

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in British Journal for the History of Philosophy on 17th Dec 2019, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09608788.2019.1684239>

‘All History is the History of Thought’: Competing British idealist historiographies

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Abstract

Along with utilitarianism, British idealism was the most important philosophical and practical movement in Britain and its Empire during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Even though the British idealists have regained some of their standing in the history of philosophy, their own historical theories still fail to receive the deserved scholarly attention. This article helps to fill that major gap in the literature. Understanding historiography as concerning the appropriate modes of enquiring into the recorded past, this article analyses the key historiographical commitments that underpin the writings of the early T.H. Green (section two), Edward Caird (section three), and F.H. Bradley (sections four and five). Section six explores the influence of Bradley’s historiography. These approaches are linked by the belief that all thought can be properly understood only by critical historians who possess the appropriate tools with which to distinguish permanently valid truths from the transient imperfections with which those truths are mixed. A crucial division between them is the invocation of a neo-Hegelian Geist by the early Green

and Caird, and Bradley's reliance on a progressive human nature. Moreover, the article establishes that R.G. Collingwood's highly influential theories of 'absolute presuppositions' and 're-enactment' were taken largely from Bradley's historiography.

1. Introduction

While the historiographical writings of R.G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott have attracted significant attention, until recently scholars have paid too little attention to their late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century forbears (for example, Thomas, 'Oakley'; Skodo, *Afterlife*; DeVall, 'Collingwood'; Connelly, 'Bradley'; Karabelas, 'Philosophy'). To some extent this relative lack of attention reflects the widespread belief that key members of the earlier generation of British idealists, such as Bernard Bosanquet, completely subordinated history to philosophy (Bosanquet, *Principle*, 78-81; Walsh, *Introduction*, 13; Collini, 'Hobhouse', 106, 106n82; Boucher, 'Creation', 194-95). This received view is misleading, however.

Many of the British idealists approached philosophical issues by engaging with past philosophers and thinkers. Key texts included T.H. Green's *Introductions to Hume's 'Treatise of Human Nature'* (1874), Edward Caird's books on Kant (1877, 1889) and Hegel (1883), and Bosanquet's *A History of Aesthetic* (1892) (Green, 'Hume'; Caird, *Hegel*; Caird, *Account*; Caird, *Philosophy*; Bosanquet, *Aesthetic*). Certainly, although many British idealists saw great value in historical research, few gave substantive accounts of their historiographical principles. (Early texts include: Sorley, 'Historical'; Ritchie, 'Rationality'; Bradley, 'Presuppositions'.) Nevertheless, scholars fail to recognise that the British idealists' historical works operated

according to consistent methodological principles, even if those principles were left implicit or stated only briefly in their writings. As a report on the efforts of previous scholars then, there is some truth in Admir Skodo's claim that previous efforts to understand the role and significance that the British idealists 'accorded to historical knowledge in their philosophy has proved to be a non-starter' (Skodo, *Afterlife*, 21). Yet, Skodo is too pessimistic (Mander, *British Idealism*, 1, 10-12, 21, 38-40, 46, 54, 177-78; Tyler, 'Ritchie'). This article argues that more circumspect research can bring far greater understanding than is found in most of the existing scholarship.

While the British idealists wrote a great deal about the history of philosophy in the sense of the development of philosophical approaches and problems over time and between philosophers, this article examines historiography in the sense of, in Mogens Laerke and Leo Catana's words, 'meta-historical reflections about the tools, methods, aims, and epistemology proper for accounting for philosophy's past' (Laerke and Catana, 'Introduction'). Understanding historiography as concerning the appropriate modes of enquiring into the recorded past, this article will analyse the key historiographical commitments that underpin the writings of leading British idealists, especially the early T.H. Green (section two), Edward Caird (section three), and F.H. Bradley (sections four and five). Bradley's position receives the greatest attention because he articulated the most sophisticated and influential historiography. It is for this reason that his relationship to Bosanquet and Collingwood is explored in section six.

The article makes a significant contribution to the literature by examining four related but neglected aspects of British idealist historiography. Firstly, by analysing the historiography employed by the early Green the article establishes that

for all of his admiration for Hegel in the 1860s and opening years of the 1870s, he never merely parroted Hegel, and further that from the mid-1870s onwards Green increasingly distanced himself from Hegelianism. Secondly, the article analyses Edward Caird's 'principle of Development' in history, the sources upon which he drew to formulate it, and how that principle informed his entire historiography and worldview. Thirdly, the article explores Bradley's critique of failed historiographies and his own humanized progressive historiography, providing the list of presuppositions of critical history Bradley himself failed to provide. Fourthly and finally, the article throws new light on the neglected influence of Bradley's historiography on Bosanquet's and Collingwood's theories of history.

The picture that emerges in the course of this history of British idealist historiographies is one of related but competing theories of historical change and the nature of historical knowledge. What links these approaches is the shared belief that all thought and the practices in which it is embodied can be properly understood only by critical historians who possess appropriate tools with which to distinguish permanently valid truths from the transient imperfections with which those truths are mixed. The analysis begins (in sections 2 and 3) by assessing the claim that the common roots of these British idealist historiographies were found in Hegel's philosophy.

2. The Hegelian historiography of the early T.H. Green

Hegel began his *Lectures on World History* by distinguishing three types of historical writings (Hegel, *World History*, 11-24). The first was 'original history', which covered the works of chroniclers and other participants in the recorded events. The second

type was 'reflective history', where the historian analyses recorded events using categories drawn from his own perspective and hence with concerns and attitudes of his later time. 'Reflective history' has four branches: (1) comprehensive history, where historians attempt to write complete accounts of countries or even of the whole world; (2) 'pragmatic history', which imparts lessons for the present; (3) 'critical history', which 'evaluates historical narratives and examines their authenticity and credibility' (Hegel, *World History*, 22); and (4) 'specialised history', which focuses on particular aspects of a nation's history, such as its religion, politics, or art (Hegel, *World History*, 23). To 'original' and 'reflective' history, Hegel added 'philosophical history' (Hegel, *World History*, 27-28). Here, the task of the historian was the same as the philosopher: to identify and eliminate accidental and irrational elements from the confused mass that initially confronted them.

This latter search for rationality in historical change was a very important influence on Green's thought in the 1860s and early 1870s. It is unsurprising, then, that many scholars pay little attention to any other possible source of Green's historiography except the writings of Hegel and the Tübingen School (Richter, *Politics*, pp.87-92, 102; Gordon and White, *Philosophers*, 165-66; Wempe, *Positive Freedom*, 11-49; Leighton, *Greenian*, x, 52-53, 129-86; de Sanctis, 'Puritan', 9-10, 35-74; Kelly, 'Idealism'. especially 532-38). Two unfinished translations of the opening pages of F.C. Baur's *Geschichte der Christlichen Kirche* from the 1860s survive in Green's papers at Balliol Green, ('Part'; letter from Green to Mrs Blanche Clough, 12 December 1869, in Green, *Works*, vol.5, 431-33; Nicholson, editorial note, *ibid.*, 432n50). In the rudiments of his first two professional publications (published in 1866 and 1868), Green framed his own philosophy using Hegel's philosophical

history, while cautioning against those who imputed to Hegel a 'strict speculative method' (Green, 'Rudiment', 7-8). Lecturing undergraduates (including F.H. Bradley) in 1867, Green is recorded as saying that 'Hegel's philosophy of right is an induction from history: the facts of history are abstract truth when stripped of their current dress' (Green, *Works*, vol.5, 173). Later in these lectures, he emphasised the 'Connexion of Moral Philosophy and History' in Hegel's philosophy: for Hegel, 'In history we have to analyse the history back to its categories or causes, while moral philosophy is synthetic, working from cause to effect' (Green, *Works*, vol.5, 180).

Green's interests in Hegel are evident in his other early writings, including the lectures on the English Revolution which he gave to the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution in January 1867. These lectures covered the period from the start of the English civil wars in 1642 until Oliver Cromwell's death in 1658. Green began his account by highlighting the dangers both of partisan historians who distorted the historical record to suit their own political commitments, and of 'judicious historians' whose "'dry light'" fails 'to illustrate the real temper and purpose of the actors' (Green, *Works*, vol.3, 277). Green noted such dryness was absent from Thomas Carlyle's historical works, with their characteristic invocation of the power of great heroes. Nevertheless, he hesitated to endorse Carlyle's approach, because Carlyle failed to appreciate the profound importance of 'the strength of circumstance' on the course of history. Carlyle had neglected 'the organic life of custom and institution, which acts on the individual from without and from within, which at once informs his will and places it in limits against which it breaks itself in vain' (Green, *Works*, vol.3, 277; cf. Green's friend, Nichol, *Carlyle*, 72, 236). Carlyle's 'oversight

leaves out an essential element in the tragedy of [the] human story' (Green, *Works*, vol.3, 277). For Green, Carlyle's theory neglected the 'providential' forces at work in human affairs:

'we do but dishonour God and the rationality of his operation in the world, if, by way of cheap honour to our hero, we deprecate the purposes no less noble than his own which crossed his path, and find nothing but unreason in that necessity of things which was too strong for his control' (Green, *Works*, vol.3, 278).

In making this move, effectively Green returned Carlyle's theory to its roots in Hegel's *World-Historical Individuals* (Hegel, *World History*, 83-89; Tyler, *Idealist*, Chapter 1). Hence, for Green, the English Revolution was 'a tragic conflict between the creative will of man and the hidden wisdom of the world, which seems to thwart it' (Green, *Works*, vol.3, 278). Hegelian sentiments are evident throughout Green's lectures on the English Revolution, such as the belief – expressed on virtually every page – that reason is the engine of historical change and is the ultimate criterion through that one can gauge the true meaning and significance of historical events (Hegel, *World History*, 27-28). In this sense, Green's 1867 historical lectures strongly support the 'Hegelian' label which many commentators have ascribed to him. Indeed, in a letter written on 23 March 1866 he referred to 'my Hegelian philosophy' (Green, *Works*, vol.5, 420). Similarly, he ended his 1868 essay 'Popular Philosophy in its Relation to Life' by praising 'philosophy like that of Hegel, of which it was the professed object to find formulae adequate to [articulate] the action of reason as exhibited in nature and human society, in art and religion' (Green, *Works*, vol.3, 125). When contemplating the pessimism regarding the fate of the English commonwealth expressed by the leading Parliamentarian Henry Vane the Younger

(1613-62), Green argued that Vane had been guided by 'ideas which, with much blindness and weakness, he vainly offered them, cleared and ripened by a[n Hegelian] philosophy of which he did not dream' (Green, *Works*, vol.3, 364).

Yet, despite the strong scholarly consensus noted above that traces Green's historiography squarely to Hegel, even the early Green's Hegelianism can be greatly overstated. Firstly, for all of his reservations regarding Carlyle's approach, Green absorbed Carlyle's progressivism as a young man. Also against the mainstream view, following Andrew Vincent and Raymond Plant, Paul Harris and John Morrow argue that, while Green's emphasis on God's 'institutional embodiment' suggests Hegel's influence, it seems likely that Green had been influenced by F.D. Maurice and S.T. Coleridge long before he read Hegel at Oxford (Harris and Morrow, 'Introduction', 5; Vincent and Plant, *Philosophy*, 8-17; on Coleridge's historiography, see Kooy, 'Romanticism'). Given Green's scathing 1877 assessment of Coleridge's reading of Kant's conception of reason, it seems likely that Maurice exerted a stronger influence on Green's historiography (Green, *Works*, vol.3, 127; Maurice, *Sermons*, 102-09). As Harris and Morrow observe, Maurice's 'Platonic immanentist incarnationism' likely prepared Green's interest in Hegel's historiography (Harris and Morrow, 'Introduction', 5).

Green's admiration for Hegel declined during the 1870s (Tyler, *Metaphysics*, 24-34). By 1880, it had waned so greatly that he warned his readers that the formulaic rigidity of his dialectical method meant that philosophers should attempt to arrive at Hegel's conclusions using less dangerously misleading and esoteric techniques (Green, *Works*, vol.3, 147). This might go some way to explaining why

Green did not seek to publish the English Revolution lectures during his lifetime (see Nettleship, 'Preface', vi; Harris and Morrow, editorial notes, 348n*).

Moreover, against Hegel Green insisted in *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883) that philosophers could not legitimately invoke a divine agency that exerted its power in the world independently of the deliberate actions of individuals living together in social groups (Green, *Works*, vol.4, sections 190-91). He was emphatic that the world's development was not something that could occur without free actions by real human beings. Importantly, the invocation of 'providence' which reappears throughout Green's 'English Revolution' (especially towards the end) is missing in Green's mature philosophy. (It appears also in 'The Witness of God' (1870) (Green, *Works*, vol.3, 239).) Rather, his mature writings and not least his political speeches show that he recognised the messy ways in which every individual lived within the contingencies of the people and events around them (Green, *Works*, vol.5, 225-409).

Not all of the British idealists were so cautious regarding Hegel's historiographical method. In the 1883 memorial volume to Green, *Essays in Philosophical Criticism*, his former pupil D.G. Ritchie contributed a chapter entitled 'Rationality in History', in which he developed an account of historical agency and progress that accorded very well with the Hegelian method that had underpinned Green's English Revolution lectures over quarter of a century earlier (Ritchie, 'Rationality'; Tyler, 'Ritchie'). Once again, Ritchie rejected the Carlyleian theory of the uniquely great man who exerted an innate genius over those around him, and who could overcome the force of circumstances. Rather, as the early Green had also argued, great individuals such as Napoleon were influential because, intentionally or

not, their worldviews and interests matched the dominant trends that were emerging within the wider world.

3. Edward Caird's 'idea of development'

Edward Caird defended a similar position in many of his writings. For example, in his early essay 'Reform and Reformation', Caird argued at length that human society could progress only to the extent that God had already manifested himself in the world, and that when properly understood human history revealed 'the full toned utterance of one divine speaker' (Caird, 'Reason', 2, 6; Tyler, 'Caird'). Similarly, in his 1893 two-volume set of Gifford lectures *The Evolution of Religion*, Caird argued that historical research was in a much more satisfactory state than previously because it used 'better methods of historical and philosophical criticism' (Caird, *Evolution*, vol.1, ix). Central to this improvement, Caird argued, was the insinuation of 'the great reconciling principle of Development' into the heart of these methods (Caird, *Evolution*, vol.1, ix). Caird found this principle of development (or synonymously 'Development' or 'evolution') in Aristotle, Livy, the Hebrew Scriptures, St. Paul, Augustine, Dante, Vico, Lessing, Kant, Herder, Goethe, Schelling, Hegel, Lamarck, Comte, Darwin, Spencer, von Hartmann, and Wundt (Caird, *Evolution*, vol.1, 21-24). Unsurprisingly given Caird's profound admiration for Hegel, he believed that it was Hegel who provided the greatest statement of the principle 'and applied it with wonderful insight and grasp to the political, the artistic, the religious, and the philosophical history of man' (Caird, *Evolution*, vol.1, 24).

Caird held that the principle of development provided the historian and the philosopher – they merged habitually for Caird, as they did for Hegel – with a critical

viewpoint from which: (i) to analyse their chosen domain of the otherwise apparently fragmentary past; and simultaneously with that analysis, (ii) to distinguish the recurring elements of human life that were evident within that particular region of the past; and (iii) to identify clearer expressions of those recurring elements in later periods of human life. This is what Caird attempted to do in each of his books and the vast majority of his shorter writings (see Tyler, *Bibliography*, part 1; on Green's more restricted use of this method, see Tyler, *Metaphysics*, 21-23, 36-41, 49-55). In this way, the idea of development 'could adapt itself to all the inequalities of the varied and complex structures of human opinion', driving a process of critical sifting whereby the historian could identify the 'partial and germinating truths' among 'the errors of men in the past' (Caird, *Evolution*, vol.1, ix). The metaphors of 'germinating' and 'maturing' were pivotal in Caird's historiography and indeed his Hegelian worldview. Only gradually did the true significance – and hence the true meaning – of past events and past thoughts become evident. The people of the past misunderstood their actions and their times more generally because they did not know the telos towards which their thoughts were moving. They could not understand the significance of their present because they could see only the acorn and had no knowledge of the oak.

Echoing Hegel again, Caird held that the idea of development transformed the contemporary historian's view of the past. Rather than seeing chaos and random chance, this historian recognised the order within the pluralism and apparent disorder of the past (Hegel, *World History*, 27-28). Previously, historians had been pushed towards 'the strife of warring dogmatisms', which rested on competing claims regarding 'absolute verity and absolute untruth'. Contemporary historians

could become 'more discriminating' because they recognised that historical narratives contained both veracity and imperfection (Caird, *Evolution*, x). Quoting Goethe's *Faust*, Caird wrote:

'For, so long as we have our life "*am farbigen Abglanz*," ["in that colourful reflection"] – in the varied and coloured reflex of our partial human thought and feeling; so long as our developing thought is divided as it is, between the truth which we have consciously realised, and that which we are only striving to make conscious, so long the question between different schools or stages of thought will not be simply: "True or false?" but "How much truth has been brought to expression, and with what inadequacies and unexplained assumptions?"' (Caird, *Evolution*, vol.1, x; quoting Goethe, *Faust*, 156 [Part 2, Act 1, Scene 2, l.4727])

In short, Caird founded his historiography on his Hegelian conviction that the idea of development provided both historians and philosophers with a critical principle from which to conduct historical research. This principle reflected an objective fact about historical change, not merely a heuristic device as Kant believed (Kant, 'Idea', 41). Consequently, critical historians were better placed to understand the past than those who participated in that past. The germs of truth contained within historical records, together with the latter's imperfections and obscurities, were more evident with hindsight. Hence, Caird collapsed the distinction between history and philosophy just as Hegel had, presupposing the truth of Hegel's claim 'that reason governs the world, and that world history is therefore a rational process' (Hegel, *World History*, 27). Rudolf Metz was exaggerating only slightly when he stated that, throughout, Caird 'was clearly following the great German master, to proclaim whom was the end and leaning of his life' (Metz, *Hundred*, 293).

Caird's invocation of the idea of development was difficult for many twentieth-century philosophers of history to accept, and receives little support

today. His particular formulation and justification of the claim was steeped in Hegel's controversial formulation of course. Nevertheless, one should not overstate Caird's eccentricity, given that, even outside of nineteenth-century Hegelian-inspired circles, there was a commonplace belief in the superiority of present historical understanding. There is something else to notice. Caird, Green and Ritchie sought to ease the Victorian crisis of faith at many points in their writings. There is no solid evidence however that Green and Ritchie sought to do this in the historical and historiographical writings analysed here. Yet, clearly Caird's historiographical reflections in *The Evolution of Religion* are concerned to address just this problem. This came out most clearly in the final lines of his reflections when he wrote:

'The idea of development thus enables us to maintain a critical spirit without agnosticism, and a reasonable faith without dogmatism; for it teaches us to distinguish the one spiritual principle which is continuously working in man's life from the changing forms through which it passes in the course of history' (Caird, *Evolution*, vol.1, x.)

(Notice also the allusion to Green's philosophy in the phrase 'the one spiritual principle' (for example, Green, *Prolegomena*, section 54).) This theological aspiration was one reason why Caird's historiography was so influential (Temple, *Nature*; McConnell, 'Temple's', 95-96; Craig, 'Scotland's', 682-87). Yet, Caird was not alone in tackling the crisis of faith by championing a revised historiography. Partly, this was F.H. Bradley's approach too, and Bradley's attempt was far more sustained than Caird's and far more sophisticated. It had the advantage of avoiding mysticism via an appeal to an admittedly controversial conception of human nature.

4. F.H. Bradley's critiques of failed historiographies

Bradley's seventy-two page pamphlet *The Presuppositions of Critical History* was his first professional publication (Bradley, 'Presuppositions'). It is a very unevenly written work in terms of both the clarity of many of its sentences and the linear progression of its argument. Nevertheless, it became pivotal for the British idealists and their successors. Collingwood saw it as constituting a profound if problematic 'Copernican revolution in the theory of historical knowledge' (Collingwood, *Idea*, 240). Following Collingwood, David Boucher has claimed that Bradley was important not because of his substantive argument but because he 'set the problems and the tone' of later British idealist historiographical theories, especially those of Collingwood and Oakeshott (Boucher, 'Creation', 202).

Certainly, Collingwood overstated Bradley's originality, as others have since (for example, Rubinoff, 'Autonomy', 129). Indeed, he implied as much when he linked Bradley's essay to the tradition of Biblical criticism that came to prominence through Hegel's writings and particularly through the Tübingen School, Benjamin Jowett ('Interpretation'), and Green. Bradley acknowledged Tübingen's influence early in *Presuppositions* when, on the question of the nature of valid historical evidence, Bradley invoked Baur (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 2). Despite this acknowledgement however, subsequently Bradley explicitly mentioned the Tübingen analysis only once in *Presuppositions* (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 51-2n). Nevertheless, Collingwood was correct that partly Bradley's essay was an implicit elaboration of Baur's position. (Much the same limitation of scope is claimed in Connelly, 'Bradley'.) Yet, it was not only that. To begin to understand what more it was, one must first understand Bradley's conception of historical understanding and

his critiques of certain alternative conceptions of historical method. Bradley held that:

'If the whole mass [of historical records] were found to be completely mediated, subject to the conditions and according to the analogy of present experience; if namely the events narrated were consistent, were possible, and followed in a sequence, of which the causes and results were in some measure known to us; and if further the dates and the general credibility of the writers [of the documents that make up the historical record] were established by a satisfactory train of inferences [then historical truth would be fully established.]' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 46)

Clearly, this situation had never obtained. One response to the unavoidable and often very significant imperfections of historical documents was 'barren scepticism which sees in history but a weary labyrinth of truth and tangled falsehood, whose clue is buried and lost in the centuries that lie behind' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 10). Such scepticism constituted the abandonment of the historical enterprise. A less defeatist response was to endorse a purely subjective view of history, whereby an historical account was deemed valid even when it was understood to be merely what the historian had 'created' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 8). Bradley doubted whether any 'sober-minded man' had ever endorsed this second response. Such a view could be found only within 'the exceptional writings of particular periods,' and these periods had always been quickly replaced by those in which the historian sought a true understanding of the past (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 8). In fact, Bradley argued, the historian faced a particularly daunting task that was diametrically opposed to subjectivism: the critical historian sought the 'true' interpretation of past events, or 'the real series' of

historical causes and effects, so as to avoid a 'simply subjective' understanding of the past (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 50, 49).

Even though Bradley believed that the historian always sought to discover the true account of past events, he poured as much scorn on 'merely "objective" history' as he did on the 'subjective' view. Objective history was a 'theory of simple reproduction' of past events to which adherents the critical historian had access due to his unbiased and immediate understanding of historical records (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 7-8). Bradley recognized that this theory – which he also called the 'theory of passivity' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 10) – was 'the view natural to the uncritical mind' which believed that 'history has no presuppositions, and indeed can have none: [on this view,] her province is to recall, and not to construct; she wishes to take the truth as it is' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 9). An adherent to such a passive theory 'demands from the historian the surrender of his judgement to the decree of the ages' – that is, he demanded that the historian accepted uncritically the views recorded by the original authors of the historical documents (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 9). Bradley condemned this view as deeply naïve in its uncritical acceptance of the accuracy of historical testimony. Original witnesses and later historians operated with their own conscious and unconscious biases, they misinterpreted past events and left ambiguous records. Historical documents were, after all, the embodiment of human thought with all its attendant limitations.

If the recorded past were not the expression of a human world, then historians would not be needed. Yet, as it stood, the historian found the historical world already partly formed by previous historians. The historical world was thus a social fact in the Durkheimian sense. However, in addition to the imperfections of

the original documents, much of the agreed historical world was itself now poorly established, because few historical documents had been appropriately interrogated. The biases and errors of contemporary historians had infected the ways in which historical materials were interpreted and systematized into current history. In response, the contemporary historian should assess whether there was solid evidence in the historical record to endorse the currently accepted history as a truthful representation of the recorded past. Bradley's favoured method was to engage in what, following Hegel, he called 'critical history': that is, to assess, prioritise and interrelate historical material according to definite and justified philosophical criteria and principles (Hegel, *World History*, 22). When successful, the critical historian improved currently accepted history and was able to add new material to that history in a justifiable manner. Bradley's theory of critical history has been widely misunderstood, as will be shown in the next section.

5. Bradley's humanized progressive historiography

Like the early Green and Caird, Bradley argued both that, if fully known, historical truth would form a single systematic whole, and that the successful critical historian adopted 'a higher and a new level' on the historical documents, in which he uncovered 'history with true preconceptions consistently developed throughout the entire field' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 10, 11). He made sense of these aspirations by combining a belief in a humanized historical motivation with a progressivist belief that careful historical research conducted in the present day was superior to the insights of the original authors of historical documents. This section will analyse Bradley's claims.

Bradley operated with a humanized historiography in at least two senses. Firstly, he held the recorded past to be of properly historical interest solely because it concerned human phenomena and aided our present self-understanding: 'the interest of history is... the exhibition of the oneness of humanity in all its stages and under all its varieties; it is ourselves that we seek in the perished (and is there anything else which we can seek?)...' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 39) Or again, 'Our interest in the past is our feeling of oneness with it, is our interest in our own progression' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 36). This echoed Hegel's famous claim that 'There is less chill in the peace with the world which knowledge supplies' (Hegel, *Right*, 12). From a contemporary perspective, this might seem a dangerously loaded motivation for historical enquiry, particularly as Bradley went on to claim that 'where we encounter an alien element which we cannot recognize as akin to ourselves, that interest fails, the hope and the purpose which inspired us dies, and the [historical] endeavour is thwarted' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 39). Moreover, Bradley never suggested that we should attempt to re-awaken our interest by finding fascination in the unfamiliar. Rather, the critical historian was perfectly justified in passing over unfamiliar elements in the historical record.

The second sense in which Bradley operated with a humanized historiography was that his approach presupposed the existence of a universal human nature. Like Hegel, Bradley held that 'man's nature is progressive', and echoed Hegel's Aristotelian claim that to be 'progressive' meant to form one stream of development from the past to the present, just as the 'bud' naturally progressed to the 'blossom', which in turn progressed to the flower (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 40; cf. Tyler, 'God'). Such emanation embodied 'the uniformity of [the] law [of

human nature]’, and as such transmitted this uniformity to historical progress (Bradley, ‘Presuppositions’, 21). As history was driven by the progressive impulse that always tended to emanate from human nature, history also always tended to be progressive (Bradley, ‘Presuppositions’, 21, 39-40, 44-45). On this view, History was underpinned by a strong form of teleology in which progress was inevitable because such change would inexorably tend to move towards a predestined end. In short, human nature found purer and more concrete expressions as societies developed. It was for this reason that Bradley could invoke the Hegelian idea of ‘unconscious destinies of men and of nations’ (Bradley, ‘Presuppositions’, 40).

To date, scholars have failed to appreciate the significance – and in most instances, the very presence – of this presupposition (for example, Walsh, *Introduction*, 106-7). Partly, this scholarly neglect reflects the fact that Bradley did not give a clear statement of what he took to be the constitutive elements and internal structure of human nature. Nevertheless, this presupposition is important for a number of reasons. (1) It underpinned Bradley’s claim that the critical historian wished to understand other persons with whom he shared a ‘common nature’ as human beings (Bradley, ‘Presuppositions’, 36). (2) Many of the lacunae and ambiguities in Bradley’s historiography seem to be traceable to the fact that it presupposed an underspecified conception of human nature. (3) It was this reliance on a conception of a gradually self-realising universal human nature that established important continuities between Bradley’s progressivist historiography and those of the early Green and Caird.

Bradley’s theory marked an advance on those of the early Green and Caird however, in that he sought to articulate clearly the specific processes required to

operationalize this historiography. This aspect of his theory began logically from the claim that the critical historian could correctly interpret his historical materials if the latter could be made intelligible to the historian using the ideas that constituted the historian's 'world'. Hence, when the critical historian could not find an immediate and clear meaning for an element that he discovered in the historical record, he should attempt to translate that element into the terms of his current hermeneutic framework. Historical understanding was possible, then, only to the extent that the critical historian understood the witness' testimony as forming part of 'a universe, a cosmos, like my own and subject to the same laws' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 29). In other words, as with all acts of translation, this process required the present historian to map the meanings and values contained within the historical record onto his present field of meanings and values. That meant he had to find a way to categorise the evidence presented in the historical record in a manner that had meaning for him given his current way of framing reality.

The critical historian could successfully translate the historical record only to the extent that he could categorise the elements of the historical record by positing 'analogies' between the elements of the witness' testimony and his own (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 60). These analogies acted as the critical historian's Rosetta stone. Once he had posited these analogies, the critical historian should seek to arrange the elements so that they formed a coherent sequence that was intelligible to him. Bradley encapsulated this line of argument thus.

'In observing an altogether new sort of fact, the parts of the fact are brought into the mind by subsumption under certain known heads. If it were not so we could not

observe the fact at all, as it would come into no relation with our minds. This process might improperly be called “analogy”.’ (Bradley, ‘Presuppositions’, 60n)

Every analogy presupposed a wider web of meanings, which Bradley referred to as a ‘world’. In other words, no meaning or fact was properly a ‘mere atom’; it derived its meaning and importance from its relations to other meanings and facts (Bradley, ‘Presuppositions’, 22). These relationships were not merely horizontal (that is, obtaining between terms of the same logical priority), but also vertical (obtaining between terms that presupposed other ideas and which in turn other ideas presupposed). Pursuing the latter claim, Bradley held that every judgement rested upon some logically prior conceptual ground – which he called an ‘absolute presupposition’ (Bradley, ‘Presuppositions’, 21) – that ‘never, as part of a conscious reasoning, was explicitly before the consciousness’ (Bradley, ‘Presuppositions’, 16). Logically, this was a terminal point of historical analysis: ‘Here the process must cease’ (Bradley, ‘Presuppositions’, 16). These absolute presuppositions conceived through analogy to the historian’s experiences then became elements that the critical historian should incorporate into his interpretation of the historical record. Bradley pushed the point further: ‘[historical c]riticism must attempt... to identify its consciousness, so far as possible, with that of the writer’ of the historical material (Bradley, ‘Presuppositions’, 48). It is precisely through such use of analogies, that ‘I partially possess myself of the witness’s consciousness.’ (Bradley, ‘Presuppositions’, 60) As Bosanquet put it, ‘There are some minds we can treat as our own’ (Bosanquet, *Principle*, 331n3). In short, adopting Collingwood’s later terminology, Bradley held that such translation partly entailed a process of re-enactment (Collingwood, *Idea*, 138; see also 215-19, 282-304, 441-50).

Such framing and re-enactment were necessary because the documents were inherently human creations: their meanings originated in the nature and perspectives of the particular human beings who produced them. While 'the historical record is the world of human individuality', 'the historical world is [also]... the course of its development in time' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 36). As such, at best these meanings could be traced to the persistent truths of human nature on the one hand and the complex interactions of historically contingent factors (the creator's psychology, particular circumstances and interests, and so on) on the other.

In addition to using analogies, uncovering absolute presuppositions, and re-enacting the thoughts of the original author, Bradley's historiographical method required the critical historian to seek 'by inference to establish his [the witness'] power and will to narrate faithfully' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 48). This was because the critical historian could trust the historical record only to the extent that he believed both that its original witness had 'integrity' and that the witness had possessed a 'will to observe and judge' that was equal to his own (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 29-30). Bradley saw this operation as relating directly to the previous one. Through the historian's re-enactment of the witness' thoughts, 'Our objective world is known to be the same, his [the witness'] subjective power of extending the object is known to be equal to mine, and the distinction of our individualities makes no difference to the matter itself.' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 30) To reiterate: for Bradley the historian could only arrive at a judgment regarding the reliability of a witness' testimony 'on the assumption of the identification of our own with another's consciousness (in general, or in relation to one particular division of the world)' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 31).

Arriving at such a judgement were possible only if the historian applied 'the same criteria' when assessing the accuracy of the witness' judgement as he used when assessing the accuracy of his own judgments (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 30). Yet, this relied on the perspective of the particular critical historian. For example, Bradley argued that historical research should not adopt the increasingly popular methods of natural science, which sought universally valid laws of social change (Buckle, *History*, vol.1, 27-31). For Bradley, such scientific laws could not be discovered in historical documents because the surviving records framed the events in highly localised terms (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 4). As an individual, Bradley rejected interpretations that gave credence to mesmeric forces and other supernatural fads of the mid-Victorian age (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 33, 41; Conan Doyle, *History*; Schultz, *Sidgwick*, *passim*; Melechi, *Servants*; Gray, *Immortalization*, 1-103). He also rejected traditional approaches that ascribed causal efficacy to non-human forces, such as Biblical literalism in relation to miracles. Bradley as a historian did not believe in the possibility of miracles, and so he could not accept at face value a witness' account of allegedly miraculous past events. No historian could legitimately appeal to evidence that violated his overall understanding of the forces at work in the world.

It is particularly important to emphasize this last point, because it shows that it is not strictly correct to argue, as Walsh and Mander imply, that in itself Bradley's historiography delivered, in Mander's words, 'a naturalistic interpretation of the Bible that excludes miracles' (Walsh, *Introduction*, 106-07; Mander, *British Idealism*, 178). Personally, Bradley wanted to reinterpret naturalistically all miraculous causes claimed in Scripture. However, his historiography required merely that historians

could retain a literal interpretation of 'miraculous' events only if they believed that miracle remained possible. Similarly, Bradley did not commit the historian to the particular beliefs justified by 'the common experiences of reasonable beings' in the historian's particular time and place, as Rubinoff claims (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 18, quoted in Rubinoff, 'Autonomy', 133). Bradley held the 'common experiences of reasonable beings' established only that every reasonable person in the same culture believed for some reason, not for the same reason. Hence, his position was far less dogmatic than either of those which Rubinoff and Mander attribute to him, because it rested solely on the individual historian's best academic judgement: 'Everything, we have said, depends on personal experience' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 64-70).

It is important to acknowledge this epistemic modesty, because Bradley was very conscious of the problems of resting his historiography on the use of re-enactment and analogies. He expressed explicit concern that it was unclear what it meant to make an analogy between elements of the past and the present (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 59). Moreover, he recognised that the process seemed to entail imposing one's present concerns and attitudes onto core elements of the historical record (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 59). He bit the bullet: of necessity, the critical historian 'moulds the past after the present' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 60n). Yet, with clear regret he argued that it was unavoidable that the elements which constituted the critical historian's internally complex world must constitute 'a canon' for that historian (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 63). Reflecting his epistemic modesty however, he was emphatic that the critical historian's inability to escape his own

time and perspective meant that even the most careful historical judgement could never be certain, only probable: all of his judgments were inferential at best.

Moreover, the canon's authority was very limited: although the particular critical historian's world enjoyed canonical status for him, it was only canonical for other critical historians to the extent that those other historians shared his perspective. Furthermore, any particular critical historian could change his perspective, meaning that his judgements were always subject to change in light of his changing presuppositions and analogies. Finally, claims in the historical record that must be rejected now because they could not be accommodated within the critical historians' worldview at present, were to be reintroduced in light of future discoveries. For example, Bradley noted that, as it was now possible to provide a purely scientific explanation of stigmata where it had not been previously, we could give much greater credence to medieval accounts of their occurrence than previous historians should have done (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 63-64).

In the most general terms, the critical historian should attempt to discern the extent to which past historians and other authors operated with the correct presuppositions; that is, with the presuppositions of critical history. Bradley never stated these presuppositions systematically in his essay, and indeed when listed (as below) they did not build logically on preceding presuppositions like propositions in an extended syllogism. Nevertheless, the following core presuppositions can be identified and serve as a useful summary of Bradley's *Presuppositions of Critical History*.

1. History is the product of human relationships.

2. Human nature is consistent across time, even though its various manifestations are culturally conditioned and hence historically situated.
3. Our understanding of human nature would be internally coherent if that nature were to be expressed fully.
4. Humans instinctively seek to manifest their nature in the world and in their thoughts.
5. History studies the manifestation of the most significant past practical effects of human actions and hence of the culturally conditioned human nature that underpin those actions.
6. The critical historian seeks to present the past as an ordered whole. 'The whole interest of history is to have one truth, one reality, then as now, and now as then.' (Bradley, 'Presuppositions', 62)
7. Historians can only interpret the past by re-enacting past thought, analysing the historical record using analogies to current experience, so as to judge what was possible in the past and what was not. Only in this way could they properly ascribe significance to the material (documents, and so on) that was found in the historical record.
8. The best perspective on historical material that any one critical historian had available to him was his own carefully thought-out world-view, including its principles of categorisation and prioritisation of historical material.
9. Every historical judgement was perspectival, inductive, and open to legitimate challenge by other critical historians.

6. Bradley, Bosanquet and Collingwood

Bradley's historiography was very influential, not least on Bosanquet and Collingwood. Appreciating this fact sheds important light on the mistaken received view noticed at the start of this article, which portrays Bosanquet as a typical British idealist who saw history as always inferior to philosophy. Bosanquet was indeed typical, but not as the critics allege. For example, he argued in his *Logic* (1888) that 'What we mean by History is the revelation of man's nature in action and intelligence' (Bosanquet, *Logic*, vol.1, 277; see Bosanquet, *Civilization*, 27-126). In his *History of Aesthetic* (1892), he interpreted history as fundamental to civilization's development: 'The basis of life will always henceforward be intellectual and historical' (Bosanquet, *History*, 468). Historical research into fine art was valuable for the reason that Green, Caird and Bradley valued historical research in all domains: it uncovered determinate manifestations of beauty and truth allowing them to be analysed in light of the highest achievement of the contemporary age (cf. Boucher, 'Creation', 194-95). This enabled everyone to better understand the nature and place of beauty in human nature and life, a subject which so fascinates us in the present (Bosanquet, *History*, 462-65; see also, for example, 2, 4-9, 68, 150-51, 180-81, 349-51). Crucially, Bosanquet endorsed Bradley's historiography without reservation in his important essay 'Atomism in History' (1911) (Bosanquet, *Social*, 22n1 and associated text). Indeed, he was a staunch defender of Bradleyian critical history as an academic discipline, which he saw as a necessary activity in a civilized country (Bosanquet, *Social*, 20-40). In these ways, Bosanquet showed a respect for critical historiography that was typical of the British idealists, and specifically endorsed the Bradleyian position.

Collingwood was also inspired by Bradley's historiography. Nevertheless, his treatments in *The Idea of History* of latter's historiography were uneven, with clear statements of the latter's basic structure appearing alongside criticisms of bowdlerised versions of Bradley's position. For example, towards of the book Collingwood alleged that Bradley did not provide criteria that could be used to establish historical truth. Instead, they enabled one merely to establish the possibility that certain natural events had occurred. That is, Collingwood's Bradleyian historian was unable to assess whether people in the past held certain views or performed certain actions. Rather, Collingwood alleged, Bradley believed the historian could assess only whether the recorded accounts of past events relied on causes that were possible – that were not miraculous, for example (Collingwood, *Idea*, 238-40). Similarly misplaced were Collingwood's allegations: (i) that Bradley reduced all knowledge to knowledge in the mode of natural science; and (ii) that the historian should not modify his own worldview in light of his historical research (Collingwood, *Idea*, 138-41). Collingwood even treated, without any firm evidence, Bradley's later logical and metaphysics as being Bradley's extensions (rather than, possibly, modifications) of Bradley's early historiography (Collingwood, *Idea*, 140-41). Collingwood's objections and manoeuvres fly in the face of much of what has been noted above: Bradley was neither so crude nor so limited.

Nevertheless, it should remain clear that although Collingwood's own theory of historical knowledge is much more famous and influential, in many respects it was essentially a reformulation and extension of Bradley's historiography (McIntyre, 'Historicity'). This claim holds for the theories of presuppositions and re-enactment, whose fundamental structure and even terminology Bradley developed 66 years

before the publication of Collingwood's *Essay on Metaphysics* (*Idea*, 138, 215-19, 282-304, 441-50; *Essay*, 21-57). Certainly, Bradley did not anticipate Collingwood's 'logic of question and answer' (Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 29-43; cf. Burns, 'Collingwood'; DeVall, 'Collingwood'). However, given the controversy which that logic has provoked among Collingwood scholars, revisiting Bradley's writings might seem a rather more promising method for future historical research.

7. Conclusion

What should one take away from this article? Firstly, there is the inadequacy of the received view of British idealist historiography. It is not the case that, before Collingwood and Oakeshott, the movement had failed to clearly articulate the philosophical role of historical knowledge and its significance (Skodo, *Afterlife*, 21). Rather, like Hegel, the early Green, Caird and Bradley defended variants of the view that famously Collingwood articulated during his analysis of Hegel that, since history proper concerns solely 'the life of thinking beings', 'all history is the history of thought' (Collingwood, *Idea*, 115). Secondly, the article shows that one should reject the received view that Green was a pure Hegelian, as well as recognising that, from the mid-1870s onwards, he forsook Hegel's historiography because he believed the latter presupposed a rigid dialectical method and supra-human agency. Thirdly, one should take away from this this article that, like Caird and Bradley, even the later Green could endorse the Hegelian claim that 'The higher categories underlie the lower and ultimately break thro' to the surface' (Letter from Caird to Talbot, 6 January 1905, in Jones and Muirhead, *Life*, 241). Fourthly, one should rethink Collingwood's claim to originality. More than half a century before Collingwood

developed his historiography, Bradley urged the critical historian to seek historical absolute presuppositions and re-enact the thoughts of historical figures. Unlike Collingwood, Bradley combined these claims with a conception of universal human nature, arguing that the historical record contained imperfect expressions of the development of civilised human consciousness. Yet, Bradley's historiography relied upon psychology, and did not invoke the Absolute or eternal consciousness that underpin the historiographies of Hegel, the early Green and Caird. The final thing to notice is that, while controversial, Bradley's development of a form of humanized progressivism means that Bradley did indeed inaugurate what Collingwood described as a 'Copernican revolution in the theory of historical knowledge' (Collingwood, *Idea*, 240), but for reasons that Collingwood and most contemporary scholars still do not fully understand.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Michael Beaney, Jim Connelly, Leo Catana, Mogens Laerke, Peter Nicholson, Jon Stewart and audiences at the universities of Copenhagen (Denmark), Hull (UK) and Urbino (Italy), as well as two anonymous reviewers.

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