

*Book Review*  
*British idealism and the concept of the self*

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British idealism and the concept of the self (2016) by W. M. Mander and Stamatoula Panagakou (Editors) London: Palgrave Macmillan 335 pages. ISBN: 978-1137466709 Price: \$119.99 CAD

Undergraduate philosophers typically beat a short path through the literature on the concept of the self. They begin with Descartes's assurance of his own existence, pass through Locke's idea of selfhood grounded in memory and reflection, press on through Hume's scepticism and Kant's account of transcendental and empirical selves, and from there take a leap forward into the mass of 20th and 21st-century philosophers, many of whom derive their theories from one or another of their great 17th or 18th-century forebears.

This way of picturing the self in the history of philosophy makes the range of problems (and, by extension, philosophers) associated with it look rather narrower than it should, being concerned first and foremost with personal identity and the possibility of self-reference. The idea of the self is, after all, used in a wide variety of ways in everyday language. We might say, for example, 'She was tempted by the offer, but in the end her better self prevailed,' 'Forgive his behaviour: he's not himself when he's been drinking,' or 'They're on a self-improvement kick.' Philosophers and non-philosophers routinely talk about self-consciousness, self-esteem, self-image, selflessness, self-doubt, self-possession, self-interest and self-love. To understand the senses of 'self' entailed in these familiar concepts, we need to take our investigations a little further.

The usual undergraduate short course view also excludes a whole raft of philosophers with interesting things to say about the topic. Among those typically overlooked, write editors W. M. Mander and Stamatoula Panagakou in *British Idealism and the Concept of the Self*, are the British Idealists, whose works constituted one of the main currents of thought in the Anglophone world between the 1860s and the early years of the twentieth century. Drawing on German

thinkers like Hegel and Kant, the British Idealists maintained that ‘Idealist principles... were at work everywhere, creating a grand narrative or synthesis’ (p. 3), and constructed highly integrated, systematic accounts of the world and the connections between the various parts of the map of knowledge, covering everything from ethics to epistemology, religion to history, and aesthetics to education. Central to these systems were the Idealists’ unusually capacious concepts of mind with which all the things that can be thought about – all the ‘works of the conscious world,’ as Bernard Bosanquet once put it (‘Symposium: Is Mind Synonymous with Consciousness?’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. os1, issue 1, 1887–88, p. 15) – coincide. This in turn gave rise to the conceptions of the self-discussed in this book.

Including the editors’ introduction, *British Idealism and the Concept of the Self* comprises fifteen chapters from an impressive cast of contributors. Jenny Keefe sets the scene for the arrival of the capital-I British Idealists in the 1860s, examining the concepts of the self described by Benjamin Jowett, Alexander Campbell Fraser, James Frederick Ferrier, John Grote and James Hutchison Stirling. Through their careful interpretations of German idealists, these philosophers sought to break with the traditions of empiricism and common-sense realism then dominant in English-language philosophy, thereby ‘pav[ed] the way’ for the better-known idealists who followed them (26). The remaining chapters include two on the metaphysical and moral dimensions of the self according to F. H. Bradley (James W. Allard and Dina Babushkina, respectively); one on Edward Caird’s attempts to locate the self in consciousness alongside the objective world and God (Phillip Ferreira); two on T. H. Green’s uses of the idea of the self in his metaphysical and social philosophy (Janusz Grygień and Rex Martin); three on the varied uses to which the concept is put by Bernard Bosanquet, who goes perhaps further than Green in distinguishing between distinct senses of ‘self’ used in social, political and moral contexts (Stamatoula Panagakou, William Sweet and Avital Simhony); one on J. M. E. McTaggart’s idea of a ‘substantial self’ (Gary L. Cesarz); and two drawing on explicit and implicit treatments of the self by R. G. Collingwood (Ian Winchester and James Connelly). Completing the volume are W. J. Mander’s chapter on the idea of ‘the true self,’ in which he draws on Green, Caird, Bosanquet, Henry Jones and John

Stuart Mackenzie to assemble a generic account of selfhood in late nineteenth-century Idealist thought, and a final chapter, by the late Leslie Armour, setting out the case for ‘an ontology in which persons are fundamental’ (323), despite the fact that ‘the particular way in which persons are associated with reality... makes them overflow all the categories which we might want to apply to them’ (315). Doing justice to our ordinary notions of self- or personhood, then, is bound to be difficult, but to neglect the task on these grounds would be to surrender a fundamental part of our view of reality.

As this list of topics makes clear, the British Idealists had various and in some respects markedly different ideas about the self. They take up the problem not just as a conceptual matter, to be solve through careful application of theory, but also as a social, political, moral and historical one. Yet if there is a common thread that runs through all their discussions of the topic, it is something like what Cesarz describes in his chapter on McTaggart:

Many consider the advances in neurophysiology conclusive proof of the triumph of materialism. Its most strident defenders insist that consciousness and the self have been explained... But here what passes for “explanation” promotes the irony... that successful explanations of the self must be purely materialistic or explain the self away. I find it alarmingly escapist that so much thought is devoted to explaining itself away... as a quaint holdover of “folk psychology”... or as a “pack of neurons”[...] (264, emphasis added)

The Idealists shared this alarm. McTaggart’s answer to such materialism and scepticism about the self – or their precursors, like Hume’s ‘bundle theory’ – was to insist on the existence of an immaterial ‘substantial’ self, something that can at least think about whether selves are bundles, bodies, souls or substances. Cesarz neatly reframes McTaggart’s concerns for the modern day, contrasting the idealist position not only with Hume’s but also with John Searle’s, Daniel Dennett’s, Paul and Patricia Churchland’s and Francis Crick’s. The same point stands in each case: any attempt to explain the self in a material terms seems bound to explain it away, just as the idea that an orange is no more than a series of perceptions of an orange – say of a certain shape, colour and size, with a certain taste, texture and smell – fails to explain quite what it means to perceive an orange (266). Whether this constitutes much of an objection to sceptical accounts of the self, and whether it justifies McTaggart’s

attempts to revive the old notion of ‘substance’ to shore up his preferred concept of the self, are questions I leave for the reader to judge. What Cesarz makes clear, though, is that these attempts are rooted in real dissatisfaction with the thought that the concept of the self, which pervades so much of our everyday thought and language, can be explained away as just so much ‘folk psychology’.

A great strength of *British Idealism and the Concept of the Self* is that the contributors are prepared to criticise as well as commend their subjects, to develop, repair and revise the arguments where they fall short, and to try sailing the ship, so to speak, after patching its holes. A book consisting of exposition and interpretation of the British Idealists’ conceptions of the self would be valuable enough, especially to historians of ideas, but the variety of approaches taken by the contributors to this volume makes it doubly useful. The sum effect of all this is that the British Idealists do not appear – as their enduring if not wholly deserved reputations might lead us to assume – as just thinkers from another age, mercifully behind us, in which unwieldy and speculative metaphysics passed for rigorous argument. We see instead evidence of the richness and variety of the Idealists’ thinking about the self and the many domains – intellectual, moral, political, educational, historical – in which it has a place. Most of the major Idealists are discussed and viewed from different angles by more than one contributor, enabling readers unfamiliar with the British Idealists’ works to see that questions about exactly what these philosophers thought and what its implications might be remain open to dispute. Hence we see, for example, Ian Winchester make sense of Collingwood’s treatment of the self in *The New Leviathan* (1942) and James Connelly, long at work on a philosophical biography of Collingwood, ask what it means for a biographer ‘to posit a self with projects, hopes and a certain self-understanding in order to make sense of [a] subject’s life’ (242). This cross-cutting of the material allows Collingwood’s ideas to be both properly represented and refreshed for application to problems that may never have occurred to him.

Since this is a review for the *Journal of Educational Thought*, it seems appropriate to finish with some remarks on the ways in which the Idealists’ concepts of the self apply to education. For Bradley, says Babushkina, the goal of ‘moral

upbringing' is 'to teach a child to identify herself with the ideal self... by encouraging some of her desires and actions and discouraging others' (83); and for Bosanquet, says Panagakou, the 'moral self' is an end, attained through in the course of trying to 'perfect the soul' – reflected in his involvement in London societies dedicated to 'the improvement of intellectual and moral character' through education (185). For Caird and Jones, says Mander, education is one means by which selves are nurtured and 'enlarged' by the societies in which they develop (296); and for Caird in particular, learning involves a kind of 'spiritual growth' as the thinking subject becomes increasingly aware of the conditions of its own knowledge. 'While this is something that can only be imperfectly achieved,' says Ferreira, 'if we did not presuppose such an ideal [of unified and self-transparent knowledge] and at some level believe that this ideal is real, there would exist no motive force within our theoretical and practical lives' (103).

Some readers might balk at the high abstraction of these remarks, but the key message for educationalists can be brought down to earth without too much difficulty. Education should equip students to be reflective, capable of criticising and correcting their own ideas where they prove faulty, and to apply knowledge from one domain to another, including their own lives broadly construed. Thus the idealistic view of the self as something formed or constituted in the course of thinking informs a view of education as an inescapably moral enterprise. Educators quite literally create their students' selves – that is, their senses of themselves and their relations to the world around them – in the course of teaching them. This thought bears repeat reflection, and shows how even readers without much prior knowledge of the British Idealists or the vast literature on the self might profit from the ideas discussed in this book.

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