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To cite this article: Emily Thomas (2015) Hilda Oakeley on Idealism, History and the Real Past, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 23:5, 933-953, DOI: [10.1080/09608788.2015.1055232](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2015.1055232)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2015.1055232>



Published online: 17 Jul 2015.



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ARTICLE

HILDA OAKELEY ON IDEALISM, HISTORY AND THE REAL PAST¹

Emily Thomas

In the early twentieth century, Hilda Diana Oakeley (1867–1950) set out a new kind of British idealism. Oakeley is an idealist in the sense that she holds mind to actively contribute to the features of experience, but she also accepts that there is a world independent of mind. One of her central contributions to the idealist tradition is her thesis that minds construct our experiences using memory. This paper explores the theses underlying her idealism, and shows how they are intricately connected to the wider debates of her period. I go on to explain how the parts of Oakeley's idealism are connected to further areas of her thought – specifically, her views on history and her growing block theory of time – to provide a sense of Oakeley's philosophy as a system. As there is no existing literature on Oakeley, this paper aims to open a path for further scholarship.

KEYWORDS: Hilda Oakeley; British idealism; extensional model of consciousness; philosophy of history; growing block theory; R. G. Collingwood

1. INTRODUCTION

The British philosopher Hilda Diana Oakeley (1867–1950) is currently unknown to scholarship but, in the first half of the twentieth century, she was an extremely active thinker that was regarded highly enough by her peers to be elected President of the Aristotelian Society. This paper explores Oakeley's complex, idiosyncratic brand of British idealism. Oakeley holds that minds actively contribute to the features of their experience, the private 'world' that each mind inhabits; however, outside of these worlds, there is not-mind stuff that cannot be apprehended in its own nature. One of Oakeley's most important theses is that minds are continually engaged in 'creative memory', a process in which mind draws on memory to

¹This has been a knotty paper to write. I am grateful for insightful comments from Bill Mander, Guiseppina D'Oro, James Connolly, Karen Green, Graeme Forbes, Mike Beaney, and two anonymous referees for this journal.

construct experience. I will explore this thesis and, along the way, show that Oakeley's work is interesting for several further reasons. First, Oakeley draws heavily on Plato, rather than on the German thinkers – such as Kant and Hegel – traditionally associated with the British idealists. Second, Oakeley develops her views with a weather eye on the intellectual currents seething around her, providing a new perspective into the ongoing debates of her period between idealisms and the new realisms. Finally, Oakeley is a systematic thinker who draws unusual philosophic connections; to illustrate, this paper will explain how parts of Oakeley's idealism connect to her views on history and the reality of the past.

The paper will proceed as follows. Section 2 contextualizes Oakeley's work and career. Section 3 explores Oakeley's idealism. The first part sets out the architecture of Oakeley's idealism; the second part asks why Oakeley constructed it in this way, and argues that part of the answer lies in her reaction to the new realists, especially Samuel Alexander. Section 4 provides a sense of Oakeley's philosophic system by connecting parts of her idealism to her further views; this section also briefly compares Oakeley's views with those of her peer R. G. Collingwood. Section 5 offers some final thoughts on Oakeley's contribution to the idealist tradition, and argues that Oakeley deserves further study.

2. OAKELEY AND THE BRITISH PHILOSOPHICAL LANDSCAPE

In the late nineteenth century, British philosophy was dominated by 'absolute idealism', the view that the universe comprises a single Absolute consciousness. The early twentieth century saw anti-idealist 'new realisms' emerge, and rival idealisms. 'Personal idealism', led by Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, argued that persons are real in a stronger sense than allowed for by absolute idealism; nonetheless, persons are parts of the Absolute. 'Monadist idealisms', advanced by James Ward, H. Wildon Carr and arguably J. M. E. McTaggart, argued against both absolute and personal idealism that persons are Leibnizian monads, in that they are absolutely real individuals.

Oakeley came up to Oxford in 1894, whilst absolute idealism was at its peak. Oakeley's (*My Adventures in Education*, 64) autobiography describes how she was taught by the absolute idealists William Wallace, Edward Caird and Bernard Bosanquet, and adds that F. H. Bradley was 'the great name in the background'. Although Oakeley qualified for a baccalaureate and a master's degree in 1898, she was not awarded them; Oxford did not grant degrees to women until 1920. After leaving Oxford, Oakeley taught philosophy at McGill University and the University of Manchester. From 1907, Oakeley settled at King's College London, where she became an extremely active philosopher. In addition to producing dozens of papers and half a dozen books, Oakeley was acting head and head of the King's philosophy

department from 1925 to 1931, and she twice chaired the University of London's board of studies in philosophy. In 1940 Oakeley became President of the Aristotelian Society, the third woman to do so.²

Today, Oakeley is chiefly known as an educationalist.³ Aside from a sprinkling of brief references and vintage book reviews, there is no secondary literature on Oakeley's philosophy. Passmore's *Hundred Years of Philosophy* – a monolith history of British philosophy from 1843 to 1943 – discusses the likes of Bradley, Bosanquet, Alexander and Collingwood at length but makes no mention of Oakeley. Oakeley also fails to make an appearance in recent literature on British idealism, including Dunham, Grant and Watson's (*Idealism*) history; and Boucher and Vincent's (*British Idealism*) guide. Oakeley is omitted from Kersey's *Women Philosophers* and Warnock's *Women Philosophers*; and she does not receive an entry of her own in Waithe's *History of Woman Philosophers*, although she is mentioned in footnotes. There are two exceptions to this general inattention: Keene's ('Oakeley, Hilda Diana (1867–1950)', 717–8) dictionary entry provides a short introduction to Oakeley, and Mander's (*British Idealism*, 533) history of British idealism gives a brief description of Oakeley's work.

Many factors have likely contributed to the neglect of Oakeley's philosophy. One is the timing of Oakeley's career, which peaked in the 1930s and 1940s, a period on which there is relatively little scholarship. Another is the decline of British idealism generally⁴ and its subsequent neglect; to illustrate, Matson's (*History of Philosophy*) history skipped British idealism altogether. Perhaps the largest factor is that Oakeley was such a *late* idealist. To put her career in context, many of the major idealists – including Bosanquet, Bradley and McTaggart – had passed away by 1925. That said, there is one figure associated with late British idealism on whom there is ample literature: Collingwood. One might wonder why scholarship on Collingwood flourished, whilst on Oakeley it did not. An answer emerges if we think of philosophy as a kind of conversation. Oakeley was in conversation with figures such as Carr and McTaggart on topics such as the nature of idealism, at a time when those conversations were coming to a close. In contrast, Collingwood was involved in many other conversations – such as methodological issues concerning history, and aesthetics – that continued, and this has contributed to keeping his wider thought alive.

²Oakeley followed Beatrice Edgell and Susan Stebbing, figures also omitted in Passmore (*Hundred Years of Philosophy*). Oakeley was a feminist and her autobiography (*My Adventures in Education*, 76–7) describes walking in the London suffrage processions.

³See Howarth ('Oakeley, Hilda Diana (1867–1950)').

⁴Mander (*British Idealism*, 545–52) explores various reasons for this decline, including (anti-German) anti-Hegelianism. This reason *may* pertain to Oakeley's neglect; in a book review, De Montmorency ('History and Progress', 84) complains that the 'German influence' is still dominant in Oakeley.

Oakeley continued to write on idealist issues up until her death in 1950, well past the point when such issues were fashionable. May Sinclair, a fellow rare woman idealist whose philosophy has also been neglected, puts the problem with characteristic dash:

There is a certain embarrassment in coming forward with an Apology for Idealistic Monism at the present moment. You cannot be quite sure whether you are putting in an appearance too late or much too early. It does look like personal misfortune or perversity that, when there are lots of other philosophies to choose from, you should happen to hit on the one that has just had a tremendous innings and is now in process of being bowled out.

(1917, vii)

It is to Oakeley's intellectual merit – and, indeed, to Sinclair's – that she continued to espouse her idealist tenets despite a presumably increasing perception that they were outdated.

3. OAKELEY'S IDEALISM: ARCHITECTURE AND CONSTRUCTION

3.1. The Tripartite Architecture of Oakeley's Idealism

Idealists hold that, in *some* sense, mind actively contributes to experience.⁵ This basic thesis can be developed in many ways, including taking idealism towards monism or pluralism. 'Substance monism' holds there is one *kind* of substance; it is opposed to 'substance dualism', which holds there are two kinds of substances. 'Existence monism' holds there is numerically one substance; it is opposed to 'existence pluralism', which holds there are many substances. To illustrate, an absolute idealist might hold there is one kind of substance (mind) and numerically one substance (the Absolute). In contrast, a personal idealist might hold there is one kind of substance (mind) and numerically many substances (individual minds). A transcendental idealist might hold there are two kinds of substances (mind and matter) and many instances of both. Of these caricatures, Oakeley's idealism lies closest to the latter's: Oakeley is a substance dualist and an existence pluralist.

Oakeley's idealism possesses a rich and unusual architecture. I will approach it by exploring the various materials that go into building it: the extensional model of temporal consciousness, Leibnizian monadism and Platonic substance dualism.

The first building material is Oakeley's 'extensional model' of consciousness, which receives its first full treatment in 'The World as Memory and as History'. Oakeley ('World as Memory', 291) opens this paper by asking for a

⁵On the difficulties surrounding defining idealism more precisely, see Dunham, Grant, and Watson (*Idealism*, 1–9).

reconsideration of the character of human experience which gives more weight to its ‘historical form’, by which Oakeley means the way that human experience incorporates the past into the present. In support of this thesis, Oakeley (‘World as Memory’, 294–6) argues that ‘the truth’ that our knowledge of present experience is largely determined by the contribution of memory is ‘recognized’ by most psychologists. She also points to the philosophy of Henri Bergson. Understanding this requires some context.

Philosophers have long been interested in ‘temporal consciousness’: how we perceive change over time. A puzzle is that our conscious perception appears to be confined to the present moment, yet we appear to perceive changes that take place over moments of time, such as *seeing* the traffic lights change from orange to red. If we are only aware of the present moment, how can we also be aware of change over several moments? I will set out two of the major answers that have been proposed.⁶ On the ‘retentional model’, our experience of change occurs within discrete episodes of consciousness which lack temporal extension, yet the contents of these episodes are complex enough to represent (or ‘retain’) temporally extended phenomena. In contrast, on the ‘extensional model’, our episodes of consciousness are temporally extended, and thus able to incorporate change in a straightforward way. In some texts, Bergson appears to hold an extensional model, and it is one of these texts that Oakeley cites:

[T]he concrete present such as it is actually lived by consciousness ... consists, in large measure, in the immediate past. In the fraction of a second which covers the briefest possible perception of light, billions of vibrations have taken place, of which the first is separated from the last by an interval which is enormously divided. Your perception, however instantaneous, consists then in an incalculable multitude of remembered elements; and in truth every perception is already memory. Practically we perceive only the past.

(Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 193–4)

The idea is that the present moment of which we are aware consists in an enormous number of remembered elements, so any of our present perceptions consist largely of memory.

Oakeley (‘World as Memory’, 296) writes that Bergson’s contribution to the philosophy of memory is his ‘luminous’ exposition of the truth that, in an important sense, we live and have the greater part of our being in the world of memory, that our minds have a long historic stretch in their ‘immediate grasp’. For Oakeley, our episodes of consciousness are temporally extended, and human perceptual experience literally involves the past.

A little later, Oakeley (‘World as Memory’, 303) adds that her account of memory agrees with ‘much that is said’ by the new realist Alexander, and

⁶I borrow these labels from Dainton (‘Temporal Consciousness’).

Oakeley cites a chapter in Alexander's *Space, Time, and Deity* where Alexander sets out an extensional account of consciousness. For example, Alexander (*Space, Time, and Deity*, 120–1) writes of our experience of a meteor trail: 'the whole movement is sensory and the path of light is seen at once'. Extensional accounts can also be found in the new realists Bertrand Russell and the early C. D. Broad.⁷

The second building material of Oakeley's idealism is her Leibnizian monadism. Leibniz's *Monadology* holds that the world comprises 'monads', the true atoms of nature, living centres of experience (§3). Each monad is unique, and each has a unique perspective on the world (§57). Oakeley (*Study in the Philosophy of Personality*, 30) rejects absolute idealism, arguing instead for a monadology of unique individuals having 'unique worlds' for knowledge. Thus, Oakeley is advocating existence pluralism with regard to minds. On this issue, Oakeley explicitly aligns herself with Carr and McTaggart.⁸

The final material of Oakeley's idealism is Platonic substance dualism. In addition to mind, Oakeley ('World as Memory', 303) holds that 'alien material' exists: another kind of substance that is not-mind. Oakeley explicates this using a 'myth':

Let us assume the idea of a world originally independent of consciousness, going on its own way in accordance with a nature unknowable to us ... At certain points let us suppose this world moving into contact with consciousness ... It seems evident that that which thus would enter into mind-experience as something for perception, knowledge and scene for action, would be but a very fragmentary unsystematic extract of the reality. It would be the footsteps, as it were, of a being which brushes over or past us, or rudely shocks us at points here and there, stimulating that unique sense of present experience or existence which is for us immediacy, actuality. Hence the chaotic character often attending our experience of actuality.

('World as Memory', 307)

This myth acts as a kind of thought experiment. What would happen if a world of mind-independent stuff came into contact with mind? Oakeley argues that mind would not be able to know the nature of that world in itself; at best, mind could grasp a fragmentary, unsystematic sense of it. Oakeley argues that this is precisely what is happening all the time – mind is continually coming into contact with not-mind – and this explains why our experience of the world is sometimes chaotic.

⁷Broad (*Scientific Thought*, 351) argues that our acts of sensing are processes that last for a finite time. Russell (*Outline of Philosophy*, 203) cautiously agrees.

⁸For example, Oakeley (*Study in the Philosophy of Personality*, 30) writes approvingly of aspects of Carr's monadology; and Oakeley (*History and the Self*, 20–2) aligns herself with McTaggart's 'personalist' idealism.

As becomes apparent in Oakeley's *Study in the Philosophy of Personality*, this myth is drawn from Plato. In the context of describing the 'obstructiveness' of the material world, and how it threatens all attempts at idealistic interpretation, Oakeley writes:

At times, indeed, we may feel that Plato said the last great word on this subject, and that none of the great thinkers who have since his day wrestled with the difficulty of obstructiveness have succeeded better than he in the indication of its nature ... There is not only mind, but *ἀνάγκη*, necessity, which otherwise conceived takes the form of space or *ὕλη*, matter ... Mind at a supreme level ... the creative Demiurgus, nevertheless meets this alien something, and must persuade it to co-operate.

(*Study in the Philosophy of Personality*, 37)

Oakeley (*Study in the Philosophy of Personality*, 41) adds later that there is an analogy between her account of creative memory and the way that, on Plato's conception of mind, mind brings form and measure 'to the ordering' of indefinite, indeterminate material.

Oakeley is referencing Plato's *Timaeus*, a dialogue in which the character Timaeus provides a cosmogony, explaining how the world came to be in its current form via the divine creator, the Demiurge. Timaeus explains that the creator wanted everything to be as good as possible, and so he brought that which was visible – which was 'in discordant and disorderly motion' – into a state of order (30a3–7). A little later, Timaeus claims that our ordered world is the offspring of Necessity and Intellect; Intellect 'prevailed' over Necessity by 'persuading' it (48a1–5). Above, Oakeley reads Necessity as space or matter; the idea is that there is something outside of mind that has its properties 'necessarily'. This is Oakeley's own view: matter, with its own nature, exists independently of mind.

It is clear that Oakeley is a substance dualist. However, it is less clear how Oakeley understands the relationship between mind and matter, especially the mind's role in 'persuading' or 'ordering' matter. Two positions are possible. On one position, Oakeley holds that mind orders matter. Reading Oakeley in this way could be supported by Oakeley's apparent reading of Plato on this issue, wherein the Demiurge literally persuades matter to cooperate. On the alternative position, Oakeley holds that mind orders our *experience* of matter. Reading Oakeley in this way could be supported by her account of creative memory (more on this shortly) on which mind creates our orderly experienced world. Attributing the first position to Oakeley would raise problems that Oakeley makes no attempt to answer – for example, how would human minds order matter? – and this, in addition to the way that the second position fits neatly with creative memory, suggests that we should attribute the second position to Oakeley.

I will add a little on Oakeley's reading of Plato. Where Oakeley writes that the Demiurge must persuade matter to cooperate, it is possible that by this

she merely means the Demiurge orders our experience of matter, rather than matter itself. This reading of Plato would be in line with other idealist readings of Plato. For example, the Oxford scholar Benjamin Jowett (*Dialogues of Plato*, I:xi) opens his *Dialogues of Plato* by explaining that his aim is to represent Plato ‘as the father of Idealism’. On Jowett’s (*Dialogues of Plato*, III:394) reading of Plato, ‘All was confusion, and then mind came and arranged things.’ A similar reading can be found in Caird, who argues that Plato always ‘remained faithful’ to the central doctrine of idealism, that being and knowing, thought and existence, are one. Caird reads Plato as offering an ‘analysis of sensation’. As this is particularly relevant, I provide it at length:

[Plato] tries to show us that what we call sensation contains more than it seems, and that the senses in themselves merely give us a chaos of individual impressions which thought reduces to order. Sense ... is but the instrument through which single impressions are brought to us, but even to compare these, and to distinguish them from each other, involves the use of certain ideal forms ... This doctrine is substantially identical ... with the doctrine of Kant, that sensations are in themselves a blind and meaningless chaos ... it is only as the mind by its own activity impresses its forms on this chaos, and gathers into a unity its isolated and unconnected moments, that even sensible perception is possible.

(Caird, ‘Plato and Other Companions’, 365–6)

Caird is offering us a reading of Plato and Kant but, on my reading, his remarks apply just as well to Oakeley.

Having detailed the building materials of Oakeley’s idealism, I explain how she puts them together. Oakeley (‘World as Memory’, 302) seeks to show that, on her account of memory, there is a *gain* in a mind’s world of experience. To understand this, I return to the extensional model of consciousness. In itself, there is nothing idealist in this model: mind appears to be passive in perception, even though memory is involved in perception. However, Oakeley puts an idealist spin on the model, arguing that, via a process called ‘creative memory’, memory *actively* contributes to perception.

Creative memory occurs when mind comes into contact with the alien material that is not-mind, and *transmutes* it. Oakeley describes this process as follows:

[Creative memory is] the activity which weaves the material of our experienced world, out of its raw elements ... Memory is a special form taken by the creative activity of mind under the condition of contact with the changing material of event. Mind, as suggested, tends necessarily to absorb this matter into its world in the form of memory.

(‘World as Memory’, 303–5)

Through creative memory, a mind ‘weaves the material of our experienced world’ out of its raw elements: not-mind, otherwise known as ‘events’. The mind transmutes these raw elements and actively produces its experienced world, its world of sensory experiences. We do not perceive not-mind as it is in itself; rather, we perceive not-mind as it has been transmuted through creative memory. Each individual mind is continually engaged in creative memory. As Oakeley (‘World as Memory’, 309) puts it, ‘this work of memory – creative – comes first in the life of mind’.

To help us understand what creative memory contributes to experience, I contrast Oakeley’s idealism with Kant’s. As a proper exposition of Kant’s idealism would far outstrip the bounds of this paper, here I merely provide a sketch of Kant’s views. Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* holds that minds actively contribute to our experiences of external things; for example, Kant writes that our cognitive faculties actively ‘work up the raw material of sensible impressions into a cognition of objects that is called experience’ (B1). For Kant, if we removed our own subject, or the subjective constitution of the senses in general, then the appearances of things as we know them would disappear, as they only exist in us. What may be the case with objects in themselves, abstracted away from our way of perceiving them, is entirely unknown to us (A42/B59).

Thus far, Oakeley would accept this: minds actively constitute the appearances that we know, and mind cannot know not-mind in itself. Confirmation of this is provided by Oakeley’s (‘World as Memory’, 292) statement that, although ‘afar off’ in point of view, she should like to follow Kant in his general idea of the *status* of our experience, which – as she reads Kant – is that our experience must be what it is for minds like ours in the midst of a world presenting elements foreign to our consciousness. However, Oakeley adds that the nature of experience is inexplicable unless conditioned by a positive quality in the ‘activity’ of the subject, and here she cannot claim to have ‘learned my thesis in the school of Kant’. This positive quality is, of course, creative memory.

We can distinguish two kinds of active contributions that mind can make to experience: structure and content. This distinction allows us to contrast Oakeley’s idealism with one way of reading Kant’s idealism. Kant can be read as arguing that mind brings *structure* to raw sense perceptions, bringing the ‘activity of our understanding into motion’, to connect, compare and separate (B1). Oakeley would accept this: mind brings order to our experience of not-mind. Kant can also be read as denying that mind contributes *content* to our experience, as the content is provided by the raw sense perceptions. In contrast, Oakeley holds that mind also contributes content. To explain how, I turn to another discussion of Plato in Oakeley.

Having described creative memory, Oakeley (‘World as Memory’, 306) asks whether it might be better described if likened to Plato’s *anamnesis*, with which it has an ‘affinity’. Plato’s theory of *anamnesis* – usually translated as ‘recollection’ – is his view that human souls possess innate

knowledge, prior to bodily incarnation at birth.⁹ Oakeley is not literally suggesting that human souls possess innate knowledge pre-incarnation but there is an affinity to be found. Whereas Kant arguably holds that the content of experience is exclusively provided by the external world, Oakeley is arguing that mind contributes some content to experience: 'innate' memories. To explain how this might work, I provide an analogy.

Imagine a child walking into a space filled with unfamiliar objects: the child experiences long pieces of metal with sharp points and glinting jagged edges, blocks of wood overlaid with shining sheets in various patterns, and tiny shafts of grey scrunched into twists and u-shapes. Now imagine a carpenter walking into that same space: the carpenter experiences claw hammers and saws, block planes and feather boards, wood drive screws and clatter pins and wing nuts. The experience of the carpenter differs from that of the child in that the carpenter can attach labels and functions to the objects in the room. The carpenter's knowledge of these objects is 'innate', in the sense that it is contributed by memory. Further, there is a case to be made that this innate knowledge actively contributes to the experience of the carpenter such that the very perception of the carpenter differs from that of the child: the carpenter does not see strangely shaped pieces of metal and wood, the carpenter *sees* hammers and screws. In this way, the carpenter's memory is actively contributing to the contents of her experience.

I argue that the active contribution of the mind outlined here is analogous to the process Oakeley describes as creative memory. For Oakeley, the 'raw materials' of the external world are a confusing mass of metals and shapes. However, like the carpenter, our minds can contribute memory to our experiences, and transmute the confusing mass into an orderly display of hammers and screws. This analogy helps us to understand how the extensional model of consciousness is working in Oakeley's thought. On the kind of extensional model outlined by Bergson, part of what we perceive at any moment is the immediate past, contributed by memory. Oakeley goes beyond this to argue that part of what we perceive at any moment is the past, immediate *and* distant. The carpenter may have acquired her knowledge of wing nuts several years ago but that memory is contributing to her experience of *seeing* a wing nut – rather than a twist of metal – now. This analogy also helps us to understand Oakeley's Leibnizianism. Partly in virtue of their memories, the child and the carpenter literally occupy different worlds of experience. As Oakeley (*Study in the Philosophy of Personality*, 52) puts it, 'Leibniz's doctrine that the worlds of no two Monads can be the same gains a deeper meaning when we realise that the world of each is in its concrete character constituted by his creative memory.' Each mind

⁹With appropriate prompting, this knowledge can be recollected. As Plato's *Meno* writes, 'what we call learning is recollection' (81e5).

or monad creates its own world, transmuting not-mind using its own ‘innate’ memories.

Oakeley has taken three seemingly disparate building materials – an extensional model of temporal consciousness, monadism, and Platonic dualism – and incorporated them into a unique idealist structure.

3.2. The Construction of Oakeley’s Idealism as a Reaction to the New Realism

Identifying the *sources* that Oakeley draws on to construct her idealism is relatively straightforward. Oakeley (*History and the Self*, 20) writes that, whilst no one thinker is her chief source, ‘I owe most to Plato.’ Oakeley’s interest in Plato may be the result of Jowett’s long lasting influence at Oxford,¹⁰ or the influence of Oakeley’s teacher, Caird; Oakeley also worked on Plato independently.¹¹ As we have seen, Oakeley is also happy to acknowledge various points of agreement between her work and that of her contemporaries. A less straightforward task is establishing *why* Oakeley constructed her idealism in the way that she did. This section will discuss precisely this issue.

Explaining why Oakeley defends the extensional model of temporal consciousness, and monadism, is easier than explaining her dualism. I suggest that Oakeley would defend these theses on the grounds that they accord best with our experience. Oakeley argues throughout her corpus that our metaphysics must account for our experience. As Oakeley (‘On the Meaning of Value’, 435) puts it in an early piece, ‘the nature of the real must be such as to account for the facts of experience’. With this in mind, the extensional model is attractive because it accords with our apparent experiences, such as seeing the traffic lights change and (as we will see below) the apparent continuity of consciousness. Similarly, a monadist account of selves – as opposed to, say, an absolute idealist’s account on which selves are unreal appearances – accounts for our experience of being an independent conscious entity with a unique perspective on the world. Experience also plays a role in Oakeley’s Platonic dualism but elucidating that role is more difficult.

Whilst the British idealists admired Plato and Kant (as they read them) they were critical of dualism. To illustrate, although Caird (‘Plato and Other Companions’, 370) praises Plato highly, he argues that if Plato had followed his thought through, he would have been led beyond dualism and

¹⁰Although Jowett died before Oakeley arrived at Oxford, Mander (*British Idealism*, 31) explains that Jowett ‘shaped’ classics at Oxford for a generation.

¹¹In 1925, Oakeley published a collection of translated Greek texts with commentary, including many by Plato. Here, Oakeley (1925, 52) states that Plato illustrates in the highest degree ‘that union of mystical and scientific genius’ which some have thought essential to the philosopher.

abandoned the notion of ‘brute irrational matter’. Caird (*Hegel*, 96) applies a similar critique to Kant, arguing that the weakness of Kant’s system is that it ‘does not carry the demonstration to its legitimate result’: it retains the idea of a ‘thing in itself’, an unexorcized foreign element that produces an ‘absolutely irreconcilable dualism’.¹² Given this, it is surprising that Oakeley develops a kind of dualism along precisely the lines that Caird criticizes. What led Oakeley to do so? Whilst Oakeley does not tell us, I argue it was at least partly in reaction to the new realism.

In the early years of the twentieth century, new realism established itself as a formidable opponent to idealism. Many of the late idealists took realist concerns seriously and, in response, reworked their idealisms.¹³ To illustrate, Bosanquet (*Principle of Individuality*, 367) makes room for mind-independent ‘Nature’ which has content of itself that our minds borrow from. Whilst this might sound rather dualist, in fact – as Mander (*British Idealism*, 395) explains – Bosanquet ultimately unifies minds and Nature in the Absolute. One of the realists that Bosanquet is reacting to is Alexander, and in particular – as Bosanquet (*Principle of Individuality*, vi) states in a later work – Alexander’s thesis that man and mind must be ordered in their ‘proper place’ among the world of finite things. We have already seen that Oakeley is drawing on Alexander’s extensional model of temporal consciousness, and it is possible that Oakeley is drawing on this thesis too (and even, perhaps, on her teacher Bosanquet’s ‘dualism’).

It is also possible – in fact, it seems very likely – that Oakeley is drawing on Alexander’s views on time. Alexander’s *Space, Time, and Deity* argues that space and time are real, mind-independent entities.¹⁴ As I will now explain, Oakeley also takes time to be real and mind-independent.

Above, Oakeley’s myth claims that when not-mind ‘rudely shocks’ mind, it stimulates in mind that ‘unique sense of present experience’ which is for us immediacy, actuality. Prior to this shock, minds lack a sense of immediacy or presentness; this suggests that minds lack a sense of time. Minds only acquire a sense of presentness and time when they come into contact with not-mind. This reading is confirmed in the following passage:

The view has been indicated that mind involved in a historic process must live primarily as memory. For being in its nature a universal principle it is here subject to the condition of occurrence in a process in which it is as it were broken up, until in new ways it finds a new type of unity. Now the first method of escape from this limitation is the way of memory. In analogy

¹²On Kant in British idealism more generally, see Mander (*British Idealism*, 38–61).

¹³Mander (*British Idealism*, 392–7) provides a rare discussion of this; my presentation of Bosanquet broadly follows his.

¹⁴Alexander actually argues that mind *emerges* out of space and time; see Thomas (‘Space, Time, and Samuel Alexander’).

with the Platonic definition of time, I might describe memory as the moving image of an eternal act of mind.

(Oakeley, 'World as Memory', 303–4)

This requires some unpacking.

Plato's *Timaeus* distinguishes between the 'unchanging', that which always is and has no becoming; and that which 'comes to be and passes away', which is subject to becoming and can be grasped by sense perception (27d–28a). Our world is subject to becoming but it is modelled on that which is changeless (29a). On the modelling, *Timaeus* explains:

[The creator] began to think of making a moving image of eternity: at the same time as he brought order to the universe, he would make an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity. This number, of course, is what we now call 'time'.

(37d5–9)

Our world is a 'moving image of eternity', a 'moving image' modelled on that which is changeless, 'eternity remaining in unity'. Oakeley is drawing an analogy between Plato's 'unchanging', and mind. In itself, mind is 'eternal', in that it lacks a sense of presentness and time, and it is an unchanging unity. However, when mind makes contact with not-mind, it is shocked into losing its unity, and it becomes a changing disunity, a moving image of itself. In this sense, memory is the moving image of mind. An awful lot is left unsaid here – not least, whether there is any literal way in which minds exist divorced from not-mind – but the general idea is relatively clear: in themselves, minds are timeless; through contact with the external world which is in time, minds acquire a sense of time.

In Oakeley's later work, the mind-independent reality of time becomes an overarching theme. For example, Oakeley's 'Philosophy of Time and the Timeless in McTaggart's Nature of Existence' rejects McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time. Oakeley ('Philosophy of Time', 126–7) concludes this paper by stating that there must be posited 'sufficient harmony' between the self and its experienced object to assure that time, 'so universal and inescapable a form', must be in things and events as well as in the mind. If I am right that Oakeley takes minds to be timeless in themselves, and time to be mind-independent, then here we have an explanation for her dualism. Proof of the existence of not-mind lies in our experience of time, which is imposed on us by not-mind.

I argue that Oakeley's belief in the mind-independent reality of time is drawn from Alexander. Oakeley's admiration for Alexander is readily apparent. Oakeley's (*My Adventures in Education*, 137) autobiography – published the year after Alexander's death – writes that for some years Alexander had been generally regarded 'as the leading British philosopher', and describes him as 'philosophy personified'. Against thinkers such as

McTaggart, Oakeley frequently and explicitly aligns herself with Alexander on the reality of time, and she applauds Alexander for recognizing the importance of time to metaphysics. To illustrate, in a letter to Alexander dated 15 August 1921, Oakeley writes, ‘I am most anxious to pursue the problem of time further on the difficult way you point to ... the unreality of time stands in the way of any philosophy of history and the practical life.’¹⁵

It is striking to note that Oakeley’s thesis that the external world imposes time on mind seems to be precisely opposed to that of Kant, who can be read as holding that time and space *are* the structures that mind contributes to our experience of the world.¹⁶ However, Oakeley’s thesis is related to one that Alexander finds in Plato. Alexander (*Space, Time, and Deity*, 37) explains that whilst we have no ‘sense-organ’ to perceive space or time, we apprehend them through a kind of intuition. Later, Alexander (*Space, Time, and Deity*, 147) writes that this intuition corresponds to that ‘bastard kind of reasoning’ whereby, according to Plato’s *Timaeus*, the soul apprehends space.¹⁷ For Alexander, we directly apprehend space *and* time in this way. At least with regard to time, I suspect Oakeley would agree. Oakeley’s dualist idealism is constructed with a view to incorporating Alexander’s new realist position on the mind-independent reality of time.

4. SYSTEMIZING OAKELEY: IDEALISM, HISTORY AND THE REAL PAST

This section aims to provide a sense of Oakeley’s larger system, by showing how parts of her idealism relate to two further areas of her thought: on history and the past. It concludes by briefly comparing Oakeley’s views on these issues with those of Collingwood.

4.1. Connecting Oakeley’s Creative Memory to Her Account of History

Through creative memory, minds actively contribute to their experiences. Oakeley’s *Study in the Philosophy of Personality* explains that creative memory is also the process by which minds create history. I will set her account out in full, and then discuss it.

¹⁵John Rylands Library, ALEX/A/1/1/214/1. The few surviving letters between Oakeley and Alexander suggest that they exchanged many more, and refer to a talk that Oakeley gave on Alexander’s *Space, Time, and Deity*.

¹⁶For Kant, time is not drawn from experience, it is an a priori representation that underlies the appearances we perceive (A30-1/B46). Time does not attach to things as they are in themselves (A32/B49).

¹⁷Alexander is referring to this passage in Plato’s *Timaeus*: ‘Space, which is everlasting ... [is] itself apprehended without the senses by a sort of bastard reasoning’ (52b).

If we try to conceive the hypothesis that a section of human history could be observed by a living being of another species or by a physical atom endowed with consciousness and intelligence, we realise that such a hypothesis is not truly possible, because what such a being could observe would not be history. The being of history consists in that ideal significance, value and disvalue, which is given to certain processes of change by human minds. Apart from this, there are only movements of material phenomena, or otherwise regarded aggregates of sense-data variously disposed and changing ...

The greatest achievements of historical writing in later times ... record the behaviour of men and women in an environment of meaning, rather than of material factors. Or more exactly, the so-called material factors are indeed of importance, but the greater part, or almost all, of their importance lies in the ideas and value-ends of which they become symbols and instruments ... Meaning here signifies in part the construction of motives, passions, admirations, ends, near and remote, desires for self-affirmation and glorification, for self-suppression.

(Oakeley, *Study in the Philosophy of Personality*, 57–8)

When human minds come into contact with not-mind to create the worlds of our experience, they add ‘value and disvalue’ to elements of our experience. We value things that are important or worthwhile; in this sense, something that has value is meaningful to us. To illustrate, I could attribute utilitarian value to a knife because it can cut; I could also attribute aesthetic value to the knife because it is attractively shaped. If the knife became blunted I might disvalue it on utilitarian grounds but continue to value it on aesthetic ones. Value and disvalue are attributed to things by humans, and Oakeley is arguing that history ‘consists in’ the values that human minds attribute to things. Thus, ‘material factors’ are only important if they become symbols of value. Our knife could enter history if, say, it became a royal heirloom, as it would have become a symbol of royalty. Interestingly, Oakeley’s account of value links her account of history to her account of art. Oakeley (*History and the Self*, 40) argues that the process of attaching value is found at its height in thought and art because, in creating a text or a sculpture, we are doing more than attaching value to existing things, we are literally creating things that have value.

History is created by human minds, and as such it is only accessible to human minds. A non-human would be able to observe the material factors involved in history – changing material phenomena, aggregates of sense-data – but they would not be able to observe the values attributed to those factors by human minds, and those values are integral to history. The fact that humans create history also *explains* why the subject matter of history is humankind, distinguishing history from other *prima facie* ‘historical’ enquiries such as palaeontology.

4.2. Connecting Oakeley's Extensional Model to Her Account of the Real Past

Oakeley's extensional model of consciousness also plays a central role in her 'growing block' theory of time, the view that the past and present are real, and the future is unreal. This view is opposed to 'presentism', which holds only the present to be real; and 'eternalism', which holds the past, present and future to be equally real. There has recently been a surge of literature on the growing block theory¹⁸ and this may generate interest in the roots of the position.

The new realist Broad advanced one of the earliest growing block theories. Broad's 1923 *Scientific Thought* argues that events – things that exist for any length of time – that are in the future and hence unreal, are continually added on to the sum total of reality, becoming both real and present, and then real and past. As Broad (*Scientific Thought*, 66–7) puts it, 'The sum total of existence is always increasing.' Broad seeks to show that the 'universal past', the past of the world as a whole, exists. Oakeley's 'The Status of the Past' appeared a few years later, arguing for the same conclusion on different grounds. I reconstruct Oakeley's reasoning as follows: to account for our experience of consciousness, we must hold that the pasts of individual selves exist; if we hold that the pasts of individual selves exist, then we must posit the reality of the universal past; thus, we must posit a real universal past.

The first step constitutes the heart of Oakeley's view: it connects her extensional model of temporal consciousness to the reality of the past. Oakeley ('Status of the Past', 238) writes that 'the memory experience possesses an intimacy, which reveals the existence of the past as necessary', pointing to the view that 'the experience of the past is involved in self-consciousness'. Oakeley is arguing that there is an intimacy in memory which reveals the existence of the past. This requires some explanation.

We saw above that the puzzle of temporal consciousness is explaining our consciousness of change. Any solution to this problem must additionally explain the apparent continuity – the unbroken flow or stream – of our conscious experience. Arguably, this is easiest on the extensional model: our consciousness feels continuous because it spans a continuous extended period of time. In contrast, on the rival retentional model, our conscious experience comprises discrete stages, raising difficult questions over how those stages fit together so as to feel continuous. This provides reason to prefer the extensional model, and this appears to entail various metaphysical conclusions. For example, the extensional model seems to preclude presentism: our consciousness cannot extend through time if time does not 'extend'

¹⁸For example, the growing block theory has recently been defended by Correia and Rosenkranz ('Living on the Brink') and attacked by Heathwood ('Real Price of the Dead Past').

from the present into the immediate past. Conversely, the extensional model fits neatly with theories that take the past to be real.

I argue that Oakeley is motivated by precisely these kinds of concerns. This reading is supported by the following passage:

[T]o completely express the continuity of self-consciousness, we must add that it goes beyond the present to the depth of the temporal process which we know as past, and lives in that depth as well as on the surface. The passage of consciousness involves the reality of the past *qua* necessary to the self ... The past experience then as found in memory constitutes together with (but not merged in) the present that real self-conscious being which is the active subject of experience.

(Oakeley, 'Status of the Past', 243–4)

For Oakeley, the continuous nature of one's consciousness is accounted for using an extensional model, and this involves the existence of the self in the past and the present.

On the second step of my reconstruction, Oakeley ('Status of the Past', 237) argues that we can 'infer' from the reality of individuals' past that there is a universal past. In discussing the same argument a few years later, Oakeley (*History and the Self*, 34) states, 'We are perhaps forced to conclude that the existence of the past in a metaphysical sense, apart from memory, is an undemonstrable proposition, though a necessary postulate.' The brevity of Oakeley's remarks suggests that she takes the reasoning underlying this step to be obvious. Presumably, the idea runs as follows: it would be exceedingly strange if the pasts of selves existed but the universal past did not. Whatever the truth about the reality of the past or future is, it is arguably necessary, applying to everything. As we believe the pasts of selves exist, we must posit the existence of the universal past.

Oakeley concludes that the universal past exists. 'The affirmation that the past is real and not either "construction", or dead body, called back by flashes into semi-animation, by means of the miracle of memory, is a mental necessity' (Oakeley, 'Status of the Past', 242). It is a mental necessity because, if the pasts of selves and hence the universal past did not exist, then for Oakeley continuity of consciousness would be impossible. Selves exist across the past and the present but not yet in the future. Oakeley ('Status of the Past', 240) argues that the continuity of the self through both the past and the present 'compels' it to the idea of the future which is as such non-existent.

Oakeley's growing block theory is interesting because of the links it draws between *prima facie* distinct debates: temporal consciousness, and the metaphysics of time. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that Oakeley's discussion would be even more interesting if she considered possible objections to her views. For example, an advocate of the retentional model could argue that their model *does* account for continuity of consciousness, perhaps by

positing a gap-free succession of momentary conscious states; alternatively, they might deny that consciousness *is* continuous. Extensional models may also be compatible with versions of presentism on which the present is extended, rather than momentary.¹⁹ Whilst it is doubtful that Oakeley would have been persuaded by any of these moves, it would be intriguing to hear why in her own words.

4.3. Contrasting Oakeley and Collingwood on History and the Past

Oakeley and Collingwood met at least once²⁰ but there is little interaction in print between them: Collingwood does not cite Oakeley, and Oakeley very rarely discusses Collingwood.²¹ Nonetheless, the many shared similarities between Oakeley and Collingwood's British intellectual context, and research interests, invite comparison. For example, Collingwood is closely associated with British idealism but, like Oakeley, he does not hold that mind is all there is. Collingwood also acknowledges a philosophic debt to Alexander; one wonders whether, and how far, this debt is manifested in Collingwood's work.²² Like Oakeley, Collingwood holds that history is 'always' the history of mankind. And, like Oakeley, Collingwood (*Principles of History*, 126) holds that the historian is concerned with the mind of man: 'Its [history's] aim is reconstruction, in the present act of thought, of the past thought which has made the present what it is.'

Here is one sense in which Collingwood is an idealist about history: history aims to reconstruct past *thoughts*. Oakeley would accept this. However, there is another sense in which Collingwood is an idealist about history: Collingwood argues that the past is unreal, and only exists in our reconstruction of it, in present acts of thought.

Collingwood's early paper, 'Some Perplexities About Time',²³ argues for presentism; this view arguably survives in his later work.²⁴ Collingwood

¹⁹On these moves, see Dainton ('Temporal Consciousness').

²⁰Oakeley chaired an Aristotelian Society meeting at which Collingwood presented on political action, and she took part in the discussion; see the minutes for 25 February 1929, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 29: 387–9.

²¹The most significant discussion is Oakeley's (1940) response to Collingwood's (1940) 'Fascism and Nazism'.

²²In a 1928 letter to Alexander, Collingwood writes that he accepts a 'Hegelian metaphysic' of Alexander's kind (John Rylands Library, ALEX/A/1/1/68/2). In a 1935 letter, Collingwood praises Alexander for describing a world in which evolution and history 'have a real place' (ALEX/A/1/1/68/4). O'Neill ('On the Role of Time') discusses their relationship.

²³Rare literature on this paper includes Requate ('R. G. Collingwood and G. H. Mead') and O'Neill ('On the Role of Time'). Collingwood presented it at the Aristotelian Society on 15 February 1925. It is possible that Oakeley attended – she is recorded as participating in many other meetings that year – but she is not listed as taking part in this discussion.

²⁴For example, Collingwood's later *Reality as History* writes that the past 'perishes altogether', except in that things that existed in the past may continue to exist in the present; this text is included in Collingwood (*Principles of History*, 205). However, this

(‘Some Perplexities about Time’, 143–5) argues for the ‘commonsense’ view that the past is unreal:

Poetic imagination may think of the future as lying unrevealed in the womb of time and of the past as hidden behind some screen of oblivion; but these are metaphors, and the plain fact ... is that both future and past, consisting as they do of events that are not happening, are wholly unreal.

Collingwood (‘Some Perplexities about Time’, 146–7) is ‘inclined to accept’ the consequence that, as we can only have knowledge of real things and the past is unreal, we cannot really know it. This fits neatly with his view that the historian reconstructs past thoughts in the present.

In contrast, Oakeley would straightforwardly reject this second sense of idealism about history. She does not discuss whether history provides knowledge of the past and we can assume that this is because it is not an issue for her; if the past is real, then there is no obvious objection to having knowledge of it. Like Collingwood, Oakeley is an idealist about history in the sense that history is concerned with thought but, unlike Collingwood, she is not an idealist about history in the sense that past thought only exists in present thought.

5. FINAL THOUGHTS

Oakeley’s keen eye on the debates around her, and the connections she draws between those debates, alone renders her an interesting figure. We have also seen that Oakeley’s idealism – spanning her adoption of the extensional model of consciousness from psychology and new realism, to her belief in the reality of time – is rich as well as idiosyncratic. However, I believe that Oakeley’s most important contribution to the idealist tradition lies in her account of creative memory. The thesis that our mind actively contributes content to our experience via memory is arresting. Speculatively, I wonder whether there is a connection to be drawn here with the ‘ontological turn’ in social and cultural anthropology, proponents of which hold that one’s culture – a socially and *historically* determined system of concepts – gives rise to the ontologically distinct world that one inhabits.²⁵

The history of philosophy is a difficult business, and sometimes significant figures are unjustly omitted. This paper has argued that Oakeley is one such figure. Oakeley’s idealism, and her connected views on history and the past, form part of a sweeping system that deserves further consideration. If a new

may be a reference to Collingwood’s (*Autobiography*, 141) ‘incapsulation’ thesis, a process in which past events are carried forward or embedded in present events. This is compatible with presentism, as it does not entail that the past is real.

²⁵For discussion, see Carrithers et al. (‘Ontology Is Just Another Word’).

study of British philosophy from 1843 to 1943 were produced, Oakeley should own a place in it.

Submitted 13 October 2014; revised 4 March and 4 May 2015; accepted 22
May 2015
University of Groningen

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