devotee of idealism could well

> undergo. There has been nothing like it since the outbreak of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, nothing to compare with Professor Alexander's work but the work of the greatest system-makers. Of Spinoza. Of Kant. Of Hegel (Sinclair 1922: 162-63).

Although Alexander helped carry realism forward, he is sometimes regarded as part of the British Idealist tradition (see for instance Brettschneider 1964).[1] One reason for this is that he was trained at the University of Oxford as British Idealism was beginning to flourish. After arriving in Britain from Australia, in November 1877, Alexander won a scholarship at Balliol College. He was a student at Balliol from early 1878 and took his degree in the summer of 1881. His 'official tutors' were A.C. Bradley, William Henry Forbes, and James Leigh Strachan-Davidson (Laird 1939: 10). A.C. Bradley, a brother of F.H. Bradley, inspired Alexander to study ethics, while Forbes and Strachan-Davidson were devoted students and life-long friends of Benjamin Jowett, who was then Master of Balliol. Jowett and Alexander's tutors trained Alexander in the work of Aristotle, Plato, Kant, and Hegel. At the time T.H. Green and R.L. Nettleship were fellows at Balliol. Alexander most likely attended lectures by Green and was familiar with Green's critique of Classical empiricism, his attacks on Herbert Spencer and G.H. Lewes, and his metaphysics of the Absolute or eternal self-consciousness. Alexander must have been acquainted with Nettleship as well since Alexander speaks of 'his admiration of Nettleship's determination "to live his theories and beliefs", like a very Greek philosopher of old' (Laird 1939: 10). As a fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford Alexander wrote a dissertation on ethics for which he would be awarded the Green Moral Philosophy Prize in 1887. Alexander's first book, *Moral Order and Progress: An Analysis of Ethical Conceptions* (1889a), is based on this dissertation. It is said that this book has 'strong idealist credentials' (Mander 2011: 220). If A.C. Bradley was the initial inspiration, Green was a greater source of intellectual debt. A common understanding of this period of Alexander's thought is that he was an idealist and squarely within the British Idealist tradition. Given this

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[1] Dorothy Emmet (1966) dismisses Brettschneider's idealist interpretation of Alexander on the grounds that Brettschneider has a narrow understanding of realism. I agree with her criticism. My focus in this paper is to explore Alexander's early writings of the late nineteenth century to get a sense of his thinking from this period. It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess his mature philosophy in relation to British Idealist doctrine; for instance, I will not discuss similarities between Alexander's Space-Time and F.H. Bradley's Absolute. For general overviews of Alexander, see (Emmet 1967, 1998; Thomas 2014).

idealist heritage, we can see why he might not have travelled far from his idealist roots, despite his best intentions to move beyond the dispute between realism and idealism.

In this paper I explore Alexander's outputs of the 1880s in order to assess to what extent he can be said to be an idealist in the late nineteenth century. I argue that from the beginning Alexander rejected British Idealism, in reaction to T.H. Green, David G. Ritchie, and Andrew Seth (inter alia). I further argue that he was influenced more by experimental psychology and evolutionary biology, and eager to preserve the core insights of Classical empiricism. Therefore, it is incorrect to place Alexander within the British Idealist tradition, philosophically speaking.

One important fact that is often overlooked in discussions of Alexander's early period is that upon being awarded a fellowship at Lincoln in mid-1882 he took a leave of absence for a year to travel to Germany where he (in his own words) 'acquired knowledge of German University life' (Laird 1939: 13).[2] He spent some if not most of his time at the University of Berlin. Hermann von Helmholtz was Professor of Physics, but also wrote on physiological psychology, attacking the vitalist hypothesis that was accepted by such physiological psychologists as Johannes Peter Muller (see Boring 1950). Wilhelm Wundt was a student of von Helmholtz and established the first experimental psychological laboratory, in Leipzig, 1879. During his visit Alexander became familiar with (at least the existence of) von Helmholtz's work and others in physiology and psychology, and as early as 1882 had an interest in psychology and its physiological underpinnings. Upon returning to Oxford in 1883 to start his fellowship at Lincoln any extensive research into psychology had to wait. In 1888 he would leave Oxford for London to take up serious study of psychology only to leave London for Freiburg, Germany in 1890 to work with Hugo Münsterberg (a student of Wundt) in Münsterberg's new psychological laboratory for the year (Alexander returned to England about June 1891). His conational psychology was one route to his epistemological realism in the early twentieth century (Alexander 1911).

But from 1883 to 1888, before his flight from Oxford, Alexander did three significant things in print. First, he wrote critical reviews of the idealism of Green (Alexander 1885b, 1887, 1889b), Hermann Lotze (Alexander 1884a, 1884b), Josiah Royce (Alexander 1885a), and Andrew Seth (Alexander 1888). Second, he contributed

[2] Laird is quoting from Alexander's own account of his career to date in 1893 for his candidacy of the Chair of Philosophy at Owens College (it would become the Victoria University of Manchester).

to an Aristotelian Society symposium on mind and consciousness. Third, he published *Moral Order and Progress*.

The outline of this paper is as follows. In the next section, I present Alexander's reaction to Green's psychology and metaphysics as found in Alexander's reviews of *Works of Thomas Hill Green*. In the section after that, I examine Alexander's contribution to the 1887-88 Aristotelian Society symposium on mind and consciousness. In the penultimate section, I explore Alexander's reaction to Seth's Hegelianism, his reaction to Green's ethics, and his reading of Hegel in relation to evolutionary biology. In the final section, I conclude that the early Alexander was *never* an idealist (in the sense of the term that matters philosophically) and that he should not be considered as part of the British Idealist tradition, philosophically speaking.

REVIEWING GREEN

Alexander reviewed all three volumes of *Works of Thomas Hill Green* for *The Academy*. Volume 1 contains Green's 'Introductions' to Hume and his critique of Spencer and Lewes. This volume is an attack on Classical empiricism and the evolutionary theories of Green's day, which he thought inherited the mistakes of Locke and Hume. According to Alexander, Green argues that it is impossible to derive 'our knowledge from mere experience in the sense of feeling' (Alexander 1885b: 242). To make sense of experience we need a permanent subject, which Green calls 'self-consciousness' or just 'consciousness'. Consciousness as a thing not subject to change grounds the fleeting feelings we have. Feelings are 'transient states of the feeling organism' (Alexander 1885b: 242). They are not states of consciousness, according to Green, nor do they 'enter into consciousness at all in any sense in which that consciousness can be described as the material of experience' (Alexander 1885b: 242). Feelings receive organisation or structure from self-consciousness, which is not feeling or constituted by feelings. Feelings can only account for knowledge given their organisation, which comes from self-consciousness. Any quality a feeling has is due to its relation to self-consciousness. As Alexander writes,

> Thus, for example, the idea of change or the idea of time cannot be attributed to the succession of states of consciousness, for to do so is to suppose that the feelings are felt as different from one another, or as succeeding each other in a series; but then they are

> no longer mere feelings, but facts about feelings; and such facts are not events in an order of time, but elements in an order of knowledge (1885b: 242).

In the case of time, understood as asymmetric transitive succession, the feeling of time is one thing and the judgement that it is a kind of succession something else. Facts about feelings being felt as part of a temporal series are part of the structure of knowledge; they are not actually part of the temporal series. To say they are is to confuse facts about feelings with feelings; it is the feelings that are in the temporal series and not facts about them. Similarly, the feeling of disgust is a primitive reflex of an organism. To speak of something as disgusting is distinct from the feeling of disgust. It would be a fact about the feeling of disgust and not the feeling itself. Feelings are thus identified with nervous or physiological processes; feelings are primitive reflexes of our organism (Green 1885: 477). Feelings in this sense are not the kind of feeling that can be converted into a perception of some fact or 'taken up' into consciousness. Other examples include: fear and warmth.

In the wider context Green uses his doctrine of feeling or sensation against Locke and Hume. Green's ultimate conclusion is that any attempt to give an account of knowledge based on feeling or sensation alone is futile. We need to look elsewhere to explain the nature of experience and knowledge. Green thought Kant's epistemology contains the answer.

Alexander argues that Green's characterisation of feelings is deeply problematic. For one thing, the feeling of warmth, say, is different from the physiological process that underpins the feeling, even though the physiological process might be discovered to be identical with that feeling. More importantly, the feeling of warmth is distinct from the perception that the fire is hot. Alexander points out that in ordinary language we say 'I feel warm' and this is, prima facie, described as a state of consciousness. But on Green's view, it is not (Green 1885: 413). Instead, the perception that I am warm is the thing that is to be described as being conscious. The perception that I am warm is the thing I am conscious of; it is the state of consciousness, not the feeling. Green says: 'To feel warm, then, is not the same as to perceive that I am warm, or that my body is so' (Green 1885: 413). Alexander continues:

> But it is questionable whether we ever do *perceive* that we are warm, and the clause added seems to indicate a sense of this difficulty. Now it is quite true I perceive my body is warm, just as I can perceive by touching you or seeing you blush that your

> body is warm, but I go further and infer that you *feel* warm. This consideration will serve to explain why some psychologists regard feeling and sensation as the primary psychical fact. It still remains true that feeling, in man at any rate, is always qualified by its presence in a subject; but while it is rightly distinguished from a nervous process, it claims to be regarded, under the name of feeling, as the first stage of consciousness, distinguished from the later stage of perception (1885b: 243, his italics).

Alexander argues that Green's clause 'that my body is so' glosses over an important part of such feelings as warmth. Contra Green, I do not perceive that I am warm, although I perceive my body as being warm, and also that I feel warm. Also, Alexander thinks his contention is supported by ordinary language and by recent work in psychology. Although he does not mention any names, the psychologists he is referring to are *physiological* psychologists. These psychologists take feeling and sensation as basic states of consciousness. So, Green's doctrine of feeling and sensation is mistaken.

Green's attack on Spencer and Lewes involves the objection that they have the wrong conception of psychology and have the wrong idea of how it is related to physiology. Psychology is an examination of objects that are intertwined with consciousness. Given that consciousness is what it is (on Green's view) physiology has no 'special connection' with the general theory of consciousness (Green 1885: 483). Physiology is a particular stage in the process through which consciousness 'becomes ours' (Green 1885: 483). As a natural science physiology studies unique relations at this stage of this process; when these relations are taken into account 'the consciousness becomes ours in physiology' (Green 1885: 483). Green concludes that we cannot explain how conscious thought arises from mere feeling or from 'feeling the world' (Green 1885: 484). This objection is in the same spirit as Green's attack on Classical empiricism.

Alexander expresses distaste for Green's position as follows:

> In reading this volume one cannot help feeling a desire to see the true principles on which it proceeds, not merely proved polemically, but used to explain psychological facts. For it certainly does seem possible to have a history of the process by which the individual mind attains to a concrete knowledge of itself by logical advance from the simplest and most abstract condition of feeling (1885b: 243).

Alexander thinks that Green is merely criticising an opposing position and concluding that he has provided the correct conception of psychology and its relation

to physiology. Alexander wants Green to demonstrate what work his conception of psychology can do. In Alexander's eyes, Green has not shown the explanatory power of his theory. Green has merely engaged in polemic to reach his preferred position. In addition, Alexander thinks we can in fact explain how conscious thought or self-consciousness arises from mere feeling or basic states grounded in physiological conditions. Physiological psychology might one day prove, according to Alexander, that the feeling qua basic conscious state is identical with the physiological process that originally underpinned the feeling. So Alexander is in more agreement with Lewes than with Green.

In the final review Alexander reacts to the three volumes as a whole since the philosophical essays in volume 3 when coupled with the content of volumes 1 and 2 'give a very good idea of his metaphysics' (Alexander 1889b: 297). There are two main propositions of Green's metaphysics. First, 'there [is] something non-natural or spiritual (not supernatural) in the mind, in virtue of which its experiences could be connected experiences' (Alexander 1889b: 298). Second, 'the world is intelligible only if we postulate the presence of a single principle, a divine mind or self-consciousness – that is, a mind which is an object to itself' (Alexander 1889b: 298). It is Green's 'analysis of the human mind, which leads to the belief in the divine mind'; 'the conviction of the existence of the divine mind is used as a means of exalting the mind of man' (Alexander 1889b: 298). Alexander rejects Green's claim that analysis of the human mind requires us to identify the world with a divine mind:

> The nature of the individual mind is, according to common distinctions, a question of psychology, its relation to God and the world a question of metaphysics. Much of the difficulty of Green's philosophy arises from the combination of a question of psychology with a question of metaphysics (Alexander 1889b: 298).

For Alexander, Green is attempting to derive a result about fundamental metaphysics from psychology. This is methodologically unsound. Questions of psychology, according to Alexander, should be kept separate from questions of metaphysics.

In the final review Alexander also rejected Green's critique of Classical empiricism. Alexander was unconvinced by Green's critique because he thought Green 'takes their language too strictly' (Alexander 1889b: 298). Alexander thought that Locke and Hume spoke loosely and used expressions of ordinary English:

> Their habit was to speak of things as people knew them in experience and then to analyse them. Thus, to say with Hume that the mind is a succession of states of consciousness is a perfectly permissible description of our experience. Green's answer is that these states of consciousness, if they are to constitute the mind, already contain an element which must be called mind. Now, what this should mean is that the empirical psychology is inaccurate in its analysis of mental states, and supplies no ground for the mind being a unity at all. But Green does not take this purely psychological view. He insists that the mind cannot be a succession of states of consciousness, whereas it is certainly arguable that if you rightly define that phrase the minds we know are such a succession (Alexander 1889b: 298).

Alexander retained this Humean view of the mind as a continuum of mental states for the rest of his career (see for instance Alexander 1914: 35). He argued that it is given in experience, following Hume, that there is no 'subject' or thing that 'has' mental states. The correct description of what is given in experience is that there are mental states in succession. The self just is its acts. An improved and sophisticated empirical psychology, he suspects, would confirm this description. It would turn out to be a psychological fact that there is no 'subject' of experience. The term 'mind' can be thus analysed in terms of a succession of mental states. But he does not argue *for* this claim in this review. It is something he arrives at through his study of experimental psychology after his flight from Oxford.

THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY

In April 1885 Alexander became a member of the newly-formed Aristotelian Society. It was co-founded in 1880 by Shadworth H. Hodgson. By 1887 Alexander was vice-president. For the 1887-88 session Alexander was part of a symposium with Hodgson, Ritchie, G.F. Stout, and Bosanquet. The topic was: 'is "mind" synonymous with "consciousness"?' The papers of this meeting were published as the first pages of the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. In Alexander's contribution we find further rejection of the idealism espoused at Oxford and more embryonic versions of his later theory of mind and consciousness.

Hodgson begins the proceedings and argues as follows. Suppose mind and consciousness are synonymous. If so, there is no distinction between the subject of consciousness and its states, for they are the same thing. If the subject and its states are one, 'agency' or being an agent belongs to consciousness itself. But, this, firstly, implies

a substantive thesis about mind and consciousness, which we should not assume at the outset of inquiry or as part of a second-order thesis that is meant to frame the terms of a dispute about the *meaning* of the words ‘mind’ and ‘consciousness’ (Hodgson 1887-88: 6). Second, the idea of agency cannot apply to consciousness (i.e., conscious states); it can only apply to a *subject*, to a thing that is active. Third, according to Hodgson, this view amounts to idealism in the sense that ‘those who contend for consciousness being the exerter of agency are *ipso facto* Idealists’ (Hodgson 1898: xi).

Ritchie is the first to respond. He agrees with Hodgson that the two terms are distinct, but for idealist reasons. For Ritchie, in a Kantian vein following Green, the mind is an unknowable subject, a noumenal self, or ‘hypothetical substance’ (Ritchie 1887-88: 8-9). We do not know it directly. We do know our bodies directly; they are physical things in space and time. The only knowledge we have of our minds is through our consciousness or the feeling we have of consciousness. He argues that we do not have direct knowledge of our minds as things because we would have to make our mind an object of our consciousness, which is impossible (Ritchie 1887-88: 9). Ritchie then gives the stock argument for Oxford idealism. Ritchie thinks there must be an eternal Ego to ground all knowledge and existence. This eternal Ego makes time possible because it is eternal, or not in time, or timeless (he does not distinguish these). He thinks we can argue from the fact of knowledge to the claim that our individual selves imply an eternal Ego that is manifested in all of us. Following Green, facts about the eternal Ego are derived from facts about our egos or ‘the Ego’. For Ritchie, ‘the unity of the Cosmos’ is a self. Any other unity is a mere conjecture, whereas the unity of self-consciousness we know is based on a logical deduction from basic facts of self-knowledge (Ritchie 1887-88: 10).

Alexander rejects the claim that mind and consciousness are not the same thing. He objects to Hodgson’s argument that identifying mind with consciousness entails the unwanted view that agency belongs to consciousness. The consequence that agency belongs to consciousness is not problematic once we understand what the concept of agency amounts to. Alexander says:

> A thing is, I think, called an agent, or said to be active when one or more events in the thing or states of it lead up to or are transformed into some other event or state, either in some other thing or in the thing itself (1887-88: 17).

On this understanding of agency physical objects are agents. If a cricket ball smashes through a window, it counts as an agent because its velocity causes the broken state of the window. Similarly, the mind as a complex of mental states is an agent. States of the mind naturally cause other states of the mind. Therefore, we do not have to give up the view that the mind is nothing more than a complex or succession of mental states to salvage the view that minds are active. We do not need a subject or the mind as a thing independent of its states to be the thing that is the agent. This reply to Hodgson is significant in understanding the development of Alexander's thought. Alexander thinks the Humean view of the mind as a succession of mental states is the correct description of what is given in experience. He wants to preserve this conception of the mind and defend it against idealists who posit a nounemal self and Hodgson's theory of a knowable subject independent of its mental states.

Alexander then takes issue with Ritchie's idealism. Ritchie claims that we cannot be the object of our own knowledge because that would require us to be outside ourselves, which is impossible. But Alexander thinks this fact does not prove that consciousness cannot be the object of knowledge. This fact is merely expressing a difficulty about how we know our own mental states; it is a distinct way of experiencing something from the way we experience normal objects of knowledge or perception. For Alexander, Ritchie's idealism contradicts the facts of experience and so should be rejected (Alexander 1887-88: 17). (In later work Alexander draws a distinction between enjoyment and contemplation to explain these two distinct ways of experiencing something.)

Alexander further parodies Ritchie's argument for idealism in a bid to show that it proves too much and is fallacious. Alexander writes:

> If an electrical machine could think and speak (and we may imagine its words would be more sparkling than I can represent them), it might say, "Electricity is unique and the source of all reality, and is thus entirely incomparable with any other thing; my electricity does not exist in a succession of flashes, but is the condition of such succession, and it postulates as the unity of the whole world an electricity of which mine is the reproduction". With this view all electrical thinkers would agree who held the truth of things to be what they are when seen *sub specie electricitatis*. We know they would be wrong, but they would be making an inference of precisely the same kind as the inference in question (1887-88: 17-18).

In short, we do not want to say that the electrical machine is correct in its metaphysical conclusion that the world is a unity of electricity. The same thing can be said about us. Thus, Ritchie's argument for idealism fails. But Alexander goes further than this. He provides us with a statement of his own view:

> My own view is that the mind is a thing in precisely the same sense as all other things, and that it is a peculiar and unique thing in the same way as other things are peculiar and unique. The mind is a name which we give to the complex or unity of what we call mental states, just as the stone is the complex or unity of the states of the stone. These states are modes of behaviour towards all other things, but the thing itself is not different from its modes of behaviour but identical with them. They constitute it a thing because of their character, or quality, or content. But different things behave differently, and what constitutes their peculiarity is the difference in their modes of behaviour. The mind then is the unity of its states, a unity effected by what Mr. Hodgson calls their contents, and it owes its peculiarity not to being something entirely disparate with other things but to the peculiar nature of its states, in the same way as an animal differs from a stone, or an elephant from a tiger (1887-88: 18).

In this passage Alexander says that the mind is nothing but its states. A sum of mental states constitutes a mind in virtue of the nature of those mental states. This same fact about the natures of mental states makes them unique kinds of things, just like the nature of a rock differs from the nature of an animal. This difference has nothing to do with a rock and an animal being 'entirely disparate'. Alexander has more to say at this point. The quotation above continues:

> At a certain stage in the development of things, we arrive at that complex mode of behaviour we call consciousness; but that consciousness is brain only when considered in its merely physical behaviour, just as light may be considered physically as waves of ether but is itself light. True, consciousness depends on physical conditions, but, equally, everything else (e.g., electricity depends on conditions simpler than itself). At a certain stage you have the amoeba, at a higher stage you have the lion; so, at a higher stage still, you have the thing called mind, or consciousness, dependent on the things that precede it, and continuous with them, yet peculiar and distinct from them (1887-88: 19).

So right after stating that minds are in space as well as in time and that the mind is nothing but its states Alexander speculates that there are orders of complexity from which new kinds of things arise. The brain in virtue of being a certain complex gives

rise to the quality of mind, but the mind is still continuous (still connected) with the brain. The mind is the brain but at the same time it is mind.

Let us make the following observations. First, this view concerning the nature of the mind is empiricist in spirit. Second, it is a statement of Alexander's later emergentism in embryonic form. The major difference is that in this early period he lacks the concept of emergence, which would allow him in later work to provide a better characterisation of how things like minds are distinct though continuous with (and dependent on) other things in the universe. Third, this view is incompatible with the main motivations for idealism. For Alexander, knowledge is a property of the mind, and since the mind or the thing we call 'mind' just is another physical thing, the inference from knowledge to reality is entirely unjustified (Alexander 1887-88: 18).

In a letter written to Alexander soon after the symposium Hodgson makes the mistake of labelling Alexander an idealist. Hodgson writes:

> Happy mortal! Would I were with you, and more particularly because in a few words of talk I could I am confident clear up that puzzle which seems to perplex you as to the relations between your own, and Bosanquet's, and my, views on the question discussed at the Symposium in Albemarle Street.
>
> *My* view is this: I object to that fundamental fallacy, which is fundamental and common to all Idealists; – to the varieties of Idealism represented by yourself, and Bosanquet, and Ritchie; – though you are all at variance on other points among yourselves. What is this common fundamental fallacy? This: – you identify knowing with the knower; identify, by refusing to distinguish between them. *I* say – consciousness is a knowing only; *you* all say consciousness is a knower knowing. Thus *my* first distinction in philosophy is between knowing and known; *yours* between knowing Subject and known Object. My analysis goes deeper than yours, and its truth must sooner or later be acknowledged. It will alter the whole complexion of Philosophy. For – when once you take consciousness as a knowing only (and not as a knower knowing), you will find it impossible to show that it *does* anything; at the same time it is the knowledge of *everything*, for the term *everything* is one of its terms and has no meaning apart from it.[3]

But, as we have seen, Alexander does not think that the distinction to be drawn is between knowing Subject and known Object. It is true, on Alexander's view, that the

[3] Samuel Alexander Papers, GB 133 ALEX/A/1/1/124/1, 17 December 1887, his italics, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester. Hereafter every reference to the Samuel Alexander Papers is truncated to its call number in the John Rylands Library.

process of knowing is active, so on Hodgson's definition of idealism Alexander is an idealist. But the label is not apt. Alexander replied, but only Hodgson's reply to Alexander survives. In it Hodgson says:

> I see from your letter that I have misunderstood you in some points, and I really should be puzzled to say what I thought your real opinions or views were, on the knower and his knowing for instance. I should say that the knower *is* something else besides his acts of knowing. He is living nerve substance, besides those acts.[4]

We can infer from Hodgson's letter that part of Alexander's reply was to clarify that he is not an idealist and that he does not think there is a subject of knowing that has mental acts. The self just is its mental acts and these mental acts are grounded in or identical with physiological states. From this quotation it seems Hodgson is not sure what to make of Alexander's view or whether it should count as idealist.

HEGELIANISM AND *MORAL ORDER AND PROGRESS*

Despite his rejection of idealism in the 1880s, there are idealist elements in Alexander's early work. They are not Kantian doctrines derived from Green. They are insights based on the lessons that Alexander thinks Hegel taught us. The best example of this is in his review of Seth's *Hegelianism and Personality* (1887). Seth's book is a critique of the neo-Kantian school through a critical examination of Hegel, and a defence of personal idealism, the view that individual selves are genuine entities distinct from the eternal self-consciousness, Spirit, or the Absolute. The neo-Kantian that Seth had in his crosshairs was Green. Seth argues that Hegel and the neo-Kantians have misunderstood Kant's insight. Kant set out to examine the conditions of knowledge and concluded that it required a unity of self-consciousness and that this unity was the form of consciousness in general. But Kant, according to Seth, thought of this result as merely logical; we should not, as Green did, render this 'logical conception' of the general form of consciousness a fundamental reality.

Alexander was not convinced by Seth's argument, but what is more relevant is that Alexander thinks Seth's attack on Hegel overlooks the true insight of Hegel's philosophy. Alexander continues, writing of Hegel:

> Banish the dialectical method, and deny the reality of the categories: the sooner the better. But the real service he rendered to philosophy was not here but in his appeal to

[4] ALEX/A/1/1/124/2, 4 January 1888.

> facts. He tried to make facts intelligible. He seems to work *a priori*, but this is just what he did not do. He worked with abstract thoughts, but they are always parallel to the facts. The way to read the *Logic* is not to revel in the wonderful procession of thoughts from the simplest to the highest. If you do, you surrender yourself to a masterful thinker, and beginning with implicit confidence you may end by suspecting he has cheated you. To understand Hegel you must ask yourself to what facts, to what elements in the world do these categories correspond, and you will then find that the succession of categories is a review and arrangement according to their affinities of real elements in real things. They are an epitome of things, the mind taking its place among other things. Certainly we cannot say that the description is accurate or perfect, but this attempt to marshal the elements of things in their order is assuredly the true method of philosophy. This makes the superiority of Hegel over Kant, that he describes facts, and does not analyse the mind. If we recognise this we can dispense with his theory of the creativeness of mind and his doctrine of the Absolute Spirit (Alexander 1888: 416).

According to Alexander, the method to be extracted from Hegel is one that describes in thought facts; only by considering whether or not our abstract thought *corresponds* to facts can we do real philosophy.[5] It is Hegel and not Kant where the correct method of philosophy should be extracted from. Alexander resists the 'back to Kant' call that others responded to in their attempts to domesticate German idealism in Britain. He thinks the Kantian reaction to Classical empiricism by Green and others overlooks 'the real meaning of the latter' (Alexander 1888: 416). Classical empiricism has important insights that we need to take into account. It should not be dismissed outright, nor should an eternal spirit be put in place as the clue to reality. Again, Hume gave the correct description of a self as a succession of mental events; Alexander thought this was the correct description of the 'mental facts' (Alexander 1888: 416). He would be the first to point out that Hume's 'empirical psychology' provides no real metaphysics and leaves many ultimate questions unanalysed. What we need, Alexander suggests, is an improved psychological analysis that preserves the correct descriptions handed down by Classical empiricism, and at the same time a proper metaphysics to underpin this psychology. Alexander thinks the dichotomy 'either Classical empiricism or Kantian idealism' is a false one. The way forward is towards

[5] In (Alexander 1886) Alexander interprets Hegel's philosophy of Nature as describing the realisation of an idea as a new fact. I discuss (Alexander 1886) later in this section.

recent work in psychology so that we can move beyond this false dichotomy (Alexander 1888: 416). Following his own advice, Alexander began to study the work of experimental psychologists, hoping to find a way to go beyond the choice between Classical empiricism and idealism. This was one impetus for his flight from Oxford.

There are further insights from Hegel in Alexander's work from the 1880s. In 1889 Alexander published *Moral Order and Progress*. It is a treatise in ethics that draws heavily on the concept of evolution and its application to morality as found in Leslie Stephen's *The Science of Ethics* (1882). But Alexander is not influenced solely by biological explanations of ethics, despite the fact that he, as Seth says, 'has cast in his lot with what is currently known as Evolutionary Ethics' (Seth 1889: 554).[6] The subtitle of *Moral Order and Progress* is 'An Analysis of Ethical Conceptions'. Alexander's 'analysis of conceptions' (not concepts) captures the method of this book. It involves three elements. First, the method, in the case of ethics, is 'that of grouping together ethical facts under the main working conceptions used in morality' (Alexander 1889a: vii). Second, this 'grouping of facts' involves the idea of correspondence. The method (in this case) must involve an examination of 'the working conceptions of ethics' by describing 'what facts these conceptions correspond' (Alexander 1889a: 2). Third, it involves 'a systematisation both of the facts and of the conceptions' (Alexander 1889a: 4).

The first and second elements of this method are in line with Alexander's interpretation of Hegel from his review of *Hegelianism and Personality*. After grouping the relevant facts together under the appropriate conceptions we need to describe how these conceptions correspond to the relevant facts. As per the third element we systemise these facts and conceptions. This 'systematisation' is a coherent arrangement of the relevant conceptions and facts. However, this notion of coherence is not Hegelian. Alexander's notion of coherence involves the notion of empirical generalisations or laws, following Lotze (Lotze [1874]1884: 1). In 'What is Philosophy? (or Philosophy and Science)' (unpublished, 1889)[7], Alexander explains how science introduces order and coherence into such observations (which are sometimes provided by common sense) by establishing objective laws. Following

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[6] Rudolf Metz and John Passmore situate *Moral Order and Progress* within the 'school of Leslie Stephen' (Metz 1938: 625; Passmore 1968: 266).
[7] ALEX/A/2/2/41. It is a typescript of ALEX/A/2/2/4 (with minor revisions). ALEX/A/2/2/4 is dated 28 December 1889.

Lotze, Alexander says that science ‘converts coincidence into coherence’ (ALEX/A/2/2/41, page marked ‘4’). Moreover, Alexander’s conception of philosophy is that it is a science but it is the most general of the sciences. The ‘distinctive note of philosophy’ is ‘its comprehensiveness’ (ALEX/A/2/2/41, page marked ‘3’). Philosophy is all-comprehensive, Alexander explains, because ‘it sees together the most comprehensive facts, facts which themselves represent a multitude of other facts’ (ALEX/A/2/2/41, pages marked ‘3’ and ‘4’).[8] He would carry this conception of philosophy all the way with him to the opening pages of *Space, Time, and Deity* (1920a: 1-2).

The main argument of *Moral Order and Progress* is that morality is to be explained in terms of the organic nature of society. Society as an organic whole of which we are essentially parts is like a species locked in the process of evolution. The ‘ideals’ that are ‘in’ our minds are also subject to these evolutionary forces. Good and bad ideals fight it out in society based on evolutionary principles of equilibrium. We achieve ‘moral progress’ when the good ideals prevail over the bad ones. The analogies here are vivid. Society as an organic unity is like an individual biological organism. Society is an organism that has us as parts, just like humans have organs, limbs, etc as parts. The individual is an organ of society. Even for some defenders of evolutionary biology this was a bit much. C. Lloyd Morgan thought the analogies should be used with care and best avoided for the more scientifically amenable concept of ‘a co-operative society of human individuals’ (Morgan 1889: 170-71).

Alexander could be said to be developing certain ideas that can be found in Green’s *Prolegomena to Ethics*. They both adopt the idea of the moral individual as being a miniature reproduction of the organic social system (see Mander 2011: 220). But Alexander also gets this idea from Aristotle (Alexander 1889a: 136). So it would be hard to make the case that it comes solely from Alexander’s reading of Green. In addition, Alexander defends a whole host of views that are antithetical to British Idealism. He reduces ‘ought’ to ‘is’.[9] He rejects the existence of the quality of goodness as something over and above the character that an act or action has qua act – so there

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[8] I cannot do justice to the influence of Lotze on Alexander in this paper. It is best suited for another occasion. For a recent account of Lotze’s philosophy, see (Beiser 2013: part 2).

[9] Alexander was part of an Aristotelian Society symposium with Sidgwick, Muirhead, and Stout on ‘can ought be reduced to is?’ in 1892. Alexander defended the naturalist position that value should be reduced to fact *his entire life*. As Laird says, ‘That was his lifelong conviction’ (Laird 1939: 19).

is no irreducible property of goodness – and denies that morality and moral judgements need to be derived from a principle of reason or from Kant's categorical imperative. He attacks not only Green's metaphysics but also Green's approach to ethics. According to Alexander, Green's ethics presupposes a metaphysical commitment to the Kantian theory of a nounemal self. Alexander thinks this 'is a premature intrusion into ethics of metaphysical theory' (1889a: 77). Although metaphysics is the foundation of every science, including ethics, Alexander thinks each empirical inquiry has its own independent domain that does not directly incorporate or appeal to deeper metaphysical facts on which it is grounded (Alexander 1889a: 79). Moreover, Alexander rejects Green's contention that 'before we can understand morality we must have some definite idea of the nature of man and his position in relation to the rest of the universe' (Alexander 1889a: 74). Given such an opposition to British Idealism, it is more reasonable to suppose that Alexander's idea of society qua organic whole is derived from his reading of Hegel and Aristotle and less so from his study of Green. Indeed, in the preface to *Moral Order and Progress* Alexander acknowledges his intellectual debts as follows:

> But perhaps I may say that I have come to the ideas, borrowed from biology and the theory of Evolution, which are prevalent in modern ethics, with a training derived from Aristotle and Hegel, and I have found not antagonism, but, on the whole, fulfilment (1889a: viii).

In Hegel and evolutionary biology Alexander saw a common and converging claim: morality is to be understood in terms of the individual being part of an organic whole. Moral individuals are in 'organic coherence' with society and morality is to be regarded as a social fact. In 'Hegel's Conception of Nature' (1886) Alexander considers what Hegel would say about the doctrine of evolution. Alexander notes that Hegel's dialectical principle of development in nature is a philosophical counterpart of the scientific conception of evolution (Alexander 1886: 518; cf. Alexander 1889a: 93-94, n. 2). But he says there are major differences between the two theories. He writes:

> Evolution is a history of how things in nature come to pass; dialectic is the process by which one idea logically leads on to the higher idea which is implicit in it and is its truth. Evolution is a history of a process in time; dialectic is a history of ideas which form a process not in time (Alexander 1886: 518).

So, while Alexander thinks there are insights we can extract from Hegel, he does not think we should accept Hegelianism as a philosophical foundation and then graft a

biological conception of evolution onto it. Alexander is not synthesising idealism and the theory of evolution. That was left to his peer at Oxford, Ritchie, who argued for a reconciliation between these contrasting points of view (see e.g., Ritchie 1893). Alexander's interest in Hegel and Hegelianism waned drastically. His flight from Oxford in 1888 set him on another tangent that led him to realism. Any Hegelian traces in Alexander's later thought are sub-conscious events and *ex post* similarities that we can detect from our vantage point. It would be incorrect to interpret Alexander as a Hegelian at any point in his career, despite the fact that he was well-versed in Hegel's work as a student.[10] Concepts of evolution were of more interest to Alexander and it was these concepts that he thought described processes in reality. Hegelian doctrine was more of a confirmation that the biological concepts of evolution were on the right track and adequately describe various orders of fact. The main insight he saw in Hegel and exploited in *Moral Order and Progress* was the method of describing how facts correspond to conceptions.

CONCLUSION

Philosophers are apt to talk of 'traditions' and 'schools' when philosophers reach consensus on a general principle or method of philosophy. Philosophers agree, sometimes tacitly, sometimes as a result of sociological factors, on a basic framework or a set of ground rules, after which they proceed to generate results through argumentation, analysis, dialectic, polemic, synthesis, and more. Green's work led to a consensus in this respect, although the conclusions that philosophers derived from the agreed principle and accepted method were different. This is epitomised by *Essays in Philosophical Criticism* (1883) – a collection of papers honouring the memory of Green. In Edward Caird's Preface to this volume, he says that philosophy is to be done by a critical reproduction or reconstruction of past philosophers such as Kant and Hegel and it is only through such a critical reproduction that their work has 'speculative value' (Caird 1883: 2). The critical reproduction is conducted, however, with a 'fresh expression and a new application' of the present times; that is what makes it different. We cannot literally import Kant and Hegel. In considering their

[10] Alexander tells us of the times when he met with Jowett to discuss his essays as a student at Balliol that: 'Once on returning from a Long Vacation I told him I had read all [of] Hegel. He said, "It's a great thing to have read the whole of Hegel; but now that you have read him, I advise you to forget him again". I fear I took this advice' (Laird 1939: 6).

work it is done within the context of the time in which we absorb and consume it. The challenges that idealists of nineteenth century Britain faced were 'the advance of science, and the new currents of influence which are transforming man's social and religious life' (Caird 1883: 2-3). Green's method was to provide a critical reproduction or reconstruction of Kant and Hegel in the expressions of his time and to apply his expression of his critical reproduction or reconstruction to the problems of science, social change, religion, and our place in the universe. Every philosopher that contributed to *Essays in Philosophical Criticism* began with critically developing what they saw were the insights in Kant and Hegel and applied their own 'critical reproduction' to the challenges of the day. This consensus of approach encapsulates one part of Green's legacy.

But Alexander does not follow this approach (and did not contribute to this volume). Alexander does not begin with a critical exposition of Kant, Hegel, or any other figure. He is not concerned with critically extracting the results of past speculation, expressed in terms garnered from his time, nor is he interested in polemic, argumentation, or dialectical results. He is concerned with how and whether a theory can *explain* the facts that need to be explained based on a scientifically-informed worldview. Moreover, in his reviews of idealist treatises in the 1880s he criticises idealist doctrine. Although he did not articulate his positive views in these reviews at length, we can see that he thought experimental psychology was a genuine science and that there was something important in the empiricism of Locke and Hume. Finally, we have found that *Moral Order and Progress* is not to be placed within the idealist tradition, despite the fact that it has 'strong idealist credentials' (Mander 2011: 220). It is a work in evolutionary ethics, not idealist ethics. To be sure, there are insights taken from Hegel and it is clear that this influence comes from his time at Balliol where he was immersed intellectually in an idealist climate. But this does not make him a neo-Hegelian. Alexander was on another trajectory.

His flight from Oxford to London and then Freiburg to study experimental psychology led him to develop a conational psychology, which we see signs of in *Moral Order and Progress*. There he says of mental processes that 'in all such cases the process seems to be a direct excitement of the impulse by the object and the subsequent discharge in action' (1889a: 21). The idea is that our mental states are due to reactions to stimulus and are therefore directed at the things that stimulate them.

This is a crude statement of his view that cognition is nothing but conations (Alexander 1911). His conational psychology reinforced his epistemological realism – and both doctrines in his mind lead to metaphysical realism.

I conclude that it is not the case that Alexander was an idealist in the late nineteenth century who then defected to realism at the turn of the twentieth century. Rather his realism is partly borne out of his study of experimental psychology and evolutionary biology, not to mention his empiricist inclinations. This suggests that there is more continuity in his thought than is originally supposed. But more importantly, it confirms that Alexander was not an idealist and that he should not be considered, philosophically speaking, as part of the British Idealist tradition.[11]

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