

F. H. Bradley and the Concept of Relative Truth

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Few people now read F. H. Bradley and the British Idealists.¹ This is not because they are not important philosophers. On the contrary. It is generally agreed that Bradley, in particular, is a major philosopher, as well as a great, if demanding, writer.² It is rather because Bradley and the other Idealists are thought to inhabit a philosophical world quite different from that of the mainstream of contemporary philosophy. They seem to be concerned with issues and problems which have little or nothing to do with the topics which concern most philosophers nowadays.

Certainly, this is what I was taught about them, either implicitly or explicitly, as a student; and it is what students today are still often taught. Thus it is implied that they were concerned mainly with what are generally regarded as the peripheral areas of social and political thought. Moreover, and more importantly, they are portrayed as engaging in a strange and alien form of speculative metaphysics, which has no relation to the central tradition of English language philosophy. Indeed, analytical philosophy, it is often said, emerged only when Russell and Moore rejected their work, and returned to the empiricist mainstream.

A good number of misconceptions are contained in these views, which need to be dispelled if the significance of the British Idealists is to be appreciated. In the first place, although a number of them made important contributions in social and political philosophy, it is by no means the case that their work as a whole is particularly focused in these areas. Indeed, the main figures of the Idealist school all wrote major works on epistemology, metaphysics and logic. They wrote extensively on all the major figures of empiricist philosophy, from Bacon and Locke through to J. S. Mill. Moreover, they developed their ideas through a critical dialogue with other English-speaking philosophers of their day. They even engaged in extensive debate with such still influential figures as William James, Russell and G. E. Moore.³

It is evident, therefore, that these philosophers are not of a different philosophical world. Certainly their *approach* is different to that of analytical philosophy; but they tackle many of the same problems and address many of the same issues. Herein lies their significance. For, since its early days, analytical philosophy has developed very largely in a world of its own, without the benefit of critical dialogue with other traditions. The work of the British Idealists thus represents a unique body of critical work, from which contemporary philosophers can still learn much.

Nowhere is this more the case than in epistemology. In what follows I shall focus on this area and, more specifically, on the work of F. H. Bradley, perhaps the greatest of the Idealists. My aim is to explain and, up to a certain point, defend some of his main ideas in the theory of knowledge. I shall concentrate on his view that truth and error are relative notions and matters of degree. These ideas are particularly significant at the present time. For they challenge some of the most fundamental assumptions in traditional epistemology, and raise issues which have become quite central to recent discussion in this area.

Traditional Epistemology and its Problems

Traditional epistemology, whether of an empiricist or a rationalist form, involves an absolute view of truth and falsehood. True statements are regarded as absolutely and eternally true; and false statements are regarded as absolutely and eternally false. If it is now true that the earth orbits the sun, then it always will be true – not that the earth always will orbit the sun, for that may well cease to be true – but that *now*, in 1991, it does so. If that is true, it always will be so; for truth is absolute and eternal – that is its nature. The job of epistemology, according to this view, is to provide a method by which such truths can be determined and distinguished from error. Traditionally, it has tried to do this by seeking secure and certain foundations for knowledge, either in immediate experience or in *a priori* reason.

The problems for this traditional, foundational approach in the theory of knowledge are now well known. Neither immediate experience nor pure reason can provide a certain basis for knowledge. The arguments which lead to this conclusion, although they are now usually associated with writers like Wittgenstein, Quine and Kuhn, are not new. They were well known to Bradley. According to many contemporary writers, they result inevitably in scepticism and relativism. They call in question the whole epistemological project of trying to justify knowledge, and give rise to an 'anti-epistemological' or 'postmodernist' position.⁴ Some seem to revel in this scepticism and uncertainty. Others, by contrast, for fear of such conclusions, try to defend the traditional, foundational approach and the absolute conceptions of truth and falsehood.

These two alternatives have dominated recent discussion. Neither is tenable, however. The significance of Bradley is that he offers an alternative, quite different and, I shall argue, more satisfactory approach to these fundamental issues. He criticizes and rejects foundational epistemology; but not in favour of relativism and scepticism. Rather, he seeks to develop an historical and developmental theory of knowledge.

The Concept of Relative Truth

Central to this historical account of knowledge are the concepts of relative truth and falsehood. At first sight these seem highly paradoxical notions. To reject the absolute ideas of truth and error, and to maintain that they are matters of degree and relative, seems strange and extraordinary. Bradley does indeed give some highly metaphysical arguments for these views, the merits of which I shall not here discuss.⁵ What I want to stress is that the basic ideas which Bradley is putting forward have much that is commonsensical about them. It is rather the absolute approach which generates the paradoxes and problems. For knowledge is something that grows and develops in historical fashion; and the

absolute conception of truth and error makes this process of growth and development impossible to understand.

According to the absolute view, as we have seen, truth and falsity are exclusive alternatives. Propositions or theories must be regarded as *either* absolutely true *or* absolutely false.⁶ Neither alternative is satisfactory. This is particularly clear in the history of science. Let us consider the status of current scientific beliefs and theories (or statements framed in terms of them). Can these theories be regarded as embodying absolute truth? Certainly not.



That would be to suggest that the areas of knowledge concerned are complete and perfect, and that no further investigation could ever lead us to change our views of them. There is no valid basis for this sort of claim in chemistry, physics or, indeed, in any other area of scientific knowledge. Quite the contrary. If we look back over, say, the past 200 years, it is evident that scientific understanding has been advancing at a rapid and ever accelerating pace. Phlogiston theory has been replaced by modern chemistry; and Newtonian mechanics and physics have been superseded by the theory of relativity and quantum theory. Similar strides have been made in other areas. Whole new fields of scientific knowledge have been discovered and opened up.

Moreover, there seems every reason to believe that such developments will continue, with at least an equal rapidity in the next 200 years. In 200 years time it seems likely that scientists will look back on our views as we now look back on the scientific ideas of the eighteenth century. In other words, current scientific theories are almost certain to be superseded and discarded. They cannot, therefore, be regarded as absolute truths.

Indeed, in time they are almost certain to be regarded as false. According to the traditional approach, it would seem that we should therefore now regard them as absolutely false. But that is, if anything, an even more unsatisfactory view. Although, no doubt, our current understanding is partial, limited and destined in time to be superseded, we have *some* grasp of the truth, *some*

understanding of the natural world, to which no justice is done by the assertion that current theories are merely false. Our current understanding embodies considerable knowledge of the natural world. It is the result of a long process of previous scientific development, and in its turn it provides the essential basis upon which better theories, still to come, will build and develop. Likewise, previous and now superseded views – like phlogiston chemistry or Newtonian mechanics – should not be regarded as mere errors and illusions. These theories have played an essential role in the development of knowledge. They constitute the basis upon which our present views were built. They contained some measure of understanding of the world, some (albeit partial) validity and truth.

In short, neither current beliefs nor previous ones are either absolutely true or absolutely false. These abstract – absolute and metaphysical – categories are a hindrance to understanding and should be discarded in the theory of knowledge. However, this is not to say that we must embrace a sceptical or relativist position and reject the ideas of truth and error altogether. For we can and must maintain, of some of our beliefs at any rate, that they are true *relatively*. For *this* stage of our development, current chemistry and physics are necessary and justified sets of beliefs. Such theories are not merely possible ‘ways of seeing things’, as relativism suggests. Rather, they represent the *best* accounts of these areas presently available. There are no other equally valid, or equally possible alternative theories in these areas.

Relative to previous theories and other presently available alternatives, modern chemistry and physics are the most satisfactory accounts of their objects so far developed. It is such an essentially relative judgement that we make when we say that our current beliefs are ‘true’, ‘objective’, ‘rational’, or ‘scientifically justified’. Thus our beliefs are justified relatively, not absolutely. But relatively, they *are* justified. This justification, though relative is, as Bradley says, *real*.⁷

All ideas in the end ... lack ultimate truth. They may be called working conceptions, good and true so far as they work. And, because they work, and because nothing else could work so well, there is therefore nothing better and nothing truer than such ideas, each in its own proper place; since nothing else could possibly be more relative to our needs.⁸

The Historical Account of Knowledge

Thus, according to Bradley, we must reject *both* the absolutism of traditional, foundational epistemology, *and also* pure relativism. Knowledge does not consist of absolute truths, it does not rest on absolute and immutable foundations; but nor is it without any foundation or justification whatever, and merely relative and arbitrary. Such relativism is often the only alternative to absolutism which is envisaged; but it is, in fact, only the abstract negation, the ‘negative’ so to speak, of absolute epistemology, and equally unsatisfactory. Instead, we must develop a historical and developmental account of knowledge.

At each stage in the growth of knowledge, the ideas of that stage are necessary and justified. As we have seen, this justification is relative to experience and to thought as it has developed at that stage; but it is not, for all that, merely ‘arbitrary’ and ‘conventional’, *merely* relative. For, relative to this particular stage of development, these ideas are true and correct, in the only sense of these terms which has any application.

We may even, in this context, perhaps wish to talk of ‘absolute’ truths. This is the way in which people ordinarily talk and regard their views. For in the normal course of life we usually

take the limits and the relativity of our position and perspective for granted; and, *relative* to this position and perspective, our current knowledge is true and justified. *Given* these limits, we are accustomed to make judgements of truth and error without qualification and 'absolutely'.

Nevertheless, it is important to see the relative nature of this 'absolute'. Such a 'relative absolute' is a useful notion, and the account of truth built upon its basis illuminates the nature of knowledge. On the other hand, if we demand something 'more absolute' than this, then there is nothing that can satisfy us. As Bradley says,

within limits and in their proper place our relative view insists everywhere on the value and on the necessity of absolute judgements, both as to right and wrong and as to error and truth.... If you ask me, for example, whether there is truth in the statement that $2 + 2 = 5$, I answer that (though I am ignorant of mathematics) I believe this to be sheer error. The world of mathematics, that is, I understand to rest on certain conditions, and under these conditions there is within mathematics pure truth and utter error. It is only when you pass beyond a special science, and it is only when you ask whether the very conditions of that science are absolutely true and real, that you are forced to reject this absolute view.⁹

In this way, the historical view of knowledge can accommodate and acknowledge the truth in both the absolute and the relative views, while avoiding the one-sidedness which characterizes them both. Ultimately, our beliefs and ideas are only partial and relative; and they are destined to be revealed as such by the future advance of knowledge. However, *given* our present experience and present level of theoretical understanding, some of these views, at least, are objective, rational, justified and true.

In general ... every error upon our view contains some truth, since it has a content which in some sense belongs to the Universe. And on the other side all truths are in varying degrees erroneous.... The difference between error and truth ... in the end consist[s] in degree. In the above statement the words 'in the end' must be emphasized.... The relative view of error and truth may be held and taught one-sidedly. But, rightly understood, it comprehends, and on a lower plane it justifies, the absolute view. In the realm of the special sciences and of practical life, and in short everywhere, unless we except philosophy, we are compelled to take partial truths as being utterly true. We cannot do this consistently, but we are forced to do this, and our action within limits is justified.¹⁰

That is to say, paradoxical as it may sound, we treat our knowledge as true – and 'absolutely' so – relative to our present stage of knowledge. But in the end, it is a matter of degree and relative.

Some Objections Considered

Such views are not peculiar to Bradley. Their source is in Hegel, as Bradley acknowledges; and they are taken up in more realist and materialist terms by writers in the Marxist tradition. They also have their critics of course. According to Ewing, for example, the concept of relative truth 'seems flagrantly to contradict the law of excluded middle, according to which the only alternatives are absolute truth and absolute falsehood so that a judgement can only be partially true or partially false in the sense that it is analysable into several judgements some of which are absolutely true and others absolutely false'.¹¹

I shall deal with the idea that 'relative' truths can be analysed into absolutely true and absolutely false elements in a moment. First, however, let us examine the view that the idea of degrees of truth is in conflict with the law of the excluded middle. Ewing is surely right about this; but the correct conclusion to draw is: so much the worse for the law of the excluded middle. For the rigid either/or alternatives that it imposes make both the development of knowledge and the history of science incomprehensible.

Either we must regard current science as the pure light of truth, which emerges out of pure darkness of previous error, or we must look upon it, and everything else short of absolute truth, as sheer fallacy and illusion. These are the sole choices presented by the law of the excluded middle; yet both alternatives involve absurd and untenable ways of looking at the history of science.

These points are well made by that most unfashionable philosopher, Engels. He cites an example from the history of chemistry: namely, Boyle's Law. This law states that the volume of a gas varies inversely with its pressure at constant temperature. Regnault discovered that this law does not apply in certain cases. If Regnault had adhered to the law of the excluded middle, Engels argues, he would have been obliged to conclude that, since Boyle's Law is not absolutely true, it must be absolutely erroneous. 'Had he done so,' writes Engels,

he would have committed an error far greater than the one contained in Boyle's Law.... However, Regnault, being a man of science, did not indulge in such childishness, but continued his investigations and discovered that in general Boyle's Law is only approximately true and in particular loses its validity ... as soon as the pressure approaches the point at which liquefaction begins. Therefore Boyle's Law was proved to be true only within definite limits. But is it absolutely and finally true within those limits? No physicist would assert that.¹²

Engels is surely right about this. The claim to absolute truth is foreign to science. However, it is familiar enough in philosophy, where it is often made as though it followed from immutable laws of logic and as if no alternatives were conceivable. Thus John Anderson, arguing against Engels, asserts that the idea of degrees of truth 'means nothing'. Boyle's Law, he insists,

has been shown to be false; and the most that Engels can say is that something like it is true. Boyle asserts that all gases have the property *X*; Regnault shows that this is false, but that *all gases within specific bounds* have the property *X*. In other words, a *different* property is true, not relatively but absolutely.... Whatever Engels may say ... he must admit, as an absolute fact, that some gases under some conditions have the property *X* or he must say, as he does not wish to do, that Boyle was quite wrong about gases.¹³

This all sounds very cut-and-dried and clear; but Engels has it right when he rejects such views as 'childish'. The problem is that they make nonsense of the history of chemistry. Of course, Regnault discovered that something different from Boyle's Law is true; but he did so *on the basis of* Boyle's Law, and by *developing* Boyle's Law. The absolute notions of truth and error with their either/or logic, upon which both Anderson and Ewing insist, makes this development – and, particularly, the continuity and the progressive process involved in it – quite invisible. The development of knowledge, the history of thought, becomes comprehensible only if such absolutes are discarded, and truth and error are regarded in a historical way, as matters of degree and relative.

Development as Accumulation

Let us now look at the view put forward by Ewing and others, to the effect that 'partial truths' can always be resolved into elements, some of which are absolutely true and others absolutely false. A theory, on this account, has a degree of truth which depends upon the number or proportion of its true elements. Knowledge is thus pictured as a collection of individual truths, 'facts' or fragmentary items of data; and progress in knowledge is conceived as a process of accumulation. Each new discovery, each new extension of knowledge, is regarded as adding further such items to the existing store of knowledge. These views go naturally with the foundational picture of knowledge. We start from a certain foundation. This constitutes a core of reliable knowledge, which is gradually extended and added to as knowledge increases.

This whole picture is criticized by Bradley. He questions the view that the development of knowledge consists of a steady, quantitative accumulation of discrete, particular 'facts'. Of course, in developing our knowledge, we start with what we take as given and as fact. However, this starting point does not function as a fixed *datum*, an immutable core, which is then merely added to or built upon. The development of knowledge does not work like that. The initial starting point does not constitute an absolute foundation. It is merely *our* particular starting point. It is thus relative to our particular level of understanding; which, in turn is dependent on our particular level of biological, psychological, and social development.

However, there is no need for the starting point to be an immutable foundation, since it is only a point of departure which, in the course of the development of knowledge, is revised and rethought. As Bradley says,

the foundation in truth is provisional merely. In order to begin my construction I take the foundation as absolute – so much certainly is true. But that my construction continues to rest on the beginnings of my knowledge is a conclusion which does not follow. It does not follow that, if these are allowed to be fallible, the whole building collapses.... A foundation used at the beginning does not in short mean something fundamental at the end, and there is no single 'fact' which in the end can be called fundamental absolutely.¹⁴

Again these ideas have Hegelian origin. They derive from the notion of progressive development through stages, which runs throughout Hegel's philosophy. To explain this idea, Hegel uses the image of the growth of a plant.

The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other, and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole.¹⁵

Bradley, too, sees the development of knowledge as a process in which each stage is necessary and justified – *and hence true* – for its time; but in which each stage ultimately gives way to a new and higher stage which emerges from it, and on its basis. In that sense, the development is a *progressive* one.

However, we must be cautious about viewing it in teleological terms, as a process aimed towards an ideal end or goal. Bradley tends to be unclear on this point. An ambivalence about whether the absolute is an ideal and an end runs through his philosophy. The teleological view can easily suggest that the ideas of each stage short of the end are merely false. But this is precisely what the historical view denies. For truth, it insists, is not merely an ideal, reached only at the end of the process. It is to be found *throughout* the process, in the necessity of each and every stage. Engels makes this point well. 'With Hegel,' he writes,

truth ... was no longer a collection of finished dogmatic propositions.... Truth now lay in the process of cognition itself, in the long historical development of science, which mounts from lower to ever higher levels of knowledge, without ever reaching, by discovering some so-called absolute truth, a point at which it can proceed no further.... Each stage is necessary and therefore justified for the time and conditions to which it owes its origin. But it becomes decrepit and unjustified in the face of new, higher conditions which gradually develop in its own womb.¹⁶

Thus the history of thought, as Hegel says, 'in its results, resembles not a museum of the aberrations of the human intellect, but a Pantheon of Godlike figures'.¹⁷ Moreover, according to this view, truth is actually *realized* at every stage of the development, as well as continually in the process of *being realized* in new and higher forms. Hegel makes this point, in a different though related context, when he writes that 'the final purpose of the world is accomplished no less than ever accomplishing itself'.¹⁸

The Problem of Error

So far, I have been focusing on the idea that there are no absolute truths, that truth is a matter of degree and relative. According to Bradley, however, it is equally the case that there is no absolute error. This too needs explanation. Part of what he means by this is already implicit in the ideas I have been describing. According to the developmental picture of knowledge, as we have seen, previous and now superseded theories are not absolutely erroneous and mistaken. They embody some understanding of the world, and contain some measure of truth.

Take, for example, the phlogiston theory, which dominated eighteenth-century chemistry. According to this theory, combustion involves the expulsion of a hypothetical substance, 'phlogiston', from burning bodies. Of course, as we now know, there is no such substance as phlogiston, and combustion is not a process of expulsion, but rather one of combination with oxygen. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that the phlogiston theory is purely illusory.

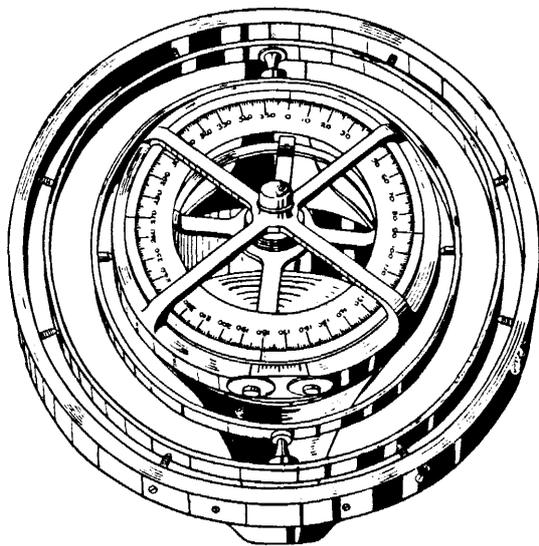
In the first place, it corresponds to initial appearances. When bodies burn, smoke and heat and light are given off: something does indeed appear to be expelled. Moreover, the phlogiston theory formed the basis of eighteenth-century chemistry. As elaborated by chemists of that period, it provided the framework in which the understanding of chemical phenomena developed considerably. Using this theory, Priestley even succeeded in isolating oxygen experimentally; even though, as a lifelong adherent to the phlogiston theory, he could never make the conceptual shift needed to see his discovery as oxygen, and persisted in regarding it as 'dephlogisticated air'.

The phlogiston theory in fact provided the basis upon which modern chemistry develops. In its time, the idea of phlogiston represented a significant step forward from the view that fire was

a miraculous gift from the gods, or one of the four ancient 'elements'. The phlogiston theory, in contrast to these earlier ideas, embodies the crucial recognition that combustion is a phenomenon that can be analysed and understood as a chemical reaction. In virtue of this, in the eighteenth century it provided the main theoretical framework for investigating and interpreting an increasing body of practical and experimental results.

By the end of that century, however, its limits were increasingly being revealed. A growing body of problematic and anomalous observations were being recorded. The theory, in Kuhn's words, was in 'crisis'. Through the work of Lavoisier and others, it was rapidly abandoned and replaced by the quite different and opposite oxygen theory, which remains at the basis of modern chemistry.¹⁹

Of course, as we now know, there is not and never has been any such substance as phlogiston. Yet, for all that, it would be a mistake to regard the theory of phlogiston as a pure error and illusion. We cannot hope to understand the history of chemistry on that basis. For modern chemistry did not emerge out of nowhere, it did not simply appear fully formed in Lavoisier's head. Rather, it was built upon the results of, the positive basis created by, the phlogiston theory which preceded it.



In short, the phlogiston theory cannot be regarded as an absolute error. It contains some measure of truth. This point can be made, as I have done, without in any way embracing the absurd and untenable view that phlogiston exists or ever has existed.

'Floating Ideas'

It is not clear, however, that this is how Bradley wishes to defend the thesis that there are no absolute errors. For Bradley maintains that different systems of thought somehow create their own 'worlds'. 'In art, in morality and religion, in trade or politics, or again in some theoretical pursuit, it is a commonplace that the individual may have a world of his own.'²⁰ Like Kuhn, he thus suggests that the phlogiston chemists of the eighteenth century in some sense lived in a 'phlogiston world', while Lavoisier and subsequent scientists inhabit a 'world' of oxygen.

These ideas, I believe, must be questioned. Before doing this,

however, I will briefly indicate the way in which they form part of a wider set of ideas, of considerable interest and importance. When Bradley insists that there are no absolute errors, he means something much more than just that there is some truth in superseded scientific views. He has a considerably more far-reaching doctrine in mind. He means to deny absolutely the view that there are any purely illusory or false ideas whatever.

All ideas, according to Bradley, have some truth to them. Even those created by the imagination, even the ideas of hallucinations and dreams, are anchored in reality in some way. Every idea, no matter how mistaken and false it may appear to be, reflects reality to some extent, and contains some measure of truth. 'Every idea ... in a sense is true, and is true of reality.'²¹ There are no ideas which merely 'float', as Bradley puts it, and which are not in any way anchored in reality. 'Every idea essentially qualifies reality',²² he insists, there is no such thing as sheer error.

Bradley spends a considerable amount of time defending these views in a number of his works, in relation to some particularly problematic cases, such as hypothetical and negative judgements, statements with empty (e.g. fictional) terms, dreams, illusions and 'the imaginary'.²³ Why is Bradley so concerned to establish this point? An important part of the answer, I believe, stems from the rejection of dualism, which is a central aspect of his philosophy.

An essential part of mind-body dualism is the view that our ideas, our consciousness, could exist just as it is, without the basis we customarily believe it has in the body or in the material world. This is one of the main points that Descartes tries to establish with the *cogito* argument. Thus, he argues that it is possible that he is being deceived by an evil demon. All his perceptions, and all his beliefs based upon them, might be completely mistaken and illusory, and bear no relation at all to the material world.²⁴

Bradley rejects such mind-body dualism and, with it, he also rejects the view that reality, and our consciousness of it, could be entirely discrepant in this way. Our ideas, he insists, cannot 'float' completely free of reality in the way that such a dualist picture suggests; they are essentially and necessarily related to it. Every idea, he insists, must 'attach itself as an adjective to the real, and hence in the end there will be no such thing as an idea which merely floats'.²⁵

However, there are two quite different ways in which it is possible to reject dualism and its belief in 'floating ideas': an idealist way and a materialist way. For both idealism and materialism are non-dualist, indeed anti-dualist, philosophies. Bradley quite explicitly and deliberately chooses the idealist path. Here I must part company with him.

Bradley's idealism comes out particularly clearly in his discussion of the epistemological status of art and literature. This topic, which is nowadays often discussed as the problem of 'fictional discourse', he considers under the heading of 'imaginary ideas'. According to Bradley, such ideas appear to be false and to float free of any connection to reality; but this is only because we make false assumptions about 'the nature and limits of reality'. We must not regard reality as confined to the world of 'fact'. There are many 'worlds' – worlds of art and literature, of dreams, even of different theoretical systems – all of which taken together go to make up in the end 'absolute reality'.

These ideas are perhaps most plausible in relation to the imaginary 'world' involved in a piece of imaginative fiction. We talk, for example, of Shakespeare's 'world', or the 'world' of a novel. 'The imaginary, we all say, has its own laws, and, if so, we must go on to add, it has its own truth and its own life, and its ideas, floating in reference to common fact, are hence attached to this its own world of reality.'²⁶ In a similar way, it is worth noting, Kuhn describes a scientific revolution as creating a 'different

world'. Thus, he tells us, 'after discovering oxygen Lavoisier worked in a different world.'²⁷

According to Bradley, 'in the end and taken absolutely ... there can be no mere idea. Reality is always before us, and every idea in some sense qualifies the real.... Flotation means attachment to another soil, a realm other than that sphere which for any purpose we take here as solid ground and as fact.'²⁸ I cannot accept such views. As a realist and a materialist, I am convinced that there is no 'other soil', no other world: there is only the one, objective material world. Nevertheless, in conclusion I want to suggest that much of Bradley's philosophy can fruitfully be given a realist and materialist interpretation, including even his idea that there are no absolute errors and that there is a degree of truth in all ideas. According to such an interpretation, all ideas, no matter how false they may appear to be, contain some measure of truth, not merely about an imagined world, but about the real, objective, material world.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to try to defend such a large thesis here.²⁹ However, it should be noted that throughout the discussion above, I have been defending the idea of relative truth in terms which imply a realist perspective. Thus a superseded scientific theory like the phlogiston theory, I have been suggesting, is not mere error. It contains some measure of truth, not about a 'phlogiston world', for there is no such world, but about the chemical character of our world. We must recognize this, I have argued, if we are to avoid scepticism and relativism and make sense of the historical development of knowledge.

Moreover, similar arguments can be applied to the areas of art and literature, upon which Bradley particularly focuses. For art and literature, it can be argued, contain some truth, not just about their own imaginary and self-created worlds, but about the objective and real world. All art, according to this view, reflects reality in some way and in some measure. We can, and often do, learn something from it about reality.

This is most evident in the case of great art and literature, particularly when it takes a realistic form. The view I am describing, however, is a quite general theory. It is a theory about the epistemological status of art and literature in general; a philosophical theory about the nature of art and its relation to reality. It does not seek to recommend any particular style of art, realistic or otherwise. Thus not only realistic forms of art and literature, but also expressionist, impressionist, and abstract forms too, reflect reality, and can be interpreted and understood in these terms. Nor does this theory try to offer a criterion by which good art can be distinguished from bad art. It is not saying that art *ought* to be true to reality; it says rather that all art necessarily *is* so in some measure.

Likewise with other forms of consciousness: a materialist reading of Bradley's principle suggests the view that all ideas contain some element of truth, and refer to and reflect some aspect of reality. This is the view implied by Bradley's philosophy, and it is, I believe, a suggestive and fruitful one.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was given to a seminar on 'The British Idealists' at Oxford University. I am grateful to Sabina Lovibond and Susan Hurley who organised the seminar, and to the other participants, for helpful comments and discussion. Some portions of this paper reproduce material from S. Sayers, *Reality and Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).
- 2 A view shared by T. S. Eliot, 'F. H. Bradley', *Selected Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 3rd edition, 1951, pp. 444-55.

- 3 See, e.g., T. H. Green, 'Introductions' to Hume's *Works*, for an important critical discussion of the empiricist tradition, and F. H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914, for extensive discussion of the views of Russell, James and pragmatism. Contemporary criticism of idealist writing can be found in B. Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, London: Allen & Unwin, revised edition, 1926, and in G. E. Moore, 'External and Internal Relations' and 'The Conception of Reality', in *Philosophical Studies*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922.
- 4 See, e.g., R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979; J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.
- 5 For example, he writes, 'truth demands at once the essential difference and identity of ideas and reality. It demands (we may say) that the idea should in the end be reconstituted by the subject of the judgement and should in no sense whatever fall outside ... Truth, in other words, content with nothing short of reality, has, in order to remain truth, to come short for ever of its own ideal and remain imperfect' (*Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 251).
- 6 Alternatively, theories may be thought of as being composed of elements, each of which is either absolutely true or absolutely false. I shall discuss this idea further below.
- 7 'Morality is "relative" but none the less real,' *Ethical Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 1927, p. 190.
- 8 *Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 267. Bradley, it should be noted, ultimately qualifies these assertions, and works towards a metaphysic which strives for knowledge of 'the absolute', even if it does not claim to reach it.
- 9 *Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 266.
- 10 *Essays on Truth and Reality*, pp. 257-58.
- 11 *Idealism*, pp. 208-09.
- 12 F. Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962, p. 128.
- 13 J. Anderson, 'Marxist Philosophy', *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1962, p. 297.
- 14 *Essays on Truth and Reality*, pp. 210-11.
- 15 G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 2.
- 16 F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Peking: Foreign Languages press, 1976, pp. 7-8.
- 17 G. W. F. Hegel, *Logic*, translated by W. Wallace, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 3rd edition, 1975, para. 86z.
- 18 Hegel, *Logic*, para. 235.
- 19 There is an illuminating discussion of this episode in T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2nd edition, 1970.
- 20 F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, London: Oxford University Press, 1897, p. 325.
- 21 *Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 42.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 23 Particularly *Essays on Truth and Reality*, *Appearance and Reality*, and *Principles of Logic*, 2 Vols, London: Oxford University press, 2nd edition, 1922.
- 24 R. Descartes, *Meditations*, I, in *Selected Philosophy Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- 25 F. H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 29.
- 26 F. H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 118.
- 27 *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 118.
- 28 F. H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 35.
- 29 See S. Sayers, *Reality and Reason*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1985, for an extended discussion of these ideas.