

Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison

Photograph: detail of portrait by E. Borthwick by kind permission of the Fine Art Collection of the University of Edinburgh

Andrew Seth (1851-1931), who changed his name to Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison in 1898 because of a legacy, was the most prominent 'personalist' critic of Absolute Idealism in its heyday (c.1880-1920), when British philosophy was dominated by debates about idealism in various forms, and especially the monism of the Absolute Idealists, principally F.H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet and Edward Caird. They, especially Bosanquet, held finite persons along with everything else in the universe, to be mere 'appearances' of a timeless, relationless and impersonal Absolute. It was this which ignited the reaction against Absolute Idealism that came to be known in Britain as 'Personal Idealism', even though significant numbers of the movement ceased to be idealists or never had been idealists in the strict sense of denying the reality, or 'real reality', of matter.¹

Andrew Seth was born in Edinburgh and graduated in philosophy and classics from the University of Edinburgh in 1878. With A.C. Fraser, who held the Chair of Logic and Metaphysics, he studied the Scottish 'Common Sense' philosophers, especially Thomas Reid. But he was also close to J.H. Stirling whose *The Secret of Hegel* (1865) helped to introduce Hegel to British philosophers. Among his fellow students were some who were also to play significant parts in the development of idealism in Britain and in the reaction against it: James Seth, his younger brother, R.B. Haldane, Robert Adamson, D.G. Ritchie and W.R. Sorley.

With a scholarship for two years he went to Berlin, Jena and then Göttingen where he studied with Herman Lotze, the leading German philosopher at the time and an exponent of 'speculative theism' which originated in the 'pantheismusstreit' of Jacobi, Schelling and others against the immanentist monism of Hegel. From Germany he returned to Edinburgh to become assistant to Fraser. He also became a close friend of A.J. Balfour, the Conservative politician who became Prime Minister in 1902 and who had a serious interest in philosophy.

In 1882 he published *The Development from Kant to Hegel*, which helped him to secure the Chair in Logic and Philosophy at the new university in Cardiff. To help him return to Edinburgh, Balfour established the Balfour lectures there, and Seth gave three series of these. He left Cardiff in 1887 to take up the Chair in Logic, Rhetoric and Metaphysics at St Andrews, and in 1891 he returned to Edinburgh in succession to Fraser, where five years later James Seth joined him in the other philosophical professorship. Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, as he was then known, retired in 1919.

German idealism, Kant at first and then Hegel, came to mid- and late-Victorian Britain as a very welcome ally against materialism and what we would now call 'scientific reductionism', pre-eminently represented at the time by Herbert Spencer. Thus in his *The Development from Kant to Hegel* (1882) Pringle-Pattison welcomed Hegel's idealism, developed from Kant by way of Fichte, because it overcame Kant's dualism of mind with its categories organising into knowledge 'appearances' behind which were supposed to lie unknowable 'things-in-themselves' and avoided both taking God to be a merely external object and ordinary pantheism in which God *is* the universe or wholly within it. About those days, Pringle-Pattison wrote five years later in *Hegelianism and Personality* (1887):

Probably no one who has really lived in this phase of thought can fail to remember the thrill with which the meaning of the new principle first flashed upon him, and the light which it seemed to throw upon old difficulties. It had become impossible, with due regard to the unity of things, to conceive God as an *object*, as something quite external to ourselves; and, on the other hand, there seemed nothing but a relapse into ordinary Pantheism, with its submergence of self-consciousness, and all that hangs thereby, in a general life, which reason and conscience alike declare to be inferior to our own. But, in this dilemma, the universal consciousness seemed to rise upon us as a creative power which was not without us, but within, —which did not create a world of objects and leave it in dead independence, but perpetually unrolled, as it were, in each of us the universal spectacle of the world. The world was thus perpetually created anew in each finite spirit, revelation to intelligence being the only admissible meaning of that much-abused term creation. We had here a new and better Berkeleianism, for God in this system (so it seemed), was not an unknown Spirit, hidden, as it were, behind the screen of phenomena; God was not far from any one of us, nay, He was within us, He was in a sense our very Self. Here, too, we had a principle which seemed to satisfy as well as Pantheism the imperative need of unity, but did so without sacrificing the claims of self-consciousness. For Self, as the eternal sustaining Subject of the universe, formed the beginning, middle, and end of the system.

I do not think I can be wrong in attributing to considerations like these the remarkable hold which this conception has exercised over many minds. It flashes upon them like a wholly new point of view, and seems to deliver them from a host of difficulties. The deliverance may be in part illusory, but it is not therefore a mark of speculative weakness to have embraced the conception. On the contrary, it is a conception which only a speculative mind could have originated, and for whose intelligent apprehension a genuine speculative effort is demanded.

None the less, however, is the supposed solution wrapped in fatal ambiguity. When the rush of feeling subsides which first bore conviction in upon our minds, we are reluctantly forced to admit that, whatever adumbrations of the truth such a conception may contain, it is, as it stands, a play of abstractions which is essentially impossible arid unmeaning, but which, if taken seriously as a metaphysic, would deprive both God and man of real existence. For surely, if we do not mean to pay ourselves with words, it is essential to the coherence of the above account that this divine, creative Self should really exist as something more than the individuals whom it constitutes, and in whom it creatively works. (63-50)

Also:

I have a centre of my own—a will of my own—which no one shares with me or can share—a centre which I maintain even in my dealings with God Himself. (228)

Invoked as an enemy of the impersonalism of materialism, Hegel's philosophy had turned out to be no less impersonalist than what it attacked.

The two most sustained passages in which Pringle-Pattison criticised Absolute Idealism and especially Bosanquet, and which also encapsulated previous criticisms, are Lects. XIV and XV of *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy* (1916, revised ed. 1920: 'IG') and his contribution to 'The Mode of Being of Finite Individuals' (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XVIII, 1918, reprinted as *Life and Finite Individuality*, 1918; 'MBFI'), a confrontation, staged in 1917 of Bosanquet and Pringle-Pattison, supported respectively by G.F. Stout and R.S. Haldane, and the high-point of the controversy, after which both schools soon faded but not without leaving traces in British philosophy in the next two decades.

1. Pringle-Pattison departs from Bosanquet in affirming that the commonality of 'contents', that is, having the same thoughts, does not abolish the distinctness of selves. They cannot 'overlap at all in existence; their very *raison d'être* is to be distinct and, in that sense, separate and exclusive focalizations of a common universe' (IG 264). 'They are formally distinct because they are really different', and 'are different wholes of content'. If spatial and temporal location is the *principium individuationis*, even then it means exposure to different influences and thus results in different natures, while space and time 'may be regarded ultimately as only a mode of expressing the general fact of individuation—the fact that there are finite centres at all' (IG 267; cf MBFI 513). 'Every existent is a "this", a "one", a being in a strict sense unique' (MBFI 510), a 'little world of content', 'a focalization of the universe which is nowhere exactly repeated' (IG 267). Rather than being a vanishing feature of the universe, individuality increases as we rise from the inorganic, through the organic and conscious, to the self-conscious (MBFI 511). And Absolute Idealism's inability to explain why the finite world exists at all 'would seem to indicate some defect in the conception either of the individual or of the Absolute, or perhaps of both' (IG 266).

2. Pringle-Pattison therefore rejects Bradley's and Bosanquet's reduction of the individual to a mere 'adjective', or complex adjective, of the one substance, the Whole or Absolute. He cites and emphasises Bosanquet on finite individuals as ultimately '*connections of content*' within the Whole (IG 272; MBFI 509; Bosanquet's *Logic* Vol. II, 1888, 2nd ed. 1911, 258-9). It is because of this that the collections of contents which selves are can be shaken up and re-sorted into merged individuals on yet higher levels, like the state, until the Absolute is reached (IG 282, 284). Moreover, these contents can be only mere universals, and thus the self only a complex of universals and not a concrete being (IG 271, 282-3). In contrast he asserts that a finite being has 'unity and centrality' (IG 283). He cites one of the best of Bradley's pungent footnotes from *Ethical Studies*: 'Mr Bain collects that the mind is a collection. Has he ever thought who collects Mr Bain?' Then he aptly turns it against Bradley himself. If the self is a collection whose contents can be resorted, then Bradley has the same conception of the self as Bain, a conception which is not that of a self at all (IG 284). Further, the Absolute itself can hardly be regarded as a self if it does not have 'the centrality or focalized unity' which is a self, and indeed, which is everything that is real (IG 271; MBFI 513). Conversely, Pringle-Pattison implies, if the Absolute has it, then why cannot finite centres? Here he is arguing that, because the Absolute is a Whole of internally related contents, it cannot have a distinct focus or centrality which is over and against its contents. Without a break in the web of experiences, there cannot be a self or consciousness of which they are the experiences. Given a break in one place, at the centre where would be sited the Self of the Whole, why not breaks elsewhere so that there could be genuine but finite selves?

What Pringle-Pattison has, in effect, argued without quite saying so, is that Absolute Idealism primarily differs from Phenomenalism or Subjective Idealism, and thus from the Empiricism which resulted in it, only in one respect: viz, its replacement of an atomistic conception of the contents of consciousness, which entails that they can be related only externally in heaps or bundles, with one that links them internally and so makes them intimate parts of a comprehensive and cosmic system. The result of that change is to make the one, finite and thus solipsist self of the Empiricist-Phenomenalist philosopher into the one infinite self of the Absolute. On the one hand, the self can only be

a bundle of its own perceptions and so no self (remember how Hume went looking for himself but couldn't find himself), and, on the other, the finite self is simply a particular sub-pattern of the Whole, an eddy in its flow. Absolute Idealism is thus Subjective Idealism turned inside out.²

But who, in Pringle-Pattison's view, is the self, this focalized centre, whether Absolute or finite? For he himself still leaves the individual self as only a collection of contents within itself, and thus with no subject of which those contents are to be predicated. The self, he tells us (IG 285), is not an entity over and above its content, but is the unity and organisation of its contents, a centre for itself and not just for an observer. Thus it seems to be only a centre and a unity, the organisation of the content, and not something in itself. Here there is no explicit indication that Pringle-Pattison fundamentally departed from Bosanquet in this respect., and, in different language, it is still maintained in Analytic philosophy for the most part, that personal identity is ultimately a function of the body, as Pringle-Pattison says, in giving us each a unique path in space and time and thus different experiences and memories. He does not state nor imply that we each have an *essential* uniqueness, an *I* and *You* which would remain unique even though, *per impossibile*, we were to occupy the same location in space-time. He rejects, on the basis of the principle of the identity of indiscernables, mere numerical difference (IG 269), but has nothing else, so far as I can see, to mark distinctness other than 'contents'.

Yet again Pringle-Pattison never questions whether the language of 'contents' and 'wholes' is really appropriate for describing persons. Surely, the relation between me and my experiences, character, virtues, desires, emotions, etc., is more intimate than that. How they are to be described is not an easy matter, though we are so familiar with them. Nevertheless, what am *I* that am still active and am not my brain or any other part of my body even in sleep and at least some forms of coma?

3. Pringle-Pattison argues that the impersonality of Absolute Idealism is also seen in Bosanquet's confusion of an impersonal system of thought with a moral personality that must grow from its own root (MBFI 513). By a moral personality Pringle-Pattison means a person, not just in respect of specifically moral acts, but in respect of all of them. To be a self is to be 'a formed will' and actively to respond to and to appropriate the influences of the world and of God. Both bare will and knowledge are abstractions unless they are the moving force in a self, 'shaping its attitude to the world and all the action which is the outcome of that attitude'. Without freedom there are only automata (IG 292). 'A self which is merely the channel or mouthpiece of another self is not a self' (IG 288; cf MBFI 519). But, he claims, that is precisely what Bosanquet's language of Reality or the moral universe expressing itself and judging in and through us implies. It is the false hypostatization of Kant's merely formal unity of apperception which thereby turns the latter into a substantive universal conscious (MBFI 519-20; an argument stated at length in *Hegelianism and Personality* and reiterated thereafter). In contrast, Pringle-Pattison states that:

We must take our stand *within* the self, and our philosophy must be able to account for, or at least to find room for, this mode of existence and the measure of freedom and independence which it involves. Now, conscious experience reveals itself in the triple character of knowledge, feeling and will, and every conscious fact exhibits these three aspects in an indissoluble unity. Although this is obscured in theories which lay exclusive stress on knowledge and, in their pre-occupation with the content known, forget the act of knowing and the feeling which is inseparable from it, experience proclaims itself everywhere, under proper analysis, as the experience of self-centred individuals. And, by common consent, it is the volitional aspect of that experience, the facts of will, culminating in deliberate moral choice, in which the consciousness of 'authorship' . . . is most indubitably present. The authorship of our own acts and our responsibility for them—this is the inmost meaning of our freedom and independence, and any theory is self-condemned which can find no room for this elementary certainty (MBFI 518).

4. Pringle-Pattison points out how Bosanquet constantly equates the finite self with 'selfishness', wanting only its own self-preservation and rights, and how Bosanquet appeals to 'the religious consciousness' and its experience of unity with God and the Good as pointing the right way forward to self-devotion and self-sacrifice. Though Pringle-Pattison also ignored genuine Christian and Islamic mysticism in which there is no merging of the self with God, he makes the sound points that the desire to be more like God is not a desire to be God (MBFI 525), that the whole idea rest upon material analogies which cannot apply to selves (MBFI 525), that friendship, love and devotion require two distinct selves to love and be loved, and that self-sacrifice requires a real self to be sacrificed (IG 289-90; MBFI 519, 525). He notes that in Bosanquet's statements that the Absolute 'needs to express itself through us as very subordinate units' and 'when its life demands our existence no longer, we yet blend with it as the pervading features or characters which we were needed for a passing moment to emphasize' (Bosanquet, MBFI 506) we have

the pagan, egoistic or self-centred view of the Absolute, which conceives life on the analogy of aesthetic enjoyment, the doings and sufferings of the subordinate units contributing to this supreme

experience the note of danger and tragedy, the sympathetic thrill of heroic daring, endurance or self-sacrifice, but all still conceived, in the main, as the dramatic interest and emotion of a spectator (MBFI 526-7).

5. What, then, of the value or disvalue of the finite individual? In respect of the latter, Pringle-Pattison notes that Bosanquet (MBFI; *Science and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 1927, 104) states that, when the finite self sets itself up as a 'self-centred real', it becomes unreal and worthless: in error and sin it comes closest to being substantive in its own right. But, rejoins Pringle-Pattison, because Bosanquet makes the finite individual a mere channel for the Absolute, error and sin thereby become totally inexplicable:

How can I take up this attitude of opposition if I have not some kind of existence over and against the spirit of the whole, if there is not some other in the relation between us? And one becomes tired of pointing out that exactly the same is true when, in religion, we bow to a higher will and accept its purposes as our own; the surrender of the selfish will implies the power to assert it. Where is the merit or value in the self-surrender if the whole process is a make-believe on the part of the Absolute? If the Absolute is the only agent in the case, how can it will anything *but* the universal? (MBFI 519).

Likewise with the positive value of the individual. According to Bradley and Bosanquet it lies in the value of the features that the individual contributes to the whole and which survive his transitory existence within it. But, argues Pringle-Pattison, such contributions cannot be the individual's qualities taken separately, for they would be universals and as such already represented in the perfect experience of the Absolute. Why then cannot it not be the unique individual himself? (IG 279). But, we have seen, there seems to be almost as little room in Pringle-Pattison's philosophy as in Bradley's and Bosanquet's for the genuinely unique individual. And it is surprising that Pringle-Pattison did not make more reference to Bosanquet's 'cosmic functionalism', those explicit statements of the merely external and instrumental value of the finite person in and for the universe (e.g. *The Principle of Individuality and Value*, 20-2, 303-15; *The Value and Destiny of the Individual*, 40, 49, 67-8, 328). Indeed, logically Bosanquet should have repeated Hegel's moral functionalism within the State also. For, on Bosanquet's view also, the State is a more real and so higher being than any mere citizen, whose value can lie only in serving it and the Whole through it.

Pringle-Pattison undoubtedly made some telling criticisms of the impersonalism of Absolute Idealism, yet both remained too close to it in respect of the sub- or impersonal language of 'wholes' and 'contents', and also did not develop the positive implications of his criticism into a systematic study of what persons and personal life really are. For example, he never developed this remark: 'But ideas in themselves are nothing, and the analysis of knowledge can never give us reality. If we were to recast Descartes' formula, in the light of all that has come and gone in philosophy since his day, not *Cogito ergo sum*, but *Ago ergo sum* is the form his maxim would take' (*Man's Place in the Cosmos*, 1902, 3). It was left to a later Scottish philosopher, John Macmurray, to make that substitution the basis of an anti-Cartesian personalism. This limitation is something that Pringle-Pattison recognised in himself, for he said that his method was essentially a critical one of examining others' ideas.

These failures to follow up his own personalist insights also reveal a further limitation, which Pringle-Pattison and similar critics of Absolute Idealism shared with Absolute, Kantian, Berkeleian and other idealisms (in the strict sense): viz. that they separated off the mental and spiritual as the sole reality or wholly real world, from the physical world, and argued that the latter was mere appearance, phenomenal or not really real. Hence they left the physical world for materialists, naturalists and objectivists to claim as their own, and to support their interpretations of it with the increasing success and prestige of the natural sciences in exploring and understanding it. Thus the intellectual world and the wider public were more impressed by the spurious scientism of those impersonalist philosophies than by the abstruse arguments and uncommon-sensical conclusions of idealists. Nevertheless the 'Personal Idealists' were the first in Britain to treat personal existence as a distinct theme in philosophy, to see that it applied to all departments of philosophy, and not to treat it as mere appendage to a philosophy already formed by a focus on sub-personal realities and the abstractions of formal logic.

For more on Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison see Jan Olof Bengtsson, The Worldview of Personalism Origins and Early Development, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2006.

For a complete list of books by him go to www.ranker.com/list/andrew-seth-pringle-pattison-books-list/reference.

Notes:

1. These debates, especially the personalist reaction, and also the other metaphysical philosophies of the period and of the years up to 1939, were omitted from the partisan accounts of the history of modern British philosophy

produced by the Linguistic and Conceptual Analysts, heirs of Moore and Russell, to whom alone they referred and to whose epistemological criticism alone they attributed the decline of idealism. Justice has yet to be done to everyone else.

2. In fact Bosanquet's *Psychology of the Moral Self* (1897) hardly differs in its mechanistic account from Empiricist and Associationist psychologies. The difference is that for Bosanquet ideas *are* reality, *one* system of reality, and not 'subjective' events related or not to an external reality.