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A Hidden Intellectual History of Queensland (working project title only)

Chapter 3. Personal Intellectual History of Queensland

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Contents

Personal Intellectual History of Queensland	2
Introduction	2
Why Personal Idealism? Mapping the Personal on the Intellectual History of Queensland.....	2
ENDNOTES.....	7

Personal Intellectual History of Queensland

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Introduction

The theme of this chapter is Personal Idealism. Personal Idealism was a school of thought in the nineteenth century. It fits into a wider ideological framework known as Personalism. It is argued that personal idealism was the predominant worldview concern in the Long Nineteenth Century, made-up in two-parts of the Colonial Period (1859-1900) and of the Intellectual Overflow (1901-1919) that included World War I, and the Federation Period which also includes the Era of Edwardian Modernism (1867-1910). Together, the Long Nineteenth Century for our purpose is 1859 to the end of 1919.

Why Personal Idealism? Mapping the Personal on the Intellectual History of Queensland

Personalism is an intellectual stance that emphasizes the importance of human persons. Personalism exists in many different versions, and this makes it somewhat difficult to define as a philosophical and theological movement. Friedrich Schleiermacher first used the term personalism (German: *Personalismus*) in print in 1799. One can trace the concept back to earlier thinkers in various parts of the world.

In the fields of philosophy and psychology, personalism developed as intellectual scoping for Queensland, often hidden from plain, public, view. Nevertheless, there were Queenslanders who thought about what it was to be a person, and what that meant as the development of personality, whether as disposition or agency. This made it difficult for the mid-century educational reformers. The intellectual understanding of the person was changing, but in complex ways, which made it difficult for the wider population to understand. Thinking on personalism in Queensland in this era came singularly from E.N. Merrington's *The Problem of Personalism*, a copy held in the Brisbane School of Arts. Ernest Northcroft Merrington (1876-1953) was the prime mover in the founding of Emmanuel College, the first residential college within the University of Queensland. He served, like David Garland, as Senior Chaplain to the Australian and New Zealand Division. Merrington was elected Moderator of the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland in 1916-17. Unfortunately, no substantive biographical work has been done on Merrington. The real story remains hidden beyond the hagiography from a few local Christians. Merrington was a Medallist B.A. and M.A. graduate of Sydney University, a prizeman in mental and moral philosophy at the Edinburgh University,

and obtained his Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Harvard. According to *The Brisbane Courier*, Merrington:

...studied in the graduate school under such leading thinkers as Professor William James, Josiah Royce, and Hugh Muenstirberg, and his work, examinations, and thesis for the doctorate were under the direct supervision of these philosophers. At Edinburgh he attended the theological lectures of Professors Martin and Marcus Dods, of New College, which included, amongst others, the subjects of Apologetics, Christian Ethics, and New Testament. He also studied logic and metaphysics under Professor Seth Pringle Pattison, and moral philosophy under Professor James Seth,... His thesis on 'The Metaphysical Problem of Personality', a critical and constructive study in the light of recent thought was authorised by the Harvard Division of Philosophy for publication.¹

The book of the Presbyterian Minister of St Andrew's Church, Brisbane City, E.N. Merrington, *The Problem of Personality: A Critical & Constructive Study in the Light of Recent Thought*, published in London, by Macmillan and Co., in 1916, married personalism and the theologically-directed, philosophical, belief systems present in Queensland.² Merrington did not express the problem of personality into a set of concise propositions, but provided a survey of what philosophers had said on personality in the previous 50 years, from British Idealism, to Continental Mental views of ideal processes and cognitive workings, to American Pragmatism. Merrington did state that the problem of personality "is primarily the Problem of Reality of the Self, and the meaning, and the place of this and kindred Concepts in a metaphysical theory."³ Merrington went further to say the problems of personality "are insoluble apart from a general theory of Reality," and the problem related to "fundamental truths of philosophy and theology".⁴ The problem of personality related to a metaphysical division in the first-second order, which Merrington explained as a debate.⁵

The idea of the 'person' is not 'apparent' and the point of the 'Neo-Hegelian' – and this term is technically problematic – is that what we understand as 'person' is appearance. Bradley in *Appearance and Reality* (1893) argued that most things are appearances and attempts to describe the reality these appearances misrepresent. Royce argued that:

The ambiguous relation of the conscious individuals to the universal thought...will be decided in the sense of their inclusion, as elements in the universal thought. They will indeed not become 'things in the dream' of any other person than themselves, but their whole reality, just exactly as it is in them, will be found to be but a fragment of a higher reality. This reality will be no power, nor will it produce the individuals by dreaming of them, but it will complete the existence that in them, as separate beings, has no rational completeness.⁶

Taylor was an English Platonist, and later would write *The Faith of a Moralist* (1926-28, Gifford Lectures), and thus ties together these modern universal themes of Bradley and Royce with a Platonic-type moralism. This first grouping by Merrington were much more remote to his orthodox theology. The 'popular' T.H. Green was the more commonly recognised philosopher of British idealism, because of his role as a social or radical liberal, and temperance reformer. Green objected to the empirical approach of reducing the person to natural forces. The discovery of a 'person', for Green, was in realisation of personal character i.e., the final good, the moral ideal, as a whole. Thus, a person was always a social person. A person in total isolation had personality eroded to the point of nil. The Caird brothers had cemented the idealist approach to personality into the form of Scottish theological orthodoxy. Edward Caird was appointed to the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow in 1866 before becoming the Master of Balliol College (1893-1907). John Caird Professor of Divinity, and Principal, at the University of Glasgow (1862-1898). Their influence was particularly strong among Presbyterian Queenslanders and Scot migrants to the colony. John Watson was a student of Edward Caird. Watson was the Gifford Lecturer for 1910-12 at the University of Glasgow after which his lectures were published as *The Interpretation of Religious Experience*. Watson signalled the collapse of theological-philosophical idealism in the early twentieth century. According to Watson, we might say 'God is the absolute' but the absolute is inadequately conceptualized as substance, power, and person. Furthermore, 'personality' was 'super rational' but such an understanding was still inadequate. The identity (rational) of subject and object was the 'absolute self', the repository of universal reason itself, the very rationality that is manifest in the world and increasingly revealed to conscious, reflective human beings.

Technically, the term 'Personal Idealism' is correctly used in relation to this emerging wave of philosophers. George Holmes Howison called his metaphysical theory, personal idealism or California personalism. Howison maintained that both impersonal, monistic idealism and materialism run contrary to the moral freedom experienced by persons. Thomas Davidson taught a philosophy called, 'apeirotheism', that was described as a "form of pluralistic idealism...coupled with a stern ethical rigorism..."⁷ The theory was indebted to Aristotle's pluralism and his concepts of the soul and nous. Aristotle's 'soul' is the rational, living aspect of a living substance and cannot exist apart from the body because it is not a substance, but rather an essence; nous is the rational thought and understanding. Hastings Rashdall had published *The Moral Argument for Personal Immortality* as the King's College London's Lectures on Immortality (1920), and sent orthodox theology back into the Cartesian direction, as well as making virtue a guarantee of life-beyond-death.

These questions go to Henri-Louis Bergson's ideas on the processes of immediate experience and intuition, as well as his ideas of time and space. Bergson had delivered the first part of the Gifford Lectures, consisting of eleven lectures, under Merrington's same title of *The Problem of Personality*. Bergson opposed the Cartesian theory of the animal-machine, and validated his conclusions through experiential, first-person intuition. He was open to the idea

of a post-mortem life of 'personal survival', lecturing before the Society for Psychical Research.

Rudolf Christoph Eucken was the winner of the 1908 Nobel Prize in Literature. The aim of Eucken's historical works was to show the necessary connection between philosophical concepts and the era to which his generation belong, and the same idea is at the root of his constructive speculation. His call was for all philosophy to be philosophy of life, the development of a new culture, not mere intellectualism, but the application of a vital religious inspiration to the practical problems of society. He called this, 'ethical activism'. Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, known as 'Seth', was a personal idealist and was the most formative critic of Absolute idealism. According to Seth, "Each self is a unique existence, which is perfectly impervious ... to other selves – impervious in a fashion of which the impenetrability of matter is a faint analogue."⁸ Seth saw the self as a 'harmful fiction'. Personality should not be merged into the Absolute. The analogue relationship between the fictional self and the Absolute is panentheistic.

F.C.S. Schiller, often aligned with the pragmatism of William James, offered the best compatibilist solution in what he called 'humanism', that was open to religious and secular interpretations. According to Schiller, if a person utters a statement in a situation they are doing so for a specific purpose: to solve the problem that habit could not handle alone. Schiller requires that the consequences of a statement make the statement relevant to some particular person's goals at a specific moment in time if it is to be meaningful. It is the consequences the statement holds for that person's purposes which constitute its meaning, and its usefulness in accomplishing that person's purposes that constitutes the statement's truth or falsity. What the (any) sentence really means cannot be determined without the specific purpose a person might be using the statement for in a specific context. The approach anticipated the direction of the mid-century in the philosophy of language. Nevertheless, the Schillerian position dissatisfied the Queensland Merrington. In relation to the first-second order divide in the debate on personality, Merrington explained that it is the challenge of his doctorate supervisor, William James, and his 'passing thought' formula in the concept of Self which drives his argument.⁹

Although a copy was there in the Brisbane School of Arts, Merrington's work remained hidden in Queensland history, which was a loss to the early twentieth century.¹⁰ Its local and regional 'revelation' would have uncovered what the modernists of the era were explaining as personality, in particular those who were closest to Merrington's thinking: Josiah Royce (Examiner); G.H. (George Herbert) Palmer (Examiner); R.B. (Ralph Barton) Perry (Examiner); William James (Teacher, who had died by the time of book's publication); and Hugo Münsterberg (Teacher).

Added to the central influences from Harvard University, were the philosophers who taught Merrington during his studies at the University of Edinburgh, Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison and James Seth. There were also the philosophical influences of the British-Australian philosophers at the University of Sydney, Francis Anderson and Andrew Harper. Merrington self-recognised shortfalls in the work. In the Foreword Merrington stated he noticed Bergson's Gifford Lectures had only been announced at the time of the book's publication. The sense of the comment was that Merrington regretted not to have had the opportunity to consider Bergson's fuller argument (there are a few references to Bergson in the book). Merrington also only made passing remarks in the book on the thinking of Melbourne's W.R. (William Ralph) Boyce Gibson and the European (Rudolf) Hermann Lotze.¹¹

The heart of the work is the semantic discussion on personality, and conceptual analysis, to reach a statement on the reality of self. In the final three chapters Merrington moves from one metaphysical statement to another: experience, value, reality. To quote Merrington, "...not only is the Self the true starting-point for a Metaphysic of Existence, but, as Personality, it forms, the groundwork of a Metaphysic of Values also, while it proves to be the supreme category of explanation, the goal and the consummation of a Metaphysic of Reality." It is a wonderful statement between the person and the belief system. And it would come to hold for the way many educated Queensland would think, in the last quarter twentieth century and into the new century.

The last four chapters have mapped the intellectual history in Queensland before 1920, minus Aboriginal cosmology and naturalism. The beliefs of Aboriginal persons should not be ignored in the story, but it is a hidden history as was the wider history of personal idealism in Queensland. In many ways Aboriginal folklore merged with ideas of 'persons' and 'personality' and later Queensland Aboriginal leaders, such as Charles Harris and Don Brady, would speak to these ideas from their own indigenous culture. Whether for good or bad, it was British, European, and American cultures that spoke dominantly in the local and regional histories. The chapters have conceptually mapped the history of what Queenslanders read up to 1920 in terms of the ancients, medievals, early moderns, and modernists.

The Mapping Brisbane History Project geographically maps the story in terms of Queensland's capital city. It is philosophically a complex story. In terms of what would come for Queensland politics, culture, and social relations, one binary is very useful, the division between nominalism (theological or secular) and theological realism. The tensions would play out in a hidden culture-history war until the moments it came out aggressively in: the modernist-fundamentalist debates of the 1920s, the democracy-fascism debates of the 1940s, the 1950s Cold War, the 1960s Neo-Conservative versus New Left debates, the 1970s cultural recession politics, with the 1980s New Right versus 'Liberal Establishment' debates, the 1990s Global Neo-Liberal politics and the post-Reagan culture-history war. Forgetting, ignoring, or being ignorant of the facts in the history, along with the hermeneutic histories, has put

Queenslanders in the continual action of chasing their own cognitive tails, in multiple and mixed belief systems.

ENDNOTES

¹Rev. Dr. E. N. Merrington. New Pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. *The Brisbane Courier*, Tuesday 26 July 1910, p. 5.

²E.N. Merrington. *The Problem of Personality: A Critical & Constructive Study in the Light of Recent Thought*. London, Macmillan and Co., 1916. pp. v-x, 1-5.

³Merrington. p. 3.

⁴Merrington. p.[v].

⁵Merrington drew out one side as the 'Neo-Hegelians' where personality is postulated as Absolute, in two sub-groups:

- F.H. (Francis Herbert),
- Josiah Royce,
- A.E. (Alfred Edward) Taylor, and the other sub-group,

- T. H. (Thomas Hill) Green,
- Edward Caird,
- John Caird,
- John Watson.

Against the 'Neo-Hegelians' Merrington sets those he calls, "champions of human Personality":

- G.H. (George Holmes) Howison
- Thomas Davidson
- Hastings Rashdall
- Henri-Louis Bergson
- Rudolf Christoph Eucken
- Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison
- F.C.S. (Ferdinand Canning Scott) Schiller

⁶ BOSA: Josiah Royce. *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, 1885, pp. 380–381)

⁷Charles M. Bakewell, 'Thomas Davidson,' *Dictionary of American Biography*, gen. ed. Dumas Malone (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 96.

⁸BSOA: Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison. *Hegelianism and Personality*

⁹Merrington. p. 146.

¹⁰There were five local newspaper review of the Merrington book. There were 53 articles found in Queensland newspaper, up to 1945, on discussions for 'The Problem of Personality'.

4. The Philosophic References. The Problem of Personality (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/list/167095>).

¹¹Merrington pp. 5, 142,110, 111, 123, 161, 198, 207, 217.

[THE END]