

## CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT BRITISH IDEALISM AND ITS REALIST REJECTION IN THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY PHILOSOPHY

CĂTĂLINA-DANIELA RĂDUCU\*

*Abstract.* Our study approaches the essential differences between the idealism and the realism existing in the British thinking scope at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We focus on what may be rightfully named the “manifest” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century realism, G.E. Moore’s paper, *The Refutation of Idealism*. We include Moore’s arguments in this paper in order to seize both their philosophic pertinence, in defense of the realist position, and the elegant presentation of these arguments, which we believe to be the best illustration of the analytical approach used in philosophy.

The most important exponent of the British idealism, Francis Herbert Bradley, Professor at Merton College, Oxford, was the author of a charming metaphysics, of a Hegelian inspiration, largely exposed in three main works: *The Principles of Logic* (1883), *Appearance and Reality* (1893) and *Essays on Truth and Reality* (1914); he is a special character in the history of philosophy, especially in the British philosophy, because he places himself on a very peculiar position: one can affirm, without the risk of error, Bradley’s opposition, rather than his affiliation to a tradition (the opposition to the British empiricism vs. the affiliation to the Hegelian idealism).

In this particular case, the surprising element is not the *compliance* but the *non-compliance* to the British tradition – the empiricism advocated by Locke, Berkeley, Hume and John Stuart Mill. It is, undoubtedly, very surprising for scholar to find a neo-Hegelian episode in the development of the British philosophy. This fact constitutes the main reason for Bradley to be proud of his doctrine. In *The Principles of Logic* he affirmed with great satisfaction the originality of the philosophical current that he imposed in the British philosophy, emphasizing that he did not know to exist anywhere (in the English space, of course), a “Hegelian school” similar to the one that he created<sup>1</sup>. In regard to “the school of experience”, as he called it, “Bradley was not only aware of its existence, was not only in disagreement with its advocates, but felt for these ones a mixture of tolerance and disdain”<sup>2</sup>.

Undoubtedly, Bradley’s work is highly abstract and difficult to understand, and we do not intend to expose it here, not even in its main aspects. Our interest is to find out which of the particular ideas of the neo-Hegelian doctrine awoke the “rebellion” of some realists, such as George Edward Moore or Bertrand Russell.

\* Institutul de Cercetări Economice și Sociale „Gh. Zane”, Filiala din Iași a Academiei Române.

<sup>1</sup> According to R.A. Wollheim, *F.H. Bradley*, in A.J. Ayer, W.C. Kneale, G.E. Paul, *The Revolution in Philosophy*, London, Macmillan, 1957, pp. 12–13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

Bradley is, nevertheless, innovating, in an absolute manner, the British philosophy, through two extremely important elements: “both in flagrant contradiction to the ideas accepted in the English space, i.e., the separation between psychology, on the one hand, and logic and philosophy, on the other hand, and the monism, the theory according to which the Reality is an indivisible whole”<sup>3</sup>. His influence is, therefore, impossible to ignore in the context of the British philosophy, and its importance is justified by the (negative) way that the realists addressed it in the first place: unanimously, they rejected the second main idea of Bradley’s doctrine.

By separating philosophy and logic of psychology, Bradley clearly marked a break from the British empiricism, identifying, at the same time, what was, in his opinion, the weak point of the empiricists’ arguments: for all of them, the task of philosophy, as a study of the fundamentals of the human knowledge, was first to follow the origin of ideas and then to expose the way in which they combine. According to the empiricists, the ideas were mental images, therefore the object of philosophy were the mental, psychological facts. Instead, Bradley found impossible to accept that philosophy and psychology could share the same object of study. If the idea – the psychologist’s object of study – was a particular, specific, psychological fact, the *Idea* – the philosopher’s object of study – is essentially general: “and, moreover, if the idea studied by the psychologist is something natural, being a part of the natural history of the mind, the idea studied by the philosopher is a product, the result of an action, of a process to which we submit the mental empirical phenomena that exist usually<sup>4</sup>.”

This new vision of Bradley is important because it has vital implications on the relation between thought and reality. The conception of reality that Bradley offers us has, as a central idea, the statement that there cannot be isolated events. Thus, a simple fact of the world is not a simple fact of the world, in the monist conception, but a fact which depends of a certain context, of certain relations that it establishes with other facts of the world, of a space in which it exists and of a time in which it develops, being inseparably linked both to its past and future, but also to the relations that the other facts in the world, to which it is related, have with the space within they exist, with their past, present and future.

Therefore, in order to ensure the uniqueness and the particularity of a certain fact or object, we should, while relating to it, bring into discussion all the relations of our fact or object with all the other, past, present and future, actual or possible objects in the world. Concisely, this means that we have to introduce in our vision the monism, together with the theory of internal relations that characterizes it. Thus, only the Whole is real, the separate things having existence only though and within it; taken separately, they are pure appearances. The reality as a whole transcends all

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

differences which exist only as representations. At the logical level, this conception means, first and foremost, the affirmation of the predicative nature of the judgement, and also of the proposition. The subject and the predicate are nothing but ideas and only together they make up the proposition, which is attributed to the reality.

Therefore, the Reality is the only genuine subject, the propositions are nothing but predicates. There are many idealist sentences that express this conception in a very clear manner: “The undefined Reality is the general subject and the total mass of judgements is the predicate”<sup>5</sup> or “the subject is an idea and the judgement is the conjunction of two ideas and the present reality is qualified through an idea”<sup>6</sup>. The neo-Hegelian logic unrealizes, if the problem could be expressed this way, the subject and the predicate, as they appear within the proposition; the same logic equally unrealizes relations. For the idealists, the relations are products of the spirit. The only relation possessing a certain reality is the relation between the whole and its parts. This kind of relation is a particular case of the relation between identity and difference, in which resides the fundamental distinction between Reality and appearances. And Bradley became famous for the vigorous way in which he denied the reality of relations.

Moreover, according to the idealists, asserting judgements about facts, relating in some way the sentences with the particular facts would mean to brutalize the facts: because the judgement dissects the fact, while analyzing it; let us take a trivial example: to assert of a building that it is grey would mean to separate the building of its colour; but in Reality (as the idealists conceive it), the two are inseparable and so the judgement does not accord the reality. Put in Bradley’s words: “The supposition that the analysis does not mean alteration is a very common and extremely destructive superstition.”<sup>7</sup>

The idealists recognize the diversity; but what they refuse to recognize is the independence of the facts in the world from thought. In other words, when we start thinking, for example, at the grey colour of our building, we are separating the building of its grey colour and from now on they will eternally and irremediably be separate. The conclusion is a tragic one, regarding experience: thus understood, experience consists in a multitude of small different parts, and if we try to link again the building and its colour by saying “The building is grey”, we will assert a false sentence: because, in thought, we already separated the two, therefore they can never appear together again.

It is important to make a remark at this moment: if we are not allowed to separate an object of a certain property that it has at a certain moment, then we are

<sup>5</sup> According to Jean-Gerard Rossi, *La philosophie analytique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1989, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> F.H. Bradley, *The Principles of Logic*, 2nd ed., London, 1922, vol. 1, p. 95, Apud R.A. Wollheim, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

not allowed to separate that object of any other object which would happen in any other place at any other moment. In other words, “if we want to speak of anything, we must speak of everything”<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, if we are allowed to say it, Bradley’s conception contains within itself, its own negation (contradiction – our note, C.R.).

According to Bradley, in order not to fail, we must not only approach things differently than the British tradition, but we must carry out a real re-construction of thought, in agreement with the new conception of reality elaborated by the neo-Hegelian metaphysics. Thus, if it is to be successful in emancipating us from the errors that invade our usual way of thinking, this reconstruction of thought must be accomplished in *two necessary steps*<sup>9</sup>. First, *we must completely stop thinking that the world consists in different and independent objects*, which have certain relations and that could have other relations with other objects without suffering any change in their structure. This equals to a *complete and intentionally irretrievable abandon (rejection) of our common sense*, but is not equal to an annihilation of relations and objects. Therefore, the second step is necessary in the process of the idealist reconstruction: *the existence of all these relations*, as it is seen by the common sense, must be denied at a primary level and *affirmed at a superior level*; their reality is saved at the more or less higher level of the *Absolute*. Thus, the British neo-Hegelianism develops a vision in which the world is seen as a necessary system (equivalent to a work of art – for instance, a sculpture – in which, taken separately, the component parts cannot give the aesthetical value of the whole) created by an absolute Spirit; only in and through it they get the right to exist (and we can compare this situation with that of an artist’s work that appears very rarely, as a result of a genial inspiration).

In the following pages, we intend to submit to the reader’s attention the paper that can rightfully be named “the manifesto” of the 20th century Realism, George Edward Moore’s *The Refutation of Idealism*. John Passmore, in his book *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, emphasizes: “The importance of this essay to the Realist movement can scarcely be overestimated, even if Moore, ever his severest critic, was to write (1922) that «it now appears to me very confused, as well as to embody a great many downright mistakes». And it is historically important in another respect: it is the first example of that minute philosophical procedure, with its careful distinction of issues, its insistence that *this*, not *that*, is the real question – where *this* and *that* had ordinarily been regarded as alternative formulations of the same problem – which was to be Moore’s distinctive philosophical style, exercising, as such, a notable influence on his successors, particularly at Cambridge.”<sup>10</sup>

We find useful, at the present moment, a close and careful exposition of the arguments that Moore uses in this paper, in order to witness their philosophical

<sup>8</sup> R.A. Wollheim, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 21–22.

<sup>10</sup> John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, Penguin Books, 1968, p. 207.

pertinence in defending the realist position, as well as the elegant enchainment of arguments that represent, in our opinion, the best illustration for the analytical method operating in philosophy.

Already in the first lines of the paper, Moore expresses his intention to challenge and call into question, with perfectly logical and reasonable arguments, the idealist thesis claiming that *the universe is spiritual*. From the very beginning Moore exposes, ironically, the main assumptions of the modern idealism regarding the spirituality of reality. When we consider this “spirituality”, Moore says that we can draw two conclusions from what the idealists maintain: 1. *that the universe is very different from what it seems to be* and 2. *that it has a great number of properties that, in reality, it does not seem to have*: “Chairs and tables and mountains *seem* to be very different from us; but, when the whole universe is declared to be spiritual, it is certainly meant to assert that they are far more like us than we think. The idealist means to assert that they are *in some sense* neither lifeless nor unconscious, as they certainly seem to be; and I do not think his language is so grossly deceptive, but that we may assume him to believe that they really are very different indeed from what they seem. And secondly when he declares that they are *spiritual*, he means to include in that term quite a large number of different properties. When the whole universe is declared to be spiritual, it is meant not only that it is in some sense *conscious*, but that it has what we recognize in ourselves as the higher forms of consciousness. That it is intelligent; that it is purposeful; that it is not mechanical; all these different things are commonly asserted of it. (...). When we say it is *spiritual* we mean to say that it has quite a number of excellent qualities, different from any which we commonly attribute either to stars or planets or to cups and saucers.”<sup>11</sup>

Of course, Moore is not resuming the argumentation with the irony towards the basic assumption of idealism. He sets for himself as a goal to offer strong counter-arguments, able to dissolve the entire idealist system. As a system, idealism must have the main property of being logically coherent. From a logical point of view, Moore finds it easier (but nevertheless correct) to refute not *all* but a *single* philosophical argument of the doctrine. Taking into consideration that in any argumentative system, in our case a philosophical system, all premises are linked by the logical operator of the conjunction, all that we need, in order to refute the whole system, is to refute a single premise of the system. This is what Moore proposes, praising, with this occasion, the tools that logic offers him: “And I wish to point out a certain advantage which this procedure gives me – an advantage which justifies the assertion that, if my arguments are sound, they will have refuted Idealism. If I can refute a single proposition which is a necessary and essential step in all Idealistic

<sup>11</sup> G.E. Moore, *The Refutation of Idealism in Mind*, New Series, Vol. 12, No. 48 (October 1903), pp. 433–453. Disponibil la [www.fair-use.org](http://www.fair-use.org)

arguments, then, no matter how good the rest of these arguments may be, I shall have proved that Idealists have *no reason whatever* for their conclusion.”<sup>12</sup>

Modestly, Moore admits that his intention is not to say anything concerning the universe, therefore, from this point of view, his paper is totally uninteresting. His “modest” purpose is, though, to address “a matter upon which not Idealists only, but all philosophers and psychologists also, have been in error, and from their erroneous view of which they have inferred (validly or invalidly) their most striking and interesting conclusions”<sup>13</sup>. If he can prove he is right, while treating this subject matter, then, with certitude, it will “follow that all the most striking results of philosophy – Sensationalism, Agnosticism and Idealism alike – have, for all that has hitherto been urged in their favor, no foundation than the supposition that a chimera lives in the moon”<sup>14</sup>.

The supposition that Moore challenges is, according to him, a “trivial” one but, as ambiguous as it is, it has been strongly advocated so far. The assumption in cause is the common but strong philosophical assertion “*esse est percipi*”, which he considers to be essential for the modern idealism.

What Moore wants to prove is, simply put, that *esse* cannot be *percipi*. In order to fulfil his purpose, as we can imagine, Moore proceeds to a meticulous analysis of each term of the assertion. In the beginning, he refers to the latter: of course, his intention is not to oversimplify its meaning; therefore, in agreement with the idealists, he does not mean that *percipi* would refer exclusively to *sensation*. On the contrary, he accepts that the dignity of this postulate, for the idealists, derives from the fact that *percipi* refers to *thought*. Moore acknowledges that the idealists have the merit to distinguish between *sensation* and *thought*, but he insists on the fact that these two mental activities have something in common: they both are ways of experiencing. Therefore: “whatever *esse is percipi* may mean, it does *at least* assert that whatever is, is *experienced*. (...) If it be not experienced at all, it cannot be either an object of thought or an object of sense.”<sup>15</sup> Moore recommends that, in the following course of argumentation, we should consider that *percipi* can be understood through its reference to what is common to sensation and thought. One of the most recent (at that time) idealist sentences offers Moore the perfect occasion to exercise his analytical genius; in an article recently published in the *International Journal of Ethics*, another famous idealist philosopher of his time, Alfred Edward Taylor<sup>16</sup> maintained that: “what makes [any piece of fact] real can be nothing but its presence as an inseparable aspect of a *sentient experience*”. Or, what Moore wants to

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, I. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, I. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, I. 8.

<sup>16</sup> *International Journal of Ethics*, October, 1902.

show is that: “what makes a thing real cannot possibly be its presence as an inseparable aspect of a sentient experience”<sup>17</sup>.

Setting aside for the moment the term in cause, Moore takes into attention the copula in *esse est percipi*. Moore’s question is: what does this *est* mean? He does not think that it postulates the identity between *esse* and *percipi*, because, if it did, the sentence would lose the dignity of a philosophical postulate; moreover, it would be “an extremely bad definition” – says Moore. So, the copula must have another meaning: whatever is to be understood by *esse*, surely it is not identical with *percipi*. But it is so strongly connected to *percipi*, that anything in this world having *esse*, would surely have the property of being *percipi*, of being experienced.

Moore’s argument is, at this point, so subtle that becomes more and more difficult to follow; this, of course, does not make it less fascinating: *esse est percipi* means “a necessary connexion between *esse* on the one hand and *percipi* on the other; these two words denoting each a distinct term, and *esse* denoting a term in which that denoted by *percipi* is not included”<sup>18</sup>. Thus, the sentence asserting that *esse is percipi* is a synthetic sentence. The error that the idealists commit is that they extend the power of this relationship to the degree of necessity: *what is experienced is necessarily so*, meaning that the object of experience is unconceivable as independent of the subject. According to Moore, the idealists see in this affirmation a necessary truth, which cannot be expressed – he thinks – otherwise but in an analytical proposition or a tautology: “What I suggest then is that Idealists hold the particular doctrine in question, concerning the relation of subject and object in experience, because they think it is an analytic truth in this restricted sense that it is proved by the law of contradiction alone.”<sup>19</sup>

Moore maintains here that the idealists fail to see that the subject and the object of experience are *distinct*, that they are *two* and not *one*, that they do not form an *organic whole*, as those maintain. The idealism pretends that the two are distinct but, at the same time, they are not distinct, that they form an “organic unity”: however, forming such a unity, none of the two distinct things is what it is, outside the relation with the other one. Considering them separate would mean to commit an “illegitimate abstraction”. This is the key-point where Moore’s criticism strikes<sup>20</sup>. The principle of “organic unities” is put forward by the idealists in order to maintain that every time when someone tries to assert something about a part of an organic unity, what is asserted cannot be true unless it is related to the whole: “And this

<sup>17</sup> G.E. Moore, *op. cit.*, I. 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, I. 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, I. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Bertrand Russell also criticizes the principle of “organic unities” and the fascinating and false, at the same time (according to Moore and Russell) *doctrine of internal relations*; Russell will develop, in *The Principles of Mathematics*, the doctrine of external relations. See: Bertrand Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics*, Cambridge: At the University Press, 1903.

principle, so far from being a useful truth, is necessarily false. For if the whole can, nay *must*, be substituted for the part in all propositions and for all purposes, this can only be because the whole is absolutely identical with the part.”<sup>21</sup> This is, of course, false but nevertheless did not stop the idealists from sustaining their right (of course, in a more subtle way) to *affirm and deny the same thing simultaneously*: the principle of organic unities, as well as the principle of combined analysis and synthesis, is used mainly for defending this sophistic practice of maintaining simultaneously two contradictory positions whenever it seems convenient.

Ironically, again, Moore states here a conclusion destined to mark his break from idealism and to affirm the realism that he advocated and developed together with Bertrand Russell: “In this, as in other matters, Hegel’s main service to philosophy has consisted in giving a name to and erecting into a principle, a type of fallacy to which experience had shown philosophers along with the rest of mankind to be addicted. No wonder that he has followers and admirers.”<sup>22</sup>

His following analysis is exemplary in logical clarity and pertinence: asking what a sensation is, Moore distinguishes three elements of the process: the object which generates the sensation, the subject who is aware of the sensation and the sensation itself. The British philosopher makes a highly important determination here which represents the *essence of his realism*: the existence of the object must be separated from the existence of the sensation; the object is, therefore, *independent* of the perceiving subject and continues to exist after the subject stops perceiving it. We have to choose, says Moore, between three possibilities: to admit that only the object exists (this would be the option for the *materialists* – our note, C.R.), to admit that only the “conscience” exists (this would be the option for the *idealists* – our note, C.R.) or to admit that both of them exist (this choice belonging to the *realists* – our note, C.R.).

Having to choose between these three alternatives and following the solid argumentation offered so far, Moore considers that a single universal answer can be given to this question: both the subject and the object of the sensation (and of knowledge, if we are allowed to generalize – our note, C.R.) exist, but the two are distinct and this distinction resides in the difference between “knowledge of an object” and “the known object”, meaning the difference between “mind” and “matter”.

It may seem a truism, a banal assertion, and a commonsense sentence. In our opinion, exactly for their courage to assert principles belonging to commonsense and for the strength they used in arguing, substantiating and underlining those, Russell and Moore remain important in the history of philosophy. In a time dominated by idealism, they were able not only to offer but to impose such a strong alternative to Hegelianism: *the Realism*.

<sup>21</sup> G.E. Moore, *op. cit.*, I. 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.



The fundamental error of the idealists was that they refused to accept the existence of an external world, a world independent of the spirit who could have perceived it or not. By denying the existence of matter, as being exterior to our perception of it, we must nevertheless deny our own experience related to the matter; we are, therefore, forced to deny everything else. Therefore, Moore maintains, the only alternative to accepting the existence of the external world is extreme skepticism, which is equivalent to maintain that nothing exists at all. From this assumption, all possible scenarios fall, together with the alleged alternative offered by the idealism sustaining that *the Spirit only* (therefore *something* – our note, C.R.) *exists*. We may thus conclude, in Moore's words, that this alternative is not acceptable at all, being "as baseless as the grossest superstitions"<sup>23</sup>.

#### REFERENCES

1. Ayer, A.J., *Russell and Moore: The Analytical Heritage*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1972.
2. Moore, G.E., *Proof of an External World*, in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, reprinted in Thomas Baldwin (ed.), *G.E. Moore: Selected Writings*, Routledge, London, 1993.
3. Moore, G.E., *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1953.
4. Moore, G.E., *Philosophical Papers*, Macmillan, New York, 1959.
5. Moore, G.E., *The Refutation of Idealism in Mind*, New Series, Vol. 12, No. 48 (October 1903), pp. 433–453. Disponible sur [www.fair-use.org](http://www.fair-use.org)
6. Wollheim, R.A., *F.H. Bradley*, in A.J. Ayer, W.C. Kneale, G.E. Paul, *The Revolution in Philosophy*, London, Macmillan, 1957.
7. Jean-Gerard Rossi, *La philosophie analytique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1989.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, I. 38.

