

T. L. S. Sprigge

The Importance of Subjectivity: Selected Essays in Metaphysics and Ethics.

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Timothy L. S. Sprigge, who passed away in 2007, is the author of the well-known thesis, typically attributed to Thomas Nagel, that if a creature is conscious there must be ‘something it is like to be that creature’. As he puts it in ‘Final Causes’, an essay from 1971 included in this collection, ‘(o)ne is wondering about the consciousness which an object possesses whenever one wonders what it must be like being that object’ (35). This essential condition of consciousness is at the heart of Sprigge’s intriguing and appealing system of philosophy that he calls ‘panpsychistic absolute idealism’. As the terms suggest, he holds that ‘reality consists of innumerable interacting streams of experience, these including the streams of experience of men and animals, but also a vast system of streams of experience which are the reality behind what presents itself to us as the physical world’ (11). Connected to this idealist root are a number of equally remarkable theses: the passing of time is ‘unreal, the object of an incoherent misconception’ (136); all of reality is ultimately ‘contained’ in a unified cosmic consciousness termed the ‘Absolute’ that is moving toward a state of perfection (223; 259); there are intrinsic values in nature (256); and the notion of moral rights extends beyond humans and other animals (328-9). The 21 essays in this collection, along with the poem ‘An Idealist Prayer for the World’ (2003), which closes the book, explain, defend, and pay homage to these ideas. They are a judicious sampling of Sprigge’s philosophy and will be of interest to anyone concerned with the metaphysics of experience, time, idealism, and ethics.

One needn’t be a fellow traveller in idealism to appreciate these essays. As Sprigge makes clear in the two charming (and in spots combative) autobiographical essays at the start of the book, ‘Orientations’ (1996) and ‘What I Believe’ (2000), his philosophy is steeped in tradition and his system is a synthesis of ideas derived from a variety of thinkers. He cites Spinoza, Bentham, Schopenhauer, Bradley, James, and Santayana as his chief influences, but he also acknowledges the influence of Royce, Moore, Russell, Whitehead, Hartshorne, Husserl, and his first supervisor in philosophy, A. J. Ayer. Certainly the reader picking up the book will encounter a philosopher well engaged with the history of ideas and commenting on a variety of systems.

A prime example of this engagement is the fine essay, ‘The Distinctiveness of American Philosophy’ (1980). Sprigge argues that it is not only the usual suspects, namely, pluralism and pragmatism, that make the ‘Golden Age’ of American philosophy distinct, but also the attention the philosophers from this period paid to the temporal nature of experience—what Sprigge calls the phenomenology of the ‘specious present’. Even more important, for him, is the issue of intentionality. In his estimation, unlike many contemporary writers, James, Royce, and Santayana ‘got down to real brass tacks’

when discussing ‘how thoughts, understood as actual dated events in our mind, transcend themselves and refer to objects which they do not include’ (97). Sprigge is one of the few British champions of American philosophy, and his thoughts in this essay, as in the others, are lively and sympathetic. He tries harder than many others to sort through the intuitions that animate contrary systems of thought.

Sprigge argues for his panpsychistic absolute idealism most fully in *The Vindication of Absolute Idealism* (1983). In the present collection, the essays ‘Absolute Idealism’ (1996) and ‘Pantheism’ (1997) provide his general line of argumentation, while the opening essay discusses how he was first drawn to idealism. As a young man in the British national service stationed in Austria, he tells us, he found only two philosophy books in his camp: Berkeley’s *Principles* together with his *Three Dialogues* and, second, Herbert Spencer’s *First Principles*. ‘Puzzling out the challenge posed by these’, he writes, ‘I concluded that the inner being of the whole of nature must be somehow psychical’ (2). Thus it is clear that he was an early convert to idealism, and it’s clear too that the reasons he remained an idealist are essentially Berkeleyan in character. He invites the reader to ‘[t]ry to imagine some scene in the physical world deprived of all subject-implying features, that is, features which, it is evident, can only exist for an observing mind.’ According to him, these features include 1) perspectival properties; 2) gestalt properties; and 3) aesthetic properties. The passage continues: ‘[t]he idealist claim is that, in fact, it is impossible to (imagine such a scene)’ (200). Starting from this claim, he develops his idealist position, defends against objections, and in fairly short-order reaches the conclusion that ‘all the centers of experience which constitute noumenal reality must belong to some all-containing whole...[and] this can only be conceived as a universal consciousness which precisely is what the cosmos as a whole really is’ (211). He admits that his views might sound ‘crazy’, but his style of philosophizing is analytic and sober, and in any case he feels he is in good philosophical company (11).

If there is one shortcoming to the book, it’s that Sprigge’s views about the nature of metaphysics need a fuller explanation. He departs radically from his first supervisor, and holds that ‘metaphysics aims at knowing the literal truth about reality’ (194). Many would doubt this aim is achievable, but he casts aside doubts and qualifies his claim by asserting that ‘knowledge of a literal truth consists in being able to imagine what something is really like’ (195). Although this claim fits neatly with his argument for idealism, given that his epistemology provides motivation for his metaphysics, a more detailed defense of the metaphysician’s supposed ability to achieve literal truth over pragmatic truth is called for.

The third part of the book, following the sections on the metaphysics of experience and time, is on ‘Ethics, Animal Rights, and the Environment’. Sprigge reports that after reading Bentham he became a utilitarian and has ‘remained such by the skin of [his] teeth’ (4). Like other utilitarians, he believes the welfare of non-human animals must be included in our moral deliberations. He defends his ethics in the essays ‘The Greatest Happiness Principle’ (1991); ‘Metaphysics, Physicalism, and Animal Rights’ (1983); and ‘Vivisection, Morals, Medicine: Commentary from and Antivivisectionist Philosopher’ (1983).

But the most interesting of the essays in this section is his defense of intrinsic values in 'Is the *Esse* of Intrinsic Value *Percipi*? Pleasure, Pain and Value' (2000). He argues that pleasure and pain are the most obvious candidates for objective values since these states possess what he and many others hold to be an essential property of intrinsic values, namely, that of being necessarily attractive or 'disattractive' for the will (254-6). He makes a strong case, arguing that there is a path to a hedonistic theory of intrinsic value for both the idealist and the empiricist, even if the idealist has the upper hand (252).

One of the more attractive aspects of Sprigge's theory of values is his claim that people treat each other and other sentient beings cruelly as a result of a failure of imagination. We are more concerned with our own lives, and often show cruelty toward other conscious beings, because 'beliefs about our own future experience are upon the whole more fully realized' (255). To the objection that there might exist a 'contra-hedonic being', one that actively seeks pain, Sprigge replies that such a being is in fact not conceivable and therefore not possible. On the contrary, he hypothesizes the existence of a metaphysical law that 'it is of the nature of consciousness to move somehow towards the pleasurable and away from the painful' (259). This last suggestion allows him to make some far-reaching guesses about values in nature, such as might be suggested by one's experience of the sublime (269).

In the introduction the book's editor, Leemon McHenry, notes that Sprigge accepts the view of philosophy that he attributed to Santayana. The view is that 'ultimate purpose of philosophical dialectics is to arrive at a synthetic vision of the world and one's place in it, at once intellectual and aesthetic' (ix). So while Sprigge's panpsychistic absolute idealism will no doubt seem 'crazy' to some, his general aim is sane enough. Even staunch anti-idealists should find the book edifying, so long as they accept another thought of Santayana's, one that Sprigge would also endorse: 'I have always liked understanding views with which I did not agree—how else could one like the study of philosophy?'

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