

William J. Mander, *The Unknowable, A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Metaphysics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2020, pp. 328, \$ 105.00, ISBN 9780198809531

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The Unknowable: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Metaphysics is the latest book by W.J. Mander, who is already well known for several books on the history of English thought, including the widely recognized *British Idealism: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and, more recently, *Idealist Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2016). The volume reconstructs the development of Anglo-Saxon philosophy in the Victorian era, identifying William Hamilton's concept of the Unknowable as the focal point for the analysis of the positions of the epoch's leading authors. The post-Kantian debate on the existence, constitution, and intelligibility of reality in itself provides Mander with an opportunity to chart a path connecting the agnostic movement to the empiricist and idealist ones, thus embracing in a single synoptic view the main trends of Nineteenth Century British philosophy. The book's general structure, twelve chapters organized into three parts, mirrors this path: the volume first offers an account of the orthodox agnosticism of Hamilton and his epigone H.L. Mansel, while also identifying related tendencies in the thoughts of Herbert Spencer and T.H. Huxley. The second part is devoted to the empiricism of John Stuart Mill, Alexander Bain and G.C. Robertson, as well as the later contributions of G.H. Lewes, K. Pearson and the most distinguished members of the Metaphysical Society, S.H. Hodgson and W.K. Clifford. The final section is dedicated to the examination of idealism, tracing its evolution from its initial manifestations in the works of J.F. Ferrier and J. Grote to the contributions of prominent Hegelians, including the Scottish physician J.H. Stirling, the Caird brothers, the personalist A. Seth Priggle-Pattinson, Henry Jones, and finally F.H. Bradley.

The comparison between these authors is drawn through an analysis of their positions on certain pivotal issues. For the

agnosticism of the first half of the century, the Unknowable assumes multiple meanings – appearing as external reality, the first cause, the Self, space and time, and the God of religion. The terrain of confrontation with empiricists and idealists proves equally varied and shaped by each of these aspects. From this confrontation emerge the distinctive characteristics of each movement and the specific nuances of each author’s perspective.

In broad terms, the difference between the agnostic movement, empiricism, and idealism can be summarized by acknowledging first that the impenetrability of the Unknowable, regardless of its specific form, within Hamilton and the other members of the agnostic current takes on the hues of an “extreme metaphysical realism” (p. 3). This stems from the presupposition that the unknowability of reality as such implies the thesis that the world we investigate subsists independently of the knowledge we can obtain of it. Agnosticism thus results in radical dualism: on the one hand, there is the finite horizon of our subjectivity; on the other hand, there is reality as such, which always exceeds the phenomenal limits of our investigation of it. Against such realism, both empiricism and idealism raise important objections. Both highlight the fragility of the idea that something can exist by exceeding the limits of our experiential dimension, since the very attribution of the predicate of existence denies the assumption of the complete unknowability of the object under consideration. To assert that an object exists – and thus to know of its existence – is tantamount to contradicting the thesis of its complete unknowability. Moreover, the very concept of the Unknowable appears as such meaningless, as the assertion about the unknowability of an object is nothing other than an epistemically characterized qualification of the object itself. If something is truly situated beyond the boundaries of our particular perspective, we cannot simultaneously assert its independence and treat it as the object of our judgments.

From this common critique, however, empiricism and idealism develop divergent perspectives. For empiricism, reality is reduced to what is directly witnessed by the senses, which alone serve as the criterion on the basis of which actual knowledge of things can be attested. For idealism, the scope of the knowable is expanded beyond the domain of mere

subjectivity. Reason is thus capable of gradually embracing reality in its objective constitution, demonstrating that it can develop beyond the limits of a knowledge habitually assumed to be merely relative.

In light of this general outline, the book's merit lies not only in its effective delineation of the essential contours of a historically complex debate, but also, more importantly, in its ability to deepen progressively, through the succession of chapters and the perspectives of individual authors, a portrait that might otherwise appear simplistic. In examining these various philosophical traditions, Mander operates, so to say, both internally and externally. On the one hand, he elucidates the nuances within each current of thought, demonstrating how, with respect to the themes previously mentioned, each is characterized by a diverse array of interpretations that are often incompatible with one another. For instance, with respect to the epistemological status of the Self, Mansel does not align with Hamilton's assertion of its unknowability, and instead argues for a full self-transparency of consciousness. With respect to the issue of faith, agnosticism itself reveals internal fractures, torn between the Christian-inspired theistic tendency of its more conservative members and the greater caution and relative disinterest of those more sympathetic towards the emerging scientific paradigm. With respect to causality, Robertson rejects Mill and Bain's thesis that causal connections are reducible to the observation of regular successions in experience. Instead, he argues for the real existence of "forces" capable of producing effects (p. 151). And last, with respect to the status of reality in itself, Bradley adopts a stance quite distinct from other idealists, rejecting the Hegelian identification of subjectivity and objectivity and highlighting the contradictions inherent in the "relational plane of thought".

These examples illustrate how the author emphasizes the details that differentiate the various interpretations of each tradition with precision and rigor. However, where the historical analysis presented by Mander turns out to be even more lucid and valuable is where he highlights not so much the discrepancies that arise within each current of thought, but rather the affinities that recur between authors of different philosophical orientations, prompting a reassessment of the actual distance between the main schools of the period. It is thus revealed that empiricist thinkers unexpectedly share

stances typically associated with idealism, or conversely, that idealist philosophers espouse some of the fundamental tenets of empiricism or even agnosticism. Among the most significant cases worth mentioning, Spencer elaborates a psychology akin in spirit to that of many empiricists, reducing mind to nothing more than the succession of our sentient experiences (p. 79; p. 134). Similarly, Huxley, criticizing Spencer and the dualistic outcomes of the more orthodox agnostics, also turns out to be particularly close to the empiricist horizon (p. 87). He shares only the critical and “negative” side of the agnosticism of Hamilton and Mansel, abhorring its “positive” aspect that identifies the Unknowable as a disguised re-proposition of the metaphysical unity of the Absolute. With regard to the empiricist school, Alexander Bain tends to espouse a “Berkeleyan” stance, countering the realism of the agnostics with an extreme form of anti-realism. This stance takes knowledge to be limited to the set of impressions of the mind, whereby “material things are the mental fact” (p. 138). By arguing that all knowledge is relational and that therefore the object has no meaning except in relation to the subject, Bain brings the empiricist perspective appreciably closer to the idealist one. It is no coincidence that both he and Mill did not fail to declare themselves idealists in turn, at least in this “subjective” sense. Conversely, when Ferrier’s thought is taken into consideration, it becomes evident that there is a trace of Berkeley’s theses (p. 217) present as well. These theses are adopted with the aim of recusing the ontological independence of the Unknowable and sealing the unity between the subject of experience and the experienced reality.

However, the point at which the interplay of references and cross-references reaches its zenith and where the most exemplary blending of the principal currents of Anglo-Saxon philosophy is observed is, without doubt, the discussion of F.H. Bradley. In a sense, Bradley succeeds in synthesizing seemingly incompatible views, which nevertheless find a singular harmonization in the elaboration of his philosophy. While he rejects associationism and identifies *feeling* as a form of experience that is distinct from Mill’s atomistic one, Bradley can be said to be aligned with empiricism insofar as he views reality as primarily experienced, rather than gradually understood through a series of deductions and inferences based on reason alone. Similarly, the proof of idealism

contained in *Appearance and Reality* appeals to the *experiential* – and therefore *mental* – character of the Absolute, in a manner that is not too distant from the Berkelianism of Ferrier and Bain. Ultimately, while rejecting the metaphysical realism of Hamilton and Mansel and criticizing, on the basis of the unitary character of experience, any form of opposition between phenomenon and noumenon, Bradley also incorporates certain tenets of agnosticism into his own philosophy. This is evident in his argument for a fundamental opacity of reality in the eyes of discursive reason and the consequent impossibility of effectively knowing it.

Mander's book is particularly successful in its ability to adeptly interweave the intricate tapestry of this period of Anglo-Saxon philosophy, offering readers the opportunity to approach the thought of philosophers who are often overlooked or misrepresented. The author presents them in a unified account while at the same time accounting for the particularity of their own positions. With respect to the most prominent figures of the period, the book permits an examination of their contributions within the context of internal debates in the Anglo-Saxon philosophical landscape. This approach avoids the tendency to oversimplify their ideas by unduly emphasizing their debt to the leading figures of classical German philosophy – as is often the case with Bradley and other idealists. *The Unknowable* thus contributes to the task of shedding light on a segment of the history of thought that has not been sufficiently studied, and certainly deserves more attention.