

James Frederick Ferrier

Scottish Philosophy the Old and the New: a Statement (a 4 page extract)

Edinburgh: Sutherland and Knox, 1856

In the course of my researches into premodern essentialism (as an antidote to, and as the *bête noir* of, postmodernism), I was thrilled to discover the *Institutes of Metaphysic* by J.F. Ferrier. I quote what he says about essence at length in my PhD by publications thesis which is online at: <http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/articles/2008-phd-thesis-alastair-mcintosh-web.pdf>

I also describe there the “remarkable outburst” of Ferrier’s, as George Elder Davie called it, in which Ferrier defended the Scottish grounding of his work against attacks that he was imitating German philosophers. Davie says that this, “his literary executors found too embarrassing to publish except for the first eight words” (Davie, *Democratic Intellect*, 1961, 305). I was keen to find the original, and eventually tracked it down in Glasgow University library in a bound volume entitled “University Pamphlets,” shelf mark B457 1852-B. Here I’ve scanned the censored pages in which he so robustly defends the metaphysical growth of auld Scotland’s soil. From what I saw on a very quick skim through of the rest of this long paper, there’s not a lot in it that’s not otherwise in the *Institutes*.

Alastair McIntosh, April 2010

SCOTTISH PHILOSOPHY

THE

OLD AND THE NEW

A STATEMENT

BY

PROFESSOR FERRIER.

εἰ δὲ μὴ δοκῶ φρονῶν λέγειν,
οὐκ ἂν παρείμην οἷσι μὴ δοκῶ φρονεῖν.

Soph. Oed. Col. 1665.

SECOND EDITION.

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1856.

accounts, although not on account of its first principles, is what may be readily conceded.

Another point of difference—indeed the fundamental difference—between the two Scottish philosophies, the Old and the New, is this, that while I hold that philosophy exists for the sole purpose of correcting the natural inadvertencies of loose, ordinary thinking—that this is her true and proper vocation; the old school, on the contrary, are of opinion that philosophy exists for the very purpose of ratifying, and, if possible, systematising these inadvertencies. This is held by Reid and his followers to be the proper business of metaphysical science. It may easily be seen what a vast difference in our respective modes of treatment and inquiry this fundamental discrepancy must give rise to. Yet, amid all the opposition which my system has provoked, no one has ventured to deny what I have proclaimed to be the true vocation of philosophy. A not unfavourable inference is suggested by this significant admission.

It has been asserted, that my philosophy is of Germanic origin and complexion. A broader fabrication than that never dropped from human lips, or dribbled from the point of pen. My philosophy is Scottish to the very core; it is national in every fibre and articulation of its frame. It is a natural growth of old Scotland's soil, and has drunk in no nourishment from any other land. Are we to judge of the productions of Scotland by looking merely to what Scotland has *hitherto* produced? May a philosopher not be, heart and soul, a Scotsman—may he not be a Scotsman in all his intellectual movements, even although he should have the misfortune to differ, in certain respects, from Dr Reid and Sir William Hamilton? To expatriate a man and his works on such grounds, would be rather a severe sentence, and one which the country, I take it, would be very slow to confirm. If my system presents points of contact or coincidence with the speculations of foreign thinkers, I cannot help that. Is a man to reject the truth which he has discovered by his own efforts, because a person in another country has touched upon something like it? The new Scottish philosophy would have been exactly what it is, although Germany and the whole conti-

ment of Europe had been buried, centuries ago, in the sea. Whatever my dominion over truth may be, small or great, I have conquered every inch of it for myself. The "Institutes of Metaphysics" seem very plain-sailing, and so does railway travelling; but if some of my critics "had seen these roads before they were made," they would have a better idea of the difficulties of intellectual tunnelling, and of bridging chasms in the land of thought, over which they may now be wafted in their sleep. But what I assert is, that my system of philosophy—whatever its merit or demerit may be—was born and bred in this country, and is essentially native to the soil. Scotland, and Scotland alone, shall get the credit, if it is good for anything, just as she must submit to the dishonour, if it is found fraught with principles of folly, danger, or disgrace.

Every expedient of malice was resorted to, in order to damage me in the late canvass; and of these, one of the most effectual was the artifice on which I have just commented. Some of my assailants endeavoured (and, I fancy, with only too much success) to frighten the electors from their propriety, with the portentous name of HEGEL, and by dinning in their ears that my philosophy was nothing but an echo of his. Other critics, however, have doubted whether I knew anything at all about that philosopher. Thus, one gentleman, Monsieur A. Vera, the most recent expositor of Hegel, asks (simple soul!), "Is Professor Ferrier acquainted with Hegel's philosophy?" So that, while I am abused, on the one hand, for being Hegel all over, I am suspected, on the other, of being almost ignorant of his existence. It is difficult to escape from such a cross-fire as that. The exact truth of the matter is this: I have read most of Hegel's works again and again, but I cannot say that I am acquainted with his philosophy. I am able to understand only a few short passages here and there in his writings; and these I greatly admire for the depth of their insight, the breadth of their wisdom, and the loftiness of their tone. More than this I cannot say. If others understand him better, and to a larger extent, they have the advantage of me, and I confess that I envy them the privilege. But, for myself, I must declare that I have not

found one word or one thought in Hegel which was available for my system, even if I had been disposed to use it. There is a joke current about Hegel, that, towards the close of his career, he remarked that there was only one man in Germany who understood him, and that he mis-understood him. And yet this is the philosopher on whom croakers and canters would affiliate my doctrines, which, whatever other faults they may have, do not err, certainly, on the side of obscurity. If Hegel follows (as I do) the demonstrative method, I own I cannot see it, and would feel much obliged to any one who would point this out, and make it clear. In other respects, my method is diametrically opposed to his: he begins with the consideration of Being; my whole design compels me to begin with the consideration of Knowing. But anything to serve a purpose! Any expedient, however vile, is legitimate when employed to accomplish the ends of fanaticism. The only circumstance which gives any colour to this mean device is, that, when I have mentioned the name of Hegel, I have done so without indignation and abhorrence. But a man who has looked even a very short way under the surface of human life, and seen something of the practical world, contemplates very calmly all speculative aberrations, and can speak even of Hegel with composure.

Another great name which has been conjured up against me is that of Spinoza. Is not that a horrible man to be in any way related to? Do not undefined terrors seem to encircle the very letters of his name? A poor Jew of Amsterdam, a needy grinder of glass lenses for his frugal livelihood, the most peaceful, and, by all accounts, the most amiable and disinterested of men—this thinker, more terrible than Swedish Charles, in all his sweeping forays,

“Has left a name at which the world grows pale.”

The world, methinks, grows pale at very little. I owe no fealty to Spinoza. I preach none of his opinions. Indeed, I am not charged with adopting anything of his except a method, which he has in common with all rigorous reasoners. But this I will avouch, that all the outcry which has been raised against Spinoza has its origin in nothing but ignorance, hypocrisy, and cant.

These traditional malignities are perfectly sickening to listen to. Parrots in their ignorance, but worse than parrots in their spite, those pests who screech such hereditary malice ought to be nailed flat against the door of every philosophical class-room in the kingdom. If Spinoza errs, it is in attributing, not certainly too much to the great Creator, for that is impossible, but too little to the creature of His hands. He denies, as many great and pious divines have done, the free agency of man: he asserts the absolute sovereignty of God. He is the very Calvin of philosophy.

Having felt myself under the necessity of making a few public explanations in reference to my philosophical position, in consequence of the suspicion or slur which, to some extent, may possibly have been thrown upon it by the recent unfavourable decision of the Town Council of Edinburgh, I have drifted inevitably into a somewhat personal strain. I may be pardoned if I continue my narrative, even at the risk of introducing details respecting the new philosophy, which are of no great public importance.

I repeat, then, that I disclaim for my philosophy the paternity either of Germany or Holland. I assert, that in every fibre it is of home growth and national texture; and I go on to speak of one to whom principally I owe the means which, next to my own efforts, have enabled me to approach, as I think, the pinnacles of truth.

> Morally and intellectually, Sir William Hamilton was among the greatest of the great. I knew him in his glorious prime, when his bodily frame was like a breathing intellect, and when his soul could travel, as on eagles' wings, over the tops of all the mountains of knowledge. He seemed to have entered, as it were, by divine right, into the possession of all learning. He came to it like a fair inheritance, as a king comes to his throne. All the regions of literature were spread out before his view; all the avenues of science stood open at his command. A simpler and a grander nature never arose out of darkness into human life: a truer and a manlier character God never made. How plain, and yet how polished was his life, in all its ways—how refined, yet how robust and broad his intelligence, in all its