

William Sweet, St. Francis Xavier University

Citation

William Sweet is an internationally-recognized scholar of the idealist movement in 19th- and early 20th - century Britain. His careful, historically-grounded and innovative scholarship on this movement has led to a re-evaluation of the work of some of its key figures and of its bearing on contemporary political philosophy as a whole. The recipient of numerous awards and honours, he has been invited to present his work across the globe.

Detailed appraisal

William Sweet is one of the foremost Canadian academics on the history of 19th- and early 20th-century British philosophy, and the leading Canadian scholar of British idealism. He has also contributed significantly to the philosophy of culture, discussions of dignity and human rights, and the philosophy of religion.

Sweet's research is primarily in the history of modern philosophy and political thought. For over 25 years, he has produced influential articles and books on key figures of the idealist movement in Britain, and been a leading exponent in the reassessment of their work.

The Idealist movement had a major impact in Britain and its then Empire, not only in philosophy, but in politics, religion, and social and economic policy. Sweet's work has challenged many of the received views of the idealist movement, but has also put into question the widely-held views that the idealists were close disciples of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, and that they were an aberrant phase in 19th-century British thought.

Sweet is the foremost expert in the world on the British idealist, Bernard Bosanquet, and the leading commentator on his philosophy as a whole. Part of Sweet's early work focused on archival materials, which led to *The Collected Works of Bernard Bosanquet* (including three volumes of previously uncollected texts), but also on the editing, annotating, and publishing of volumes of little-known early commentators on the British idealists.

Since then, Sweet's contributions to scholarship have gone much farther. By careful, analytical studies of the texts and contexts, Sweet has contributed to a better understanding of both idealist political philosophy, and Idealism's metaphysics and philosophy of religion. His innovative work has also led to a recognition of its contribution to contemporary debates in political philosophy, and to a richer appreciation of the idealist roots of later Anglo-American philosophy.

In his major work, Sweet argues that the idealists were not uncritical defenders of the state or of authoritarian absolutism, but had a robust theory of human rights compatible with state intervention. This, he has argued together with Gerald F. Gaus, suggests an option that bears on the ongoing debate between communitarianism and liberal individualism. In some of his most recent essays (in *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century* and *British Idealism and the Concept of the Self*), Sweet demonstrates, against received opinion, that some of the principal British idealists advanced views that emphasised the rights and the value of the human person.

Sweet has also contributed to the scholarship on British idealism by organising international conferences and collections of scholarly essays. These have stimulated many, particularly junior scholars, to write about the British idealists. His example and leadership here have made a major difference in expanding and deepening the study of this field.

Sweet has also extended the scholarly understanding of British idealism by looking at its reception in the then British Empire, and beyond. In the *Biographical Dictionary of British Idealism*, for which he was general editor and authored some 50 entries, Sweet details the influence of idealism in philosophy in South Africa, India, East Asia, France, and the United States, as well as Canada. This work is continued in Sweet's recent articles on idealism's influence on major philosophers from Southern Africa and India.

Sweet's ground-breaking work on the reception of British idealism in Asia has led him to explore related themes, such as intercultural philosophy and what Sweet calls the phenomenon of 'migrating texts and traditions.' Working in the philosophy of culture, Sweet has explored epistemological questions on how texts coming from one historical tradition can 'migrate' to, and take root in, another. This has led to invitations to address scholars in South Africa, India, and China, and to the translation of some of Sweet's work into Chinese. It has also led to frequent invitations to speak at major universities in China, India, and South Africa. Moreover, Sweet's ongoing work with the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie and with associated scholars has helped to bring the work of philosophers in developing countries to international notice.

In parallel with his research into British idealism, Sweet has also made major contributions to historical studies in ethics and political philosophy. Particularly significant are his many publications and translations of the work of the 20th-century French philosopher, Jacques Maritain. Best known for his influences on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Maritain has sometimes been regarded as an uncritical disciple of the mediaeval philosopher, Thomas Aquinas. Not only has Sweet offered a novel reading of the key principles of Maritain's moral and political philosophy, but he has argued that Maritain's personalist philosophy and Bosanquet's idealist speculative philosophy converge on a number of points concerning the nature of the individual and the community.

Sweet's work in the history of philosophy in general, and British idealism in particular, has led him to engage contemporary issues in ethical theory (such as the concept of dignity and human rights), political philosophy, the philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of culture. In a series of edited books, articles, and scholarly lectures, Sweet has presented a defence of human rights and human dignity. Other edited books and articles take up the discussion of philosophy's relation to culture, and as a way of promoting dialogue across philosophical traditions.

Sweet's work has been recognised by his election to the presidency of a number of learned societies, such as the Canadian Philosophical Association, and to the executive committees of international organizations, such as the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie, the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, and the Istituto Internazionale Jacques Maritain (of which Sweet is *Presidente d'onore*). He has also given invited endowed lectures in the UK, United States, Poland, Taiwan, India, and Canada, and was recently selected as 'Visiting Professor (Overseas)' by the Indian Council of Philosophical Research.

Sweet's scholarship and the international reception of his work have led to his recognition as one of the leading scholars in the history of philosophy in Canada today.