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Samuel Alexander's Place in British Philosophy: Realism and Naturalism from 1880s Onwards

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1 Introduction

Samuel Alexander (1859-1938) began publishing in 1884, and continued up to 1937. Although many scholars have examined the mature system of Alexander's *Space, Time, and Deity* (1920a, 1920b), only a few have studied his early writings.¹ To place Alexander in his intellectual context, this chapter considers his views on two major late nineteenth century debates about the mind. It explores some of his 1880s works on these debates, and locates them in the philosophic landscape of the period. We will see that these works feed directly into his mature philosophy.

Section 2 discusses the first debate, over the relationship of mind to nature. Absolute idealists conceived mind and nature as two aspects of the same thing, whilst realists maintain the independence of mind and nature. I argue Alexander was always a realist, and speculate on his association with Oxford realism. Section 3 discusses the second debate, over how our minds evolved, biologically. Some theorists argued for naturalism, whilst others argued for supernaturalism. Again, I argue Alexander was always a naturalist. Nonetheless, we will also see Alexander leans towards both idealism and supernaturalism, sharply distinguishing his realism from that of early analytic philosophers. Section 4 concludes by considering Alexander's impact on subsequent realist *and* idealist philosophers.

2 The Relation of Mind to Nature: Idealism or Realism?

Introducing the idealist-realist debate

How does mind relate to nature? At the turn of the twentieth century, two answers were widely offered to this question: idealism, and realism.

Idealism swept Britain from the mid-nineteenth century. It was largely inspired by the work of German philosophers Kant and Hegel, although thinkers also drew on the likes of Berkeley and Spinoza. From the 1870s, philosophers such as Edward Caird, T.H. Green, and F.H. Bradley began advocating Absolute idealism; Oxford was a particular hotbed, and at various times all these philosophers taught there. On their view, mind and nature are unified or identified: two aspects of the same thing. Caird (1901, 48-50) usefully articulates this

position as being opposed to ‘that common-sense dualism for which mind and matter, or subject and object, are two things absolutely independent of each other’. Hegel’s Absolute is monistic: ‘everything that exists is an identity of subject and object, and all these identities are essentially one’. Further, this Absolute, this ‘unity above all differences’, is ‘spiritual’. In other words, the ultimate nature of reality is experience, or consciousness. Nature *is* mind.²

By the late nineteenth century idealism dominated British philosophy, yet it was never all-conquering. Realism came in many forms, but it usually aimed to uphold the ‘common-sense dualism’ of mind and object referred to by Caird. Looking back to the development of realism, W.R. Sorley (1926, 416) describes this claim as central: ‘Knowing cannot in any way modify the object of knowledge’.³ Unlike the monism of Absolute idealism, realism tends towards pluralism: our minds are distinct from the things around us. Further, the ultimate nature of reality is not experience, or consciousness.

Realism encompasses a diverse family of views. The best known kind of realism is ‘early analytic’ philosophy, rooted in Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore; the latter, Cambridge thinkers began developing realism in 1898.⁴ Yet Britain saw other, earlier realists who were not early analytics. These include the Cambridge academic Henry Sidgwick, and independent philosopher Shadworth Hodgson.

At Oxford, realism was defended by Thomas Case from his 1877 *Realism in Morals* onwards; and by his student and lifelong friend John Cook Wilson⁵. Cook Wilson is known as the ‘founder’ of Oxford realism, a movement that emerged in the early 1900s, partly via his followers H.A. Prichard and H.W.B. Joseph.⁶ During his lifetime, Cook Wilson published little, principally spreading his views through powerful teaching. R.G. Collingwood (1939, 22) wrote that he was thoroughly ‘indoctrinated’ by Cook Wilson’s 1910s lectures on realism. Joseph (1916, 555) claims that, by 1915, Cook Wilson was ‘by far the most influential philosophical teacher in Oxford’. Cook Wilson became an Oxford fellow in 1873 but – because he published so little – it is unclear when he first became a realist; Prichard claims it was not until after 1900, but Cook Wilson claims to have always rejected idealism.⁷

Where did Alexander stand on idealist-realist debate in the 1880s?

Although Alexander’s realism is explicit in *Space, Time, and Deity*,⁸ many scholars have explored affinities between its system and Absolute idealism (more on this below). This is likely why some scholars have further argued that Alexander started off as an idealist, and then became a realist.⁹

Alexander was certainly taught by many idealists. Having studied at the University of Melbourne, Alexander won an Oxford scholarship in 1877, and subsequently studied at Balliol from 1878 to 1881. He held a fellowship at Lincoln from 1882 to 1893, before taking

up the Chair at the University of Manchester. Our knowledge of Alexander's time at Oxford comes largely from his friend and literary executor John Laird. In his "Memoir", Laird (1939, 4-10) writes that Alexander's teachers included the idealists A.C. Bradley and Benjamin Jowett; and that idealists R.L. Nettleship and Green were also tutors at Balliol. Laird (1939, 16) adds that Alexander took various 1880s holidays with Oxford groups, including an 1887 trip to Mürren, Switzerland, with F.H. Bradley.

Despite Alexander's idealist heritage, I'll argue that he was never an idealist. I'll discuss two reasons why one might believe otherwise; exploring these will help us understand Alexander's idealist sympathies.

The first lies in his early engagement with Hegel. A private notebook shows Alexander was studying Hegel's account of nature from at least 1883,¹⁰ and he subsequently wrote two papers on Hegel. One was delivered a paper to the Aristotelian Society in 1886-87, titled 'In Illustration of Hegel's Rechtsphilosophie'. It discusses Hegel's moral philosophy, arguing Hegel is close to evolutionist ethics¹¹. Although this provides evidence of Alexander's Hegelian education, there is no idealism here. More suggestive is his 1886 paper, 'Hegel's Conception of Nature'.¹²

Here, Alexander (1886a) argues there is a 'great likeness' between Hegel's theory and evolution. In an article exploring the evolutionary biology of early thinkers influenced by Hegel, Trevor Pearce (2014, 748-9) explains that thinkers such as Caird, Alexander, and John Dewey treat two views about organisms and their environments as part of a 'general framework'. On the 'reciprocal causes' view, an organism and its environment affect each other; on the 'dual aspects' view, an organism and its environment are two aspects of one thing. The latter is of course idealist, and Pearce (2014, 759) argues that both views are present in Hegel. If Alexander accepted the general framework, this would be strong evidence of idealism. However, I don't believe he does. Pearce (2014, 762-3) cites various passages in Alexander on these issues. For example, Alexander (1886a, 520) explicitly describes the actions of adaptation between 'organism and environment' as 'reciprocal'. Although Alexander clearly holds a reciprocal causes view, and Pearce rightly stresses that Alexander does not distinguish between this and the dual aspect view,¹³ I do not find evidence in these passages or elsewhere that Alexander holds a dual aspect view. Consequently, Alexander's Hegelian take on nature does not provide evidence that Alexander holds idealism.

The second reason to believe Alexander started as an idealist is offered by Weinstein (1984, 7), who argues that Alexander moved from Absolute idealism to Darwinian naturalism between 1886 and 1892. Weinstein's case is based on one of Alexander's first papers, 'Fingerposts to Religion', delivered in Oxford during 1885. A 'fingerpost' is a kind of British signpost (named for its 'arms' or 'fingers' pointing towards places). Laird also described this paper as 'securely within the idealist paradigm'.¹⁴ Weinstein (1984, 12) claims that 'Fingerposts' paints a 'fully meaningful cosmos'; he describes Alexander here as a

‘confident’ idealist, ‘willing to make unity the melody and variety the counterpoint’. With respect to Weinstein, I do not find idealism here. ‘Fingerposts’ explains that some people are conscious of the divine but others reach it via lesser ‘by-paths’, via science or right conduct’.¹⁵ The paper is theistic but not, I think, idealistic. That said, Alexander’s theism offers a commonality with the idealists absent in other realists; more on this below.

Whatever the truth of ‘Fingerposts’, Weinstein (1984, 13) goes on to say that Alexander’s later 1885 pieces reject idealism: ‘Alexander blinked and began having doubts about idealism, or, perhaps, he had never been so thoroughly dazzled’. Weinstein is referring to Alexander’s (1885a) review of O. Pfleiderer’s book *Religionsphilosophie*, and his (1885b) review of Josiah Royce’s *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*. I agree with Weinstein that these pieces reject idealism. For example, whilst considering Royce’s view that reality is ultimately spirit, Alexander (1885b, 605) asks, ‘How can spirit so divest itself of its spirituality as to appear as nature?’. He claims that until this question is answered, ‘Absolute Idealism will always seem to say something which is very true, but which goes such a little way’.

In arguing that Alexander was never an idealist, I am in agreement with a few other commentators. Muirhead (1939, 5) writes, ‘Whether Alexander ever accepted the Kantian form of idealism I do not know, but his whole bent of mind was against it’. Fisher (2017, 172-9) argues at length that Alexander rejected idealism ‘from the beginning’, partly by studying Alexander’s three reviews of T.H. Green’s *Works*, published between 1885 and 1889. For example, Fisher (2017, 178) rightly points out that Alexander rejects Green’s claim that an analysis of the human mind requires us to identify the world with the divine mind. Fisher (2017, 179-185) goes on to discuss Alexander’s contribution to a 1887-88 symposium. Setting himself against the Absolute idealism of D.G. Ritchie, Alexander (1887-88, 17-18) argues that consciousness is a thing ‘like other things’: stones are different to minds because a stone has a complex of stone states, whilst a mind has a complex of mental states. The peculiar properties of mind include a distinction between mind and its object. I have found another early, explicit statement of Alexander’s anti-idealism. In an 1889 book review, Alexander (1889b, 423) criticises some realists for mischaracterising idealism, and effectively attacking a straw man: ‘I hold no brief for idealism; but a person who brings charges against it must get up the case’. Although Alexander does not defend idealism, he believes that realists seeking to attack it should not misrepresent it.

Going beyond the existing scholarship, I speculate that Alexander could be associated with the Oxford realists. At Oxford he also came into contact with Case and Cook Wilson. Alexander met Case at least once, at an 1891 Aristotelian Society symposium, on the perception of the external world.¹⁶ Alexander must also have spent time with Cook Wilson, for Cook Wilson wrote in support of Alexander’s employment at Manchester: ‘He is one of the very few who have real metaphysical power. I doubt if there is anyone of more promise [in Oxford] than Mr. Alexander’.¹⁷ Given Cook Wilson’s reported influence, it is possible he

affected Alexander's realism. Lending weight to this speculation is the way that Cook Wilson and the other Oxford realists agreed with Alexander on a key realist issue: direct realism.

Several scholars have argued that direct realism was one of the defining characteristics of Oxford realism. They have shown that Cambridge early analytics (including Moore and Russell) defended indirect realism, wherein perception involves intermediaries such as sense perceptions or sense data. In contrast, the Oxford realists (including Cook Wilson and Prichard) defended direct realism, on which the immediate objects of perception are external material things.¹⁸ For example, Cook Wilson (1969, 802-3) wrote in a 1904 letter, 'We want to explain knowing an object and we explain it solely in terms of the object known'. Nothing else is involved in knowing an object except the object. To illustrate, Cook Wilson notes that the man who first discovered truths about equable curvature had not changed 'the nature of the circle or curvature'.

Alexander also defended direct realism.¹⁹ For example, Alexander (1909-10, 2) declares 'the object of sense-perception is never mental but external': the perception of a tree involves my consciousness, and the tree. Later, Alexander (1914, 6) described the 'compresence' of mind and object: 'two separate existences connected together by the relation of togetherness or compresence'. On the basis of a friendship dating to 1885, G.F. Stout (1940b, 127) writes that Alexander was '*always* unwilling to admit that sensa are existentially distinct from physical objects' (my emphasis). If Stout is correct, this would mean Alexander's direct realism dates to his Oxford days and, speculatively, perhaps to Cook Wilson.

Alexander's leanings towards idealism

Although this chapter has argued that Alexander defended realism throughout his career, idealism undeniably left marks on his metaphysics. Scholars have pointed out various similarities between the systems of *Space, Time, and Deity* and Absolute idealism. For example, Muirhead (1939, 3; 12) wonders whether Alexander's system is a 'transformation' of Absolute idealism to realism, arguing that Alexander's notion of a *nisus* in spacetime is similar to the transformative processes of Bradley's Absolute. Brettschneider (1964, 38; 46-7) argues Bradley's concept of a concrete universal is echoed in Alexander's concept of spacetime; and that Alexander follows Bradley in rejecting external relations and positing monism. Weinstein (1984, 15-20) claims that Hegel's division of nature (into mechanics, physics, and organics) parallels Alexander's order of emergence (from spacetime to matter to life). Thomas (2013, 551) agrees that Alexander's mature account of spacetime owes much to his early reading of Hegel. Emmet (1992, §3) memorably described time in Alexander's system as 'a kind of ghost of the Absolute'. Murphy (1927, 629) and Fisher (2015b, 257)

argue that Alexander's mature view that spacetime is the source of all ontological categories, yet is not itself subject to categories, stems from his British idealist heritage.

In fact, the grand speculative nature of Alexander's system likely owes more to Absolute idealism than to the piecemeal, anti-systematic approach of other early realisms.²⁰ Passmore (1976, 29-30) makes this point: idealists such as Bradley and McTaggart built systems. In contrast, as one idealist (Henry Jones) complained as early as 1893, the upcoming 'young bloods ... evolve no systems'. As a realist system builder, Alexander proved an exception.

3 The Evolution of Mind: Naturalism or Supernaturalism?

Introducing the naturalist-supernaturalist debate

The next key debate Alexander became involved with at the start of his career involved biological evolution: accounts of how species changed over time. Philosophers disagreed over the importance of evolution to philosophy, and this disagreement does not map onto the idealist-realist divide. For example, idealist Green accepted biological evolution but denied it was relevant to philosophy; whilst idealists Caird and Ritchie argued it was central to idealism.²¹ Pragmatists William James and F.C.S. Schiller believed evolution crucial to philosophy; whilst realists Sidgwick, Russell, and Moore denied its relevance.²²

David Blitz has shown that fundamental schisms appeared amongst late nineteenth century thinkers who considered the philosophy of evolution. Blitz (1992, 1-2) explains that one schism concerns the evolutionary source of human minds. During this period, many theorists believed that nature could not, by itself, make the leaps or jumps required to produce 'novelties' such as minds or consciousness. This led to two widely held positions. Naturalists held that minds are produced by nature but mind is present throughout all the levels of nature - albeit to a much lesser degree. Blitz (1992, 10-11) argues that, as a result of their maxim that 'nature does not make jumps', theorists such as Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel were forced in the direction of panpsychism. In contrast, supernaturalists held that minds are not present throughout nature, because novel human minds are the result of divine intervention. Blitz (1992, 45-6) argues that Alfred Russell Wallace held this kind of view: protoplasm could never bring out about consciousness. For Blitz, evolutionary philosophers are faced with a dilemma: panpsychism or supernaturalism.

Where did Alexander stand on the naturalist-supernaturalist debate in the 1880s?

From his article on Hegel's conception of nature, we know that Alexander became interested in evolution early.²³ It is also apparent in his early works that Alexander is a naturalist about

the evolution of mind. In the 1887-88 symposium, he prefigures his mature emergentism via a kind of proto-emergentism, arguing that consciousness appears ‘in the development of things’:

At a certain stage you have the amoeba, at a higher stage you have the lion; so, at a higher stage still, you have the thing called mind, or consciousness, dependent on the things that proceed it, and continuous with them, yet peculiar and distinct from them. (Alexander, 1887-88, 19)

He subsequently took part in another symposium, asking ‘Is there evidence of design in nature?’. Here, Alexander (1889-90, 57) claims that although a designing intelligence has *prima facie* plausibility and is the easiest answer, he prefers the ‘more difficult’ one. He argues there is no need to posit design, for nature is the result of a process which is not design: natural selection. Alexander goes on to discuss various aspects of Darwin’s natural selection, for example pointing out that the extinction of species seems incompatible with a beneficent designer.

Although proto-emergentism is present in Alexander’s early works – he conceives nature as having levels which exhibit novel properties – he lacked the precise mechanism of ‘emergence’ to explain it. Blitz (1992, 102) explains this was developed by C. Lloyd Morgan around 1912 to 1915. Blitz (1992, 56) frames Morgan’s emergentism as a solution to the evolutionary philosopher’s dilemma: emergence provides a *natural* mechanism whereby novel qualities such as mind can be absent at lower levels but appear at higher ones. This avoids panpsychism and supernaturalism. Once Alexander could draw on Morgan’s theory of emergence, he applies it liberally, arguing in *Space, Time, and Deity* that matter emerges from space and time as well as arguing that mind emerges from brain.

Interestingly, Blitz (1992, 60-62) argues that before Morgan developed his theory of emergence, he accepted Darwin’s principle of continuity, holding that change in nature happened gradually. This is in tension with Morgan’s further belief that novelties such as consciousness arise. Alexander’s early writings exhibit the same tension: he is explicit that change in nature happens gradually, yet also allows that novel qualities like consciousness appear. His worry over how this works surfaces in his third book review of Green, where Alexander (1889c, 298) asks whether it is possible to show the ‘graduations’ between a stone, a plant, and a mind.

Alexander’s leanings towards supernaturalism

Although Alexander’s 1880s work evinces naturalism, it also evinces a religious bent. His early paper ‘Fingerposts’ states: ‘every one is conscious more or less of moments of depression and exaltation in which his emotions reveal to him a larger presence than his own, from which he shrinks or with which he feels communion’.²⁴ In the symposium on intelligent

design, Alexander adds that rejecting a designer only implies the ‘untruth’ of one kind of theism. It leaves open others:

I should think of God as growing along with the growth of the world, and only becoming intelligent and capable of design with the emergence of humanity. There is an old Greek idea of a power called Moira, or Fate, which rules over everything, to which the Gods themselves are subject. And I do not know but that we are taught by the facts to accept a view resembling this, and to regard God as participating in the process in which all things are involved. (Alexander, 1889-90, 63)

This early account of deity blossoms in *Space, Time, and Deity*. In his mature work, Alexander argues that although God is not creator of the universe, God emerges from the universe – naturalistically.²⁵ I wonder if this religious bent is what Weinstein detects in “Fingerposts”, and misidentifies as idealism. Many British idealists were theists; Green, Caird and many others sought to identify the Absolute with God. Mander (2011, 6) states that ‘few, if any, of the Idealists lacked a pervasive religious dimension to their thought’. In contrast, prominent realists such as Moore and Russell defended atheism.²⁶ Muirhead (1939, 11) once observed that Alexander’s theism ‘challenged’ realists. Alexander’s theism draws him closer to the British idealists in another way, lending his mature system a supernatural inclination despite his naturalism.

4 Alexander’s Realist-Idealist Legacy

Alexander is a realist, who should perhaps be associated with the Oxford realists, yet his grand metaphysics has an idealist flavour. Further, whilst resolutely defending naturalism, the religious side to his work suggests another kind of sympathy with the British idealists. Although Alexander stands firmly on the realist-naturalist side of late nineteenth and early twentieth century philosophy, he is looking across dividing lines. Perhaps this helps explain the unusual range of his influence. Alexander’s work was picked up by realists John Anderson, the ‘founder’ of Australian realism; by Anderson’s Australian student, D. M. Armstrong; and American philosopher Donald C. Williams²⁷. It was *also* picked up by late British idealists, seeking to adapt idealism to meet the realist challenge. Chief amongst these are May Sinclair and Hilda Oakeley, both of whom engage at length with his account of time.

Sinclair’s *The New Idealism* (1922, vii) states that the ‘battle’ between idealism and realism must be fought on ‘the field of Space and Time’. The book’s strategy is to show that realism cannot account for our experience of space and time, but idealism can. She makes this case by attacking the strongest realist account she can find - that of Alexander. The opening pages of the book state:

I could have done nothing without Professor Alexander’s work on Space-Time. Much as idealism owes to idealists, its larger debt must be to the first realist who taught them to ‘take

Space and Time seriously'. So, after years of devotion to Mr. Bradley's Absolute, I wanted to see what would happen if I simply followed the trail which, thanks to Professor Alexander, I saw before me. (Sinclair 1922, x–xi)

Although Sinclair is critical of Alexander, she happily credits him as the inspiration for her new metaphysic. As I read Oakeley, she also takes Alexander's views on time as inspiration, but in a less critical way. Unusually for an idealist, Oakeley adopts realism about time. Her (1926–7) "The World as Memory and as History" espouses several views that seem to be borrowed from Alexander, including his account of temporal experience, and the realist nature of time. She uses these views to construct a new, idealist account of the active role taken by mind in creating our experiences. Oakeley wrote in a 1921 letter to Alexander, 'I am most anxious to pursue the problem of time further on the difficult way you point to'²⁸.

Twenty-first century philosophy is more realist than idealist, so Alexander's work likely wielded more long-lasting influence through realists such as Anderson and Williams. Nonetheless, this idealist-leaning realist offered ideas that were also attractive to forward-thinking idealists.

Additional references:

Oakeley, Hilda (1926–7). 'The World as Memory and as History'. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 27: 291–316.

Sinclair, May. (1922) *The New Idealism*. London: Macmillan.

¹ See Weinstein (1984) and Fisher (2017).

² For a comprehensive history of British idealism, see Mander (2011).

³ Marion (2000, 308) agrees that this was the maxim of Oxford Realism: 'knowing in no way alters or modifies the thing known'.

⁴ On its origins see Beaney (2013).

⁵ On their relationship, see Marion (2000, 320).

⁶ Studies of Oxford realism include Marion (2000) and Travis & Kalderon (2013).

⁷ See Marion (2016, §1).

⁸ For example, see Alexander (1920a, 8).

⁹ Passmore (1968, 266) writes that Alexander 'broke' with his Balliol idealist teachers. Brettschneider (1964, ix) states Alexander 'shifts' from absolutism to realism. Weinstein (1984, 7) also holds this view; he is alone in offering an argument for it.

¹⁰ John Rylands Library, Samuel Alexander Papers, ALEX/A/2/1/12.

¹¹ Only the abstract of the paper survives; a print is held in the John Rylands Library, Samuel Alexander Papers, ALEX/A/2/3/3. Thanks to Trevor Pearce for sharing his copy with me.

¹² Fisher (2017, 185-192) has also studied the Hegelian aspects of Alexander's 1889 *Moral Order and Progress*; he denies this book evinces idealism.

¹³ In private correspondence.

¹⁴ Cited in Weinstein (1984, 12). Due to the Covid-19 crisis, I have not been able to read Laird's paper directly.

¹⁵ John Rylands Library, Samuel Alexander Papers, ALEX/A/2/2/1.

¹⁶ Alexander chaired the session, and a subsequent article in *The Oxford Magazine* reports that Case participated in the discussion. This piece of mockery claims that Alexander assumed a 'striking physical attitude', whilst Case 'hesitated whether to call the Aristotelian Society or their hosts the external world' (Anon, 1891, 106).

¹⁷ Cited in Laird (1939, 26).

¹⁸ See Marion (2000, 303), Travis & Kalderon (2013, §15.3), and Hatfield (2015, 112).

¹⁹ For more on this, see Fisher (2017) and Passmore (1968, 267-69).

²⁰ On analytic philosophy's 'piecemeal' approach, see Beaney (2013, 26-7).

²¹ On the idealists, see Pearce (2014, 751-3).

²² On the realists, see Cunningham (1996, 2; 34).

²³ Further evidence of Alexander's early interest in evolution can be seen from the fact he owned a copy of Leslie Stephen's *The Science of Ethics* (1882) in 1882 and read it closely. Thanks to Anthony Fisher for this information.

²⁴ John Rylands Library, ALEX/A/2/2/1.

²⁵ On Alexander's theism, see Titus (1933) and Thomas (2016).

²⁶ On their atheism, see Berman (1998, 221-234).

²⁷ On Anderson and Armstrong, see Passmore (1957, 267), Gillet (2006), Fisher (2015), and Cole (2018, §1; 5.2). On Williams, see Fisher (2015). See also the material on Williams and Anderson in this collection.

²⁸ John Rylands Library, ALEX/A/1/1/214/1. Sinclair's correspondence with Alexander can also be found in these archives. Unfortunately, both sets of correspondence appear to be incomplete. For more on Oakeley and Sinclair's engagement with Alexander, see Thomas (2015; 2019).