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Two Quests for Unity: John Dewey, R. G. Collingwood, and the Persistence of Idealism		
<p>After having dominated philosophical thought in Britain and the United States during the end of the nineteenth century, idealism was in steady decline by the outbreak of World War I. Its ideas and ideals seemed unsuited to face the transition from Victorianism to modernism and the rapid social changes of the post-war era. Its Anglo-American proponents—who were often liberals—were accused of indirectly promoting Prussian militarism and authoritarianism because of idealism’s German background. Idealism was also charged with being ill-attuned to the development of the natural sciences, and was replaced by the narrower and more scientific ideal of analytical philosophy. While idealists had been preoccupied with religion, history, aesthetics, and metaphysics, the analysts turned toward an increasingly specialized and theoretical notion of philosophy focused on formal logic, epistemology, and language analysis.</p> <p>This study of two philosophers avoids the simplistic but well-established division between (Anglo-American) analytical and continental philosophy. I claim that the overlooked similarities between John Dewey (1859–1952) and Robin George Collingwood (1889–1943) can be explained with reference to their shared background in idealism. Their philosophies should be regarded as continuous struggles regarding which aspects of idealism should be kept, rejected, or revised. By choosing an American and a British philosopher as the main subjects, this study also aims to highlight the transatlantic philosophical connections that have often been neglected due to methodological nationalism. Comparing Collingwood’s idealism to Dewey’s pragmatism will also highlight the historical similarities between these philosophical traditions.</p> <p>The overarching aims of Dewey’s and Collingwood’s thought are interpreted as <i>quests for unity</i>, drawing attention to the continuing influence of a persistent idealist notion. I argue that there were four types of unity shared by Anglo-American idealists, Dewey and Collingwood: <i>unity of experience</i>, <i>unity of opposites</i>, <i>unity in diversity</i>, and <i>social unity</i>. Furthermore, I argue that Dewey’s and Collingwood’s social and political thought should be regarded as a continuation of the social liberalism of the Oxford idealist T. H. Green. Like earlier Anglo-American idealists, Dewey and Collingwood insisted on the importance of philosophy’s practical value. While both came to reject transcendental, metaphysical, and absolutistic notions in favor of a more historical and humanistic idealism, they nevertheless kept idealism’s basic view of philosophy as a broad, synthetic, situated, and reconstructive form of cultural criticism committed to the common good. This ideal has unfortunately been lost, but a critical conversation with philosophers like Collingwood and Dewey may help us imagine what such a philosophy—adapted for the twenty-first century—might look like.</p>		
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