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Faith, Idealism, and Logic

Lord Macaulay, man of letters, member of Parliament, the only historian ever raised to the peerage on the strength of his work, recorded in his diary in 1852 his first and only attempt to read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason.*

I received today a translation of Kant. . . . I tried to read it, but found it utterly unintelligible, just as if it had been written in Sanscrit. Not one word of it gave me anything like an idea except a Latin quotation from Persius. It seems to me that it ought to be possible to explain a true theory of metaphysics in words that I can understand. I can understand Locke, and Berkeley, and Hume, and Reid, and Stewart. I can understand Cicero's Academics, and most of Plato; and it seems odd that in a book on the elements of metaphysics . . . I should not be able to comprehend a word. (Blanshard 1954, 1, quoting Trevelyan 1923, 515)

Despite this reaction from one of Britain's leading intellectuals, in twenty-five years the philosophy of Kant and, more amazing still, Hegel had progressed from being unintelligible to providing much of the metaphysical backbone of the dominant philosophy. It supplanted both empiricism and the Scottish philosophy of common sense, while claiming possession of articulate bands of followers at Glasgow and Oxford. This change in the philosophical climate was certainly not the result of the attractive style in which German philosophy was written. It was not the result of the fact that in the 1840s many Balliol men began to converse and correspond (among themselves, of course) in German, although this speeded the process (Faber 1957, 179). Despite the common concerns of British romantic poets and German philosophers, it was not the activities of poets that domesticated the alien philosophy, although some of them, particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge, provided essential aid (A. C. Bradley

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1969). More than anything else it was a result of the fact that German
philosophy provided a contribution to the leading intellectual concern
of thinking inhabitants of Britain: evangelical Christianity. In this chap-
ter I explain how Idealism provided a defense of the faith and how the
need for such a defense was the force behind the rise of British Ideal-
ism. To do this I will begin by briefly describing the Victorian crisis of
faith. I will then explain the stages by which German idealism, particu-
larly in its Hegelian form, developed in Britain as a response to it: how
the elements for this defense were introduced by James Hutchinson Stir-
ling, elaborated by William Wallace and Edward and John Caird, and
systematized by T. H. Green. I will conclude by explaining how internal
problems in the Hegelian defense of religion engendered the need for an
idealistic examination of the principles of logic, a need that F. H. Bradley
attempted to satisfy.

I

Nineteenth-century Britain was the scene of an evangelical revival. It
began much earlier, in 1739, with the preaching of John Wesley and
George Whitefield, and by the mid-Victorian years it had affected the
whole of Victorian society. Its physical presence in the form of sermons
and religious pamphlets, the most common Victorian publications, was
enormous. By the time of his death in 1892, the most popular Victorian
preacher, Charles Spurgeon, had sold 50,000,000 copies of his sermons.
A young Victorian from a good family might hear as many as 1,000 ser-
mons before reaching majority (Young 1960, 14). Those less exposed to
sermons would still encounter Christianity as a central concern in almost
every serious piece of Victorian literary culture. Its effects extended from
the printed word to language itself. Biblical categories were commonly
used to categorize people; prostitutes, for example, were Magdalenes.
It was politically important as well. Evangelical propaganda led to the
suppression of duels and blood sports, evangelical drives to protect chil-
dren in factories enjoyed some success, evangelicals played an important
role in prison reform, and in their most impressive accomplishment by
1807 they had succeeded in abolishing the slave trade (Halévy 1961,
453–7). They played a dominant role in education: 55 percent of chil-
dren between 5 and 15 were enrolled in church-run Sunday schools. Every
major figure in British political life from 1830 to 1870 with the exception
of Palmerston was touched by evangelicalism (Ensor 1936, 137). It has
even been claimed that evangelicalism was responsible for the stability

of the institutions of British society in a revolutionary century (Halévy 1961, 387). As R. C. K. Ensor has said, "No one will ever understand Victorian England who does not appreciate that among highly civilized, in contradistinction to more primitive, countries, it was one of the most religious that the world has ever known" (Ensor 1936, 137).[1] The intellectual, moral, and political cultures of Victorian Britain were based on evangelical Christian foundations.

Yet its success created problems. There were two essential elements in evangelicalism. First, evangelicalism was marked by its concern with individuals, not only in this life but in the next. Earthly life was important only as a preparation for eternity, when individuals would be judged for their actions during their earthly lives and punished or rewarded accordingly. Even more important was a second belief which grounded the first, that the Bible was literally true. This included belief in a transcendent God who created the world in time (Webb 1933, 9). Yet despite the centrality of these beliefs in Victorian life, by the mid-Victorian years the second belief was being seriously challenged by the natural sciences and by scholarly studies of Scripture.

The challenge came initially from geology and then from biology. As geology established itself as a science in the early nineteenth century, it became apparent that geological processes operated on a larger time scale than allowed for by the number of generations, as recorded in Scripture, since the creation. The age and variety of fossils presented additional problems. If God had created the animals for Adam and his children to have dominion over and preserved them with the aid of Noah, why were there fossils of extinct species? The active involvement of gentleman scientists, including a large number of clergy, in geology exacerbated the conflict. Numerous attempts were made in early Victorian Britain to reconcile the Biblical account of creation and Noah's flood with the presence of fossils, but none of these attempts met general acceptance.[2] As Ruskin remarked, "If only the geologists would let me alone, I could do quite well, but those dreadful hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses" (Himmelfarb 1968, 239). The conflict became more extreme when Charles Darwin proposed his theory of evolution. This theory not only eliminated the need for divine creation, but it also suggested that the moral of the Garden of Eden story, that human beings have *fallen*, is incorrect. From an evolutionary perspective, human beings have *risen* from lower animals (Webb 1933, 76–7).

Likewise, the scholarly study of Scripture challenged the evangelical belief in the literal truth of the Bible. This attack, too, was a result of the

success of the natural sciences. Because of the outstanding achievements of natural philosophy, efforts were made to define scientific method and apply it to the moral sciences as well. The most familiar of these attempts is embodied in John Stuart Mill's *A System of Logic* (Webb 1933, 63–4). Yet as textual principles were applied to Scripture it became apparent that the Biblical narratives could not be construed to be the divinely dictated stories that evangelicals claimed they were. Thoughtful Victorians were thus caught in a conflict between their religious beliefs and their intellectual commitments. They were unwilling to abandon evangelical Christianity, but the intellectual basis for it was rapidly eroding.

Victorian literature provides a record of this conflict, not only between different individuals but even within the same individual. A well-known statement of it was given by the extremely popular poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in *In Memoriam*. Published in 1850, before the publication of *The Origin of Species*, the poem testifies to the tension already present before the Darwinian controversy. The occasion for the poem was the death of the poet's friend Arthur Hallam. Taken as a whole the poem provides a record of Tennyson's attempt to reconcile himself with Hallam's death. Because part of Tennyson's difficulty in reaching such a reconciliation lay in his skepticism about immortality, the religious doubt most strongly expressed in the poem is doubt about personal immortality. Yet Tennyson's doubt is not confined to immortality. The climax of despair in the poem occurs in Sections 55 and 56 when Tennyson extends this doubt to all spiritual values. Here he represents nature as caring nothing for either individuals or whole species and so crying out against human moral and religious values and burying them along with humanity. In his words

> . . . . And he, shall he,
> Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,
>   Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
>   Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,
> Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,
>
> Who trusted God was love indeed
>   And love Creation's final law –
>   Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
> With ravine, shriek'd against his creed –
>
> Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,
>   Who battled for the True, the Just,
>   Be blown about the desert dust,
> Or seal'd within the iron hills? (1906, sec. 56)

Tennyson's question is whether a loving God controls the world or whether the world is subject to random violence that will eventually wipe out the only being who ever believed in a loving God. The implication of such an event would be that human values are merely human and not built into the structure of the world by an omnipotent but loving Creator.

As the poem continues, Tennyson gradually becomes reconciled to the death of his friend and, as a consequence, is able to resolve his doubts.[3] He does not, however, find this resolution easily. Part of the power of *In Memoriam* is that it so successfully blends Tennyson's honest doubt with his deep desire for belief. The belief he finally is able to salvage is a tenuous thing – belief without proof, much evidence, or even strong conviction supporting it. It is the personal answer of a poet, but it did not prove to be an intellectually satisfying answer for many thinking Victorians.

Other Victorian writers, like Matthew Arnold and A. H. Clough, were conscious of the same conflict, but unable to reach even this tentative solution. This lack of a firm resolution of the conflict in literature was admitted by the writers and stressed by the philosophers. Many thinking Victorians did not find a personal solution like Tennyson's intellectually comforting. They could admit that there is much good philosophy in poems like *In Memoriam* while recognizing that the personal view expressed by the poet is not a reasoned solution to the problem. Someone who held it as a poetic truth might still believe it to be false from a scientific standpoint. Many regarded this as an undesirable state of affairs and looked to philosophy to reconcile these beliefs in a rational way (e.g., Green 1906, 1–4).

Yet the two dominant philosophies of mid-Victorian Britain seemed unable to do this. At the end of his life John Stuart Mill did bring the resources of the empiricist tradition to bear on religious problems, but in a way that disconcerted rather than consoled. Mill's reluctant admission that supernatural religion had some utility and that there is some evidence for the existence of a limited, finite God failed to ease the distress of his more religious contemporaries (1969, 419–20, 482). Furthermore, in his last major work, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, Mill succeeded for all practical purposes in destroying the reputation of the last original member of the Scottish school of common sense. Taking its origin from Thomas Reid, this school claimed to defend common sense and religion against Hume's skepticism. It was the other considerable philosophy in mid-Victorian Britain. By attacking Hamilton so effectively, Mill showed that the Scottish school was unable to reconcile religious belief with scientific theory.

The inability of these philosophies to deal with the Victorian problem was not just the result of the fact that their arguments were unacceptable. Even more telling was the fact that neither school seemed to be able to address the issues effectively. Mill had nothing substantial but doubts to add to the views of William Paley, views that Darwin undermined, while the Scottish defense of religion seemed to reduce itself to nothing more than simple agnosticism. As a contemporary writer put matters, with

> . . . the recent crowding in of new scientific conceptions. . . . Neither system seems to present its leading principle bent as one would like to see it into the curves and junctures of the most anxious thought of our time. (Masson 1877, 137; quoted in James Bradley 1979, 16)

The stage was thus set for the arrival of a new form of philosophy. Mid-Victorian culture faced a serious question which its members were able to formulate effectively but unable to answer in a principled, rational way. A new philosophy seemed necessary to provide the answer.

II

The stirrings of a new philosophy had been felt for some time. In separate ways Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle voiced important themes found in German idealism. Neither, however, developed them in the systematic way that some thinking Britons felt was needed to deal with the current crisis. At the same time, two British philosophers, John Grote and J. F. Ferrier, began to develop their own versions of idealism. Unfortunately, John Grote, who had the disadvantage of being eclipsed by his older utilitarian brother George, died before he was able to effectively systematize his views, and Ferrier's works, although systematic, never captured public attention. The first idealistic work to do so was James Hutchinson Stirling's dark, uneven Carlylean tome, *The Secret of Hegel*.[4] This book introduced German philosophy as the answer to the British crisis of faith and contained, in a very rough form, the strategy for defending the faith that subsequent British idealists would develop.

While visiting Germany in 1857, Stirling, a Glasgow physician, saw the name "Hegel" and "was very peculiarly impressed by it" (1898, xviii). After learning that Hegel was by repute the deepest and the darkest philosopher, the one who had reconciled philosophy to Christianity, Stirling set out to master his system. The result, published eight years later, was a two-volume, 1,000-page opus of irregular contents. After opening with a preface defending the value of German philosophy, it continues with a

series of long notes, originally not intended for publication, that chronicle Stirling's thoughts as he began to understand Hegel. This section, amounting to almost one-third of the book, is aptly titled "The Struggle to Hegel." It includes discussions of Kant, Coleridge, Fichte, Schelling, and Plato, along with explanations of some parts of Hegel. This is followed by a translation of the first section of *The Science of Logic*, "Quality," to which is appended a commentary. The next section is a partial translation interspersed with commentary of the second section of *The Science of Logic*, "Quantity." The volume is rounded out by a discussion of some of Hegel's commentators and an application of Hegel's views to what Stirling saw as the problems of his day.[5]

The Secret of Hegel was by no means a bestseller, but for such a weighty book it sold remarkably well. There were many favorable reviews, and Stirling received letters filled with praise from writers as diverse as J. E. Erdmann, Thomas Carlyle, T. H. Green, and Ralph Waldo Emerson (Muirhead 1931, 170–1). More than anyone else, Stirling introduced Hegel to a British audience and made his views intellectually respectable, even if not fully understood. He also provided an important service by finding English equivalents for some of Hegel's German terminology. Most important of all, he succeeded in showing in a preliminary way how Hegel could soothe mid-Victorian anxieties (James Bradley 1979, 17–20).

Four elements in Stirling's approach to Hegel were particularly important for the early British idealists. First, Stirling situated Hegel's thought in the series of systems of philosophy that, in Stirling's view, constitute the history of philosophy. Unlike many philosophers in this century who have seen the history of philosophy as a series of attempts, often misguided, to solve the perennial problems of philosophy, Stirling saw it as an ordered sequence of philosophical systems. This order exhibited the progress of reason, because each new system added essential elements for the rational understanding of reality.[6] This sequence reached its climax in Hegel, who showed that reality was completely a manifestation of reason. Stirling thought Hegel was the greatest thinker of the modern world and closed modern thought just as Aristotle closed ancient thought (1898, 78). He thus approached Hegel as a systematic philosopher whose thought should be evaluated by comparing it with other systems of thought.

Second, Stirling approached Hegel through Kant. This allowed Stirling to attribute Kant's project of reconciling science and religion to Hegel. Like a good Scottish nationalist, Stirling claimed that just as Hume inspired Kant, so Kant inspired Hegel (1898, 185). But while Hume awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumbers and so changed the direction of

philosophy, Hegel merely completed what Kant had initiated. As Stirling put it, the secret of Kant is the secret of Hegel (1898, 98). Kant's secret, his Copernican revolution, consisted in his claim that the familiar objects of the everyday world are partially constituted by the experiencing subject. In Stirling's view, this meant that sensations, contributed by a source external to finite minds, the thing-in-itself, are converted into objects by a priori subjective machinery in finite minds. This machinery includes the forms of space and time and the categories that are functions of the transcendental unity of apperception. Because these categories are functions that enable finite minds to form judgments, they are rational, logical categories. Consequently, the world as finite minds know it, the world constructed by subjectivity from sensation, is shot through with rationality. This is made possible by the fact that it is a purely phenomenal world. It depends for its existence on the rational activity of a subject working with materials contributed by the unknown thing-in-itself (1898, 156–8).

As Stirling saw it, Kant succeeded in showing that the phenomenal world is rational, but he failed to show that this is the only world there is – he failed to eliminate the thing-in-itself. By failing to include the thing-in-itself, Kant's Copernican revolution was incomplete. Stirling thought that it was completed by Hegel, who eliminated the thing-in-itself and thus showed that reality was completely in accordance with reason. Instead of being the product of sensations from an unknown source, Hegel showed, objects were categories materialized and externalized by the divine mind in which finite human minds participate (1898, 84–5).

The third element in Stirling's approach that was appropriated by the early British idealists was Stirling's belief that the work in which Hegel succeeded in eliminating the thing-in-itself was not the *Phenomenology of Spirit* but *The Science of Logic*. It did this, Stirling thought, by providing a proper deduction of the categories. Rather than merely following Kant's lead and organizing the categories by means of an external principle, which in Kant's case was supposedly a list of the kinds of judgments recognized by formal logicians, Hegel showed that the categories defined the interconnected, unfolding nature of thought and reality (1898, 335–8). Hegel's *Logics* thus became the vehicle by means of which Hegel entered Britain.

The last and most important element in Stirling's approach to Hegel was his use of Hegel as a Christian apologist. Stirling differed from later idealists, however, by remaining relatively orthodox. In the "Preliminary Notice" to *The Secret of Hegel* he announced that "Kant and Hegel . . . have

no object but to restore Faith – Faith in God – Faith in the immortality of the Soul and the Freedom of the Will – nay, Faith in Christianity as the Revealed Religion – and that, too, in perfect harmony with the Right of Private Judgment, and the Rights, or Lights, or Mights of Intelligence in general" (1898, xxii). Stirling thought Hegel's *Logic* shows – this is the secret of Hegel – that the world is a materialization of rational thought. But, as Stirling reminds his readers, this is not the thought of a finite spirit but of "God as he is in his 'eternal essence before the creation of the world and any finite spirit'" (1898, 85).[7] In proving that the world is an externalization of thought, Hegel is thus proving, at least in Stirling's view, the existence of God. Because reality is God's thought, no scientific investigation, if properly conducted, can cast doubt on God's existence.

Even though the strategy behind Stirling's use of Hegel is clear, more is required to show that Hegel's argument vindicates Christianity. At the very least, some account is needed of why the thought with which Hegel is concerned is the thought of God. Surprisingly, Stirling provided no such account. In fact, *The Secret of Hegel* lacks any detailed discussion of Hegel's philosophy of religion. Instead, Stirling identifies Hegel with Christianity in two other ways. First, he quotes a large number of passages from Hegel that testify to Hegel's sympathy with revealed Christian doctrines and to the "depth and fervency" of his religious feelings. Second, he makes a large number of extravagant, unsupported claims about the religious implications of Hegel's views. It comes as no surprise that Stirling thinks that Hegel has shown Christianity to be the one and only revealed religion. It is more surprising to find him saying that with Kant's help Hegel vindicated the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God. And it is quite astonishing that he took Hegel's claim that Spirit is embodied in finite particulars to show that the soul is necessarily immortal and that for Hegel God is a personal God (Stirling 1898, 717–21). Stirling did not defend these claims. He only assured his readers that Hegel had shown them to be true.

This allowed Stirling to use Hegel uncritically to combat the two main scholarly disciplines that were undermining the faith of his contemporaries. He was more successful in defusing the force of the scholarly study of Scripture. He criticized it for grubbing in historical fact and, following Hegel, argued that the essence of Christianity is not to be found in its external, historical details but in its spiritual core. Like other matters of fact, historical facts are, he said, contingent and not essential to the faith. It is the spiritual core of the faith that matters, not its accidental, historical manifestations (1898, 728–9).

He was less successful in dealing with the other major challenge to
Christianity – Darwinism. Because Darwin and Hegel are both concerned
with development, Stirling might have attempted to show that they are
compatible. Instead, he took the unpromising line that Darwinism com-
mitted philosophical mistakes. The major "mistake" identified in *The
Secret of Hegel* concerns the transformation of species. Stirling followed
a passage in Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* (Hegel 1970, 20, sec. 249) by
claiming that nature is organized into a system of grades or species. These
grades or species can be generated from each other, Hegel claimed,
only as logical categories. As really existing, species comprise individu-
als. Only individuals occupy space and time, which, according to Hegel,
is (necessarily!) the realm of contingency. To attempt to identify logical
changes in the contingent realm is a mistake. Consequently, Stirling's
criticism of Darwinism is that it confuses a logical transformation with an
empirical one (1898, 735–47).[8]

As a footnote to the discussion of Stirling, it is worth noting that even
though *The Secret of Hegel* was primarily concerned with religious ques-
tions, it did have a social dimension. Stirling was sharply critical of con-
temporary uses of political economy in British politics. In his view, po-
litical economy represented the principle of Enlightenment, self will. It
failed to see that reason was not confined to the individual, but that there
was a universal reason active in the formation of social institutions. This
was the realm of the ethical, and in his view it was essential that it be
cultivated in Britain. Following the individual self-interest embodied in
political economy would lead only to "a wilderness of self-will and animal
rapine" (1898, 716). Stirling had no positive social program to suggest,
but his mention of the need for one in this context foretold what was to
come from later idealists (1898, 695–719).

Even though Stirling convincingly introduced Hegel to a British audi-
ence as a defender of the faith, he failed to give this defense in *The Secret
of Hegel*. Moreover, none of his many subsequent works had anything re-
motely approaching the importance or influence of *The Secret of Hegel*.
Although he was widely regarded as one of the pioneers who introduced
Hegel into Britain, he did not write the kind of systematic defense of the
faith for which many of the educated were looking. Moreover, he never
obtained a chair in philosophy and so was not in a position to continue
the propagation of idealism by introducing students to Hegel's work.
What he did accomplish, however, should not be underestimated or dis-
missed with a joke about the title of his main work. He pioneered the
first serious British approach to Hegel. By treating Hegel as a systematic