
Hegelianism in the UK

John Stewart, Encyclopedia Britannica, with a short
introduction by Kai Froeb

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Editorial remarks

Below, we cite first the excellent overview of the British Hegel reception by John Stewart, which covers the period from its early beginning in the 2nd half of the 19th century until today.

Before the world wars, where for understandable reasons most traces of German culture were attacked in the English world, Hegel is said to have been the major Philosopher in Oxford and Cambridge. The long quote from the “Hegelianism” article in the “Encyclopedia Britannica” of 1911, written by an English Hegelian, gives us an impression of how the English Hegelians saw themselves at that time. That part of the article is in the public domain.

John Stewart on the reception of the Hegelian Philosophy in the UK

The reception of Hegel in British philosophy has been particularly complicated and problematic, since it was there that Hegel found some of his most fervent allies as well as his most hostile critics. The first important expositors of Hegelian philosophy in Great Britain were T. H. Green (1836-82) and Edward Caird (1835-1908). Green employed idealist arguments against some of the classics of British philosophy, such as the empiricism of Locke and Hume. His main work, the **Prolegomena to Ethics**, was left unfinished at his death. By contrast, Edward Caird, a more systematic thinker and dynamic expositor than his long-time friend Green, produced a vast philosophical corpus in his lifetime. His early writings include **A Critical Account of the Philosophy of Kant and Hegel**. His other two significant works, **The Evolution of Religion** and **The Evolution of Theology in the Greek Philosophers**, strongly reflect Hegelian methodology in their attempt to trace the conceptual movement of theological ideas through their manifold historical forms. He, like Hegel, sought to unite long-standing pairs of opposites from the philosophical tradition, such as freedom and necessity, subject and object, and reason and passion.

The second generation of Hegel scholars in Great Britain was constituted by, among others, F. H. Bradley (1846-1924) and Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923). Bradley’s influential investigation, **Ethical Studies**, shows the marked influence of Hegel’s moral theory. In that work he examines different aspects of Hegel’s conception of **Sittlichkeit** or ethical life. He then uses this account of the situatedness of moral principles in historical communities to criticize the abstract individualism of utilitarianism and classical liberalism. On the other hand, Bosanquet’s influential essay, “Logic as the Science of Knowledge” (1883), betrays the influence of Hegel’s logical and metaphysical theory. There Bosanquet criticizes the hard distinction between judgment and inference as well as between deduction and induction. In addition, he tries in a Hegelian spirit to show the systematic unity of various logical propositions. From this generation of Hegel scholars came the teachers of the eventual founders of analytic philosophy such as Russell, Moore, and others.

J. M. E. McTaggart (1866-1925) developed, along Hegelian lines, his own theory of idealism, which served as a ready target for the incipient analytic philosophy. After his early exegetical works on Hegel, such as **Studies in the Hegelian Dialectic** (1896), **Studies in Hegelian Cosmology** (1901), and **A Commentary on Hegel’s Logic** (1911), McTaggart applied Hegelian methodology to construct his own philo-

sophical system in his magnum opus, **The Nature of Existence** (vol. 1, 1921; vol. 2, 1927). There he developed a theory of ultimate spiritual reality, which he conceived as a reified aggregate of individual minds. McTaggart's extravagant metaphysical form of Hegelianism made him a preferred object of criticism of the early analytic philosophers, and it was his view that for many came to be synonymous with that of Hegel himself.

The birth of logical positivism and British analytic philosophy at the turn of the century has been analyzed largely by intellectual historians as a result of a rejection of the generation of British Hegel scholars, which included Bradley and McTaggart, in favor of a more "rigorous" philosophical method favoring analysis and more in line with mathematics or linguistics. Both Russell and Moore were convinced idealists in their early years, and this conviction of youth, as often happens, became the target of the most impassioned criticism in maturity. This intellectual transition is marked by the publication of Moore's essay "Refutation of Idealism" in 1903. As analytic philosophy grew and came into its own, distinctions hardened between, on the one hand, the various schools of continental philosophy, which traced their origins back to Hegel, and, on the other hand, the new analytic philosophy, which rejected Hegel and his followers categorically.

In addition to reasons of philosophical import such as these, there were later a number of historical, and perhaps less rational, reasons involved in the rejection of Hegelian philosophy in England and America. During the World Wars, Hegel's popularity, like that of many German thinkers, was at low ebb in the English-speaking world. First in L. T. Hobhouse's antipathetic **The Metaphysical Theory of the State**, Hegel's "wicked doctrine" was made responsible for the ills of the First World War. Later, Karl Popper picked up where Hobhouse left off and performed the same function of saddling Hegel with the atrocities of World War II. He galvanized the already negative sentiment against Hegel and spread it beyond all previous dimensions with his well-known book **The Open Society and Its Enemies**. In the second tome of that work, Popper, in a rather untempered tone, argues that Hegel's political philosophy amounts to nothing less than a straightforward totalitarianism that has certain affinities with Nazi Germany. Thus, Hegel, like Nietzsche, suffered the fate of being branded as a forerunner of German national socialism, and this unfortunate association had a profound impact at the particular historical moment. This justly criticized reading was, despite its scholarly shortcomings, taken up uncritically by a number of scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. [hegel.net: For a critique of Popper's Hegel critique, see Kaufmann 1959¹]

The freeze between analytic and Continental philosophy gradually began to thaw, thanks largely but unintentionally to the work of P. F. Strawson. With his book, **The Bounds of Sense**, he rendered the service of making a small part of European philosophy reputable in the English-speaking world. In this book, Strawson analyzed Kant's classic, the **Critique of Pure Reason**, and showed how Kant was in fact engaged in a number of epistemological issues that were relevant to the research program of the analytic philosophy of the day. Since Strawson himself had already established a solid reputation in the analytic camp, his name helped to propel Kant's work into the mainstream discussion of the analytic tradition. Kant became a philosophically legitimate topic in America and England, and a second, independent body

¹ kaufmann1959.htm

of Kant research in English came into being alongside the already existing body of German literature. While Kant enjoyed this comeback of sorts in circles of analytic philosophy, Hegel remained in the shadows. No established analytic philosopher wrote on his philosophy or tried to bring him into the analytic fold. During this time the prejudices against him continued to grow, and he was rarely represented in the classroom or in the professional journals.

Excerpt from Jon Stewart: *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, Ed. Jon Stewart; Published: North-Western University Press, 1996.

(See also the complete forward to the book, out of which the above long quote was excerpted)

Encyclopedia Britannica 1911 on Hegelianism in the UK

On the continent of Europe the direct influence of Hegelianism was comparatively short-lived. This was due among other causes to the direction of attention to the rising science of psychology, partly to the reaction against the speculative method. In England and Scotland it had another fate. Both in theory and practice it here seemed to supply precisely the counteractive to prevailing tendencies towards empiricism and individualism that was wanted. In this respect it stood to philosophy in somewhat the same relation that the influence of Goethe stood to literature. This explains the hold which it had obtained upon both English and Scottish thought soon after the middle of the 19th century.

The first impulse came from **J.F. Ferrier** and **J.H. Stirling in Edinburgh**, and **B. Jowett in Oxford**. Already **in the 1870s** there was a powerful school of English thinkers under the lead of **Edward Caird** and **T.H. Green** devoted to the study and exposition of the Hegelian system. With the general acceptance of its main principle that the real is the rational, there came in the **1880s** a more critical examination of the precise meaning to be attached to it and its bearing on the **problems of religion**.

The earlier Hegelians had interpreted it in the sense that the world in its ultimate essence was not only spiritual but self-conscious intelligence whose nature was reflected inadequately but truly in the finite mind. They thus seemed to come forward in the character of exponents rather than critics of the Western belief in God, freedom and immortality.

As time went on it became obvious that without departure from the spirit of idealism Hegel's principle was capable of a different interpretation. Granted that rationality taken in the sense of inner coherence and self-consistency is the ultimate standard of truth and reality, does self-consciousness itself answer to the demands of this criterion? If not, are we not forced to deny ultimate reality to personality whether human or divine? The question was definitely raised in **F.H. Bradley's 'Appearance and Reality' (1893; 2nd ed., 1897)** and answered in the negative. The completeness and self-consistency which our ideal requires can be realized only - in a form of being in which subject and object, will and desire, no longer stand as exclusive opposites, from which it seemed at once to follow that the finite self could not be a reality nor the infinite reality a self. On this basis Bradley developed a theory of the Absolute which, while not denying that it must be conceived of spiritually, insisted that its spirituality is of a kind that finds no analogy in our self-conscious experience.

More recently J.M.E. McTaggart's '**Studies in Hegelian Dialectic**' (1896), '**Studies in Hegelian Cosmology**' (1901) and '**Some Dogmas of Religion**' (1906) have opened a new chapter in the interpretation of Hegelianism. Truly perceiving that the ultimate metaphysical problem is, here as ever, the relation of the One and the Many, McTaggart starts with a definition of the ideal in which our thought upon it can come to rest. He finds it where (a) the unity is for each individual, (b) the whole nature of the individual is to be for the unity. It follows from such a conception of the relation that the whole cannot itself be an individual apart from the individuals in whom it is realized, in other words, the Absolute cannot be a Person. But for the same reason—viz, that in it first and in it alone this condition is realized — the individual soul must be held to be an ultimate reality- reflecting in its inmost nature, like the monad of Leibniz. The complete harmony of the whole. In reply to Bradley's argument for the unreality of the self, Hegel is interpreted as meaning that the opposition between self and not-self on which it is founded is one that is self-made and in being made is transcended. The fuller our knowledge of reality the more does the object stand out as an invulnerable system of ordered parts, but the process by which it is thus set in opposition to the subject is also the process by which we understand and transform it into the substance of our own thought. From this position further consequences followed. Seeing that the individual soul must thus be taken to stand in respect to its inmost essence in complete harmony with the whole, it must eternally be at one with itself a change must be appearance. Seeing, moreover, that it is, and is maintained in being, by a fixed relation to the Absolute, it cannot fail of immortality. No pantheistic theory of an eternal substance continuously expressing itself in different individuals who fall back into its being like drops into the ocean will here be sufficient. The ocean is the drops. "The Absolute requires each self not to make up a sum or to maintain an average but in respect of the self's special and unique nature". Finally as it cannot cease, neither can the individual soul have had a beginning. Pre-existence is as necessary and certain as a future life. If memory is lacking as a link between the different lives, this only shows that memory is not of the substance of the soul.

In view of these differences (amounting almost to an antinomy of paradoxes) in interpretation, it is not surprising to find that recent years have witnessed a violent **reaction** in some quarters **against Hegelian influence**. This has taken the direction on the one hand of a **revival of realism**, on the other of a **new form of subjective idealism**. As yet neither of these movements has shown sufficient coherence or stability to establish itself as a rival to the main current of philosophy in England. But they have both been urged with sufficient ability to arrest its progress and to call for a reconsideration and restatement of the fundamental principle of idealist philosophy and its relation to the fundamental problems of religion. This will probably be the main work of the next generation of thinkers in England.

Excerpt from Encyclopedia Britannica 1911 article: Hegelianism