

## Review

**W. H. Mander and Stamatoula Panagakou (eds.). *British Idealism and the Concept of the Self*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN 978-1-349-69111-1 (pbk). ISBN 978-1-137-46670-9 (hbk). Pp. 335. £74.99/£59.99.**

English-speaking moral and political theory of the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries began, to a large extent, as a critical encounter with British Idealism. As such, contemporary analytical philosophers have reason to know more about this encounter, rather than just acknowledge that it happened. Crucially, this assumes, of course, that the history of philosophy remains useful for doing philosophy. In the introduction to their collection, Mander and Panagakou write that the history of philosophy is a ‘highly selective activity’ that, in its ‘determination to tell a particular story’, ignores ‘large swathes’ of valuable philosophical writing (2). For them, this is not only true of nineteenth-century British philosophy generally, but especially true of British Idealism, which developed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This is surely not true of nineteenth-century British philosophy *as a whole*, but it is indeed true of British Idealism.

Most of the essays in this collection would seem to share this assessment regarding British Idealism, though none take it up overtly and systematically. I begin by exploring this claim further, concentrating on the conceptions of the self that run through writings of the British Idealists and which are the focus of this collection’s essays. I then turn to what Sidgwick considered the most perplexing problem of practical reasoning, namely its paralysing ‘dualism’. Many philosophers remain keen to cure this paralysis. Mander and Panagakou insist that British Idealists had already provided useful therapy worth reconsidering. I will eschew summarizing each of the collection’s individual essays. The editors do that well enough in their introduction.

Assuming that the history of philosophy is indeed philosophically useful in helping to solve quandaries such as practical reasoning’s purported debilitating dualism, it behooves us not to ignore the hermeneutical conundrums vexing the interpretation of past philosophical texts. None of the essays have much to say about this challenge explicitly; nonetheless, James Connelly raises this matter implicitly when he contrasts Collingwood’s approach to *writing history* with his approach to *writing biography*, which is undoubtedly motivated by the Collingwood biography that Connelly is writing.

The collection's essays provide a fine account of how various British Idealists conceptualized the self differently. Contemporary perfectionists such as Thomas Hurka and Martha Nussbaum would benefit considerably from being more familiar with how Idealists understood selfhood and with what the implications of their alternative understandings of selfhood implied morally. Understanding selfhood as the Idealists did bears powerfully on how they understood our moral obligations, both perfect and imperfect. (The essays by Keefe, Winchester and Armour, however, stick to exploring conceptions of selfhood alone, avoiding what follows normatively from these conceptions.) For instance, according to Green, Bosanquet and Mackenzie (essays by Grygieńć, Martin, Panagakou, Sweet, Simhony and Mander), we are morally obliged to seek enduring self-satisfaction. For Bradley and Caird (essays by Allard, Babushkina and Ferreira), we ought to realize our true self. And for Collingwood, we ought to choose to do what an ideally rational self would choose to do.

Most of the collection's essays also stress that Idealists conceptualized selfhood as social in contrast to the purported atomism of their classical utilitarian predecessors like Mill, Spencer and Sidgwick. This juxtaposition is overwrought, making a similar mistake about the bad habit many of us have gotten into when telling ourselves *stories* about classical utilitarianism much after the fashion of stories we tell ourselves about British Idealism. The fact that Keefe's essay characterizes the classical utilitarian John Grote as an early Idealist should forewarn us against repeatedly telling ourselves stories of the former kind as well.

Now, Sidgwick remained a formidable foil for Idealists, although Mander and Panagakou claim, as noted, that they effectively answered Sidgwick's anxiety about the dualism of practical reasoning. As Mander and Panagakou write:

The great significance of this [the Idealists'] conception of selfhood for political thought lies in its power to suggest a solution to the problem highlighted by Henry Sidgwick and commonly referred to as the 'dualism of practical reason,' the equally rational pull of egoism and universal concern, whose potential to conflict with one another leaves practical reason destitute. (8)

But I do not see how their conception does. Sidgwick's overriding anxiety is not just a *contingent* anxiety but also a *logical* one.

Idealists are correct to stress the deeply social nature of selfhood. And they are surely just as correct to remind us (especially the perfectionists among us) that developing or realizing ourselves therefore often enough requires helping others to develop and realize themselves as well. Hence, if we have a perfect obligation or duty to promote our own self-realization, then we have a perfect obligation or duty to promote the self-realization of others including fellow citizens. We cannot flourish ourselves unless others flourish, because our identities, desires,

goals and the like are so profusely socially constituted. To develop myself morally, for instance, requires that others likewise develop themselves morally because their moral development conditions my own. I cannot develop as a moral being if those around me are brutes and thugs. I will not get very far in developing any of my talents, and not just my moral potential, unless I take citizenship and service seriously.

But just because my own good typically in fundamental ways fortuitously happens to line up with the good of others, it does not follow that it always must. If one says instead, as the editors claim, that the interests of ‘our *true* or *real* self must coincide with those of society at large’ (8, my italics) or with what Green calls the common good, then one risks begging the question, implying that our true interests are definitionally identical with the interests of, and therefore *mean* the interests of, society at large. Moral dilemmas are real and often unresolvable no matter how much we wish they were not. The trolley dilemma in all its many versions remains a dilemma for Idealists as much as it preoccupies consequentialists and (neo-)Kantians. So there is no *contingent* escape from Sidgwick’s anxiety, and therefore no way to systematize moral practice completely. And purely definitional escapes are just seeming escapes.

Furthermore, even if, by chance or by design, we lived in a world in which promoting our own good *always* promoted the good of others and in which promoting their own good *always* promoted our own, Sidgwick’s dualism would arguably stand as a matter of reason alone. If, as Sidgwick claims, reason stipulates that I am perfectly obligated to promote *my own* good and perfectly obligated as well to promote good *universally*, then I am condemned to having two, (seemingly) *overriding*, indefeasible perfect obligations. But this is logically incoherent, as we might say on Sidgwick’s behalf. It is logically impossible to have two *ultimate* standards of right action. For a moral standard or principle to be ultimate, it necessarily trumps all others by definition.

So, it would seem that Sidgwick’s anxiety is, one way or another, an inveterate philosophical fate no matter how much monistic utilitarians and consequentialists might otherwise fancy. And the same goes for Idealists, despite their claims that one’s own good and universal good are really, when all is said and done, the same. And it would seem to matter little if we prefer terms such as ‘collective benefit’ or ‘common good’ instead of ‘universal good’. Monistic ethics is understandably a permanent fascination, but it is a philosophical siren song nonetheless.

That said, Mander and Panakagou’s collection is a revealing and superb exploration of how British Idealists conceptualized selfhood. And it reminds us of their historical importance for the development of modern English-speaking philosophy. Without them, analytical philosophy would have been born differently. Without them, there would have been no *Principia Ethica* or at least there would have been a very different *Principia Ethica*. Either way, there would have been a

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different emotivism and a different Oxford intuitionism. And, of course, then, we would have experienced a different rebirth of post-war liberal contractualism. *British Idealism and the Concept of the Self* also reminds us, or I should say that it has reminded me, that any monistic ethics is precarious.

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