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On Whether William Hazlitt was a Philosophical Idealist (and Why it Matters)

James R. M. Wakefield

1. The Revival of Metaphysical Hazlitt

The idea that William Hazlitt was in some sense a philosophical idealist is more than half a century old. In 1962, Herschel Baker noted 'an idealistic strain in Hazlitt's philosophic thought', but added that, 'ignorant of Plato, mistaken about Kant… and dissatisfied with Berkeley, he was obliged to rest on Hobbes'.[1] Until the late 1960s, the tendency of even Hazlitt's most sophisticated interpreters, like W. P. Albrecht, was to regard his metaphysical works as variations on themes established by eighteenth-century empiricists, stylistically inferior to his mature criticism and less original than he liked to imagine.[2] Any idealist features were seen as symptoms not of any deep commitment on Hazlitt's part, but of his dissatisfaction with the language of empiricism, which to him seemed inadequate to express the idea of the imagination found in his criticism.

Roy Park bucked this trend. He presented Hazlitt as a philosophically acute critic who, with his 'questing, probing mind… never ceased to be, in the nineteenth-century sense of the word, a metaphysician'. At the heart of this interpretation was Hazlitt's conception of the imaginative and creative dimensions of experience, which set him in opposition to the empiricists with whom he was usually grouped, and which connected his ethical theory, via Coleridge, with Kant.[3] Even so, Park stopped short of calling Hazlitt an idealist, characterising him instead as a champion of 'the imaginative spirit of man'. In line with the Wittgensteinian tenor of Anglophone philosophy in the 1960s and early 1970s, he associated the term 'idealism' with 'bogus metaphysical views' and

[1] Herschel Baker, *William Hazlitt* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1962), 189.
[2] W. P. Albrecht, *Hazlitt and the Creative Imagination* (Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas Press, 1965), p. 5; Ralph Wardle, *William Hazlitt* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 85.
[3] Roy Park, *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age: Abstraction and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 6, 78.

unfalsifiable propositions of the (mainly Hegelian) idealists who had dominated British philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century.[4]

Subsequent commentators' responses to Park's interpretation varied widely. Terry Eagleton caught a 'naïvely idealist' note in Hazlitt's objections to peers and poets 'clogged and tyrannised by the sense of reality', but contrasted this with the 'strong empiricism' that pervaded his conception of the imagination.[5] David Bromwich considered Park's treatment of Hazlitt's empiricism unduly 'reductive' and argued that the latter's engagement with idealism was selective and tenuous.[6] It was not until the 1990s that the 'idealistic strain' in Hazlitt's philosophy was brought into clearer focus. Uttara Natarajan, in *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense*, identified the essayist as 'a proponent of what we must call British idealism'. It was, she wrote, 'a particularly rich hybrid [of empiricism and idealism], never breaking entirely away from the tradition that it seeks to refute, but achieving rather a symbiosis of the experiential and the ideal, the particular and the abstract', resulting from the 'colonising of empiricist ideas and terminology by [Hazlitt's] own idealistic agenda'.[7] Kant proved to be an important influence on that agenda, as did Berkeley. So, too, did a large cast of other thinkers, many of whom he admired, even while disputing their conclusions and the methods they used to reach them.

Natarajan's proposal prompted a resurgence of interest in Hazlitt's philosophy. As her rather equivocal description attests, his ideas are hard to assign confidently to any familiar class. Tim Milnes calls 'idealism' 'a slippery term', noting that Hazlitt's interpreters have tended to use it, like 'empiricism', without specifying a clear definition.[8] Self-described idealists, from Kant onward, disagreed about the essential features of idealist theory, and Hazlitt did not apply the term to himself. Milnes has expressed qualified support for the view of Hazlitt as an idealist, noting the difficulties interpreters have faced when trying to match him to any exclusive category, given the unresolved tensions in his thinking: Hazlitt's philosophy was 'epistemologically empiricist' while (at least

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[4] Park, *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age*, 236, 4.

[5] Terry Eagleton, 'William Hazlitt: An Empiricist Radical', *New Blackfriars* 54 (1973), 111.

[6] David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999 [1983]), 239–45, 413n

[7] Uttara Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3–5.

[8] Tim Milnes, *The Testimony of Sense: Empiricism and the Essay from Hume to Hazlitt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 191–2.

appearing to be) 'metaphysically idealist', leaving him with idealist questions to which his empiricist conceptual scheme provided no satisfactory answers.[9] More recently, Philipp Hunnekuhl has lent weight to the idealist interpretation, describing the story of Hazlitt's engagement with Kant's philosophy via the better-informed Kantian Henry Crabb Robinson. It progressed, he argues, from a 'loose, accidental affinity' in 1805, on through a period of tentative enthusiasm for Kant beginning in 1807, and ultimately to disillusionment in 1817.[10]

In what follows, I address two main questions. First, to what extent does it make sense to say that Hazlitt was a philosophical idealist? What commitments are we making by saying so, and what do we exclude? Second, given that Hazlitt plainly can be—and has been—interpreted in other ways, why does it *matter* whether he was an idealist? Why not read him as a one who had 'imbibed a spirit of abstract reasoning' (xx, 51–2) and had some insightful things to say, without attempting to confine his ideas to a rigid category in a way that will inevitably limit and deform them?

To answer these questions, I first explain why Hazlitt is so difficult to classify and how we might understand the terms 'idealism' and 'idealist'. Next I argue that the resemblance between Hazlitt's practical philosophy and Kant's is weaker than some interpreters have suggested, though it helps explain the former's moral psychology. I then discuss the idealist interpretation of Hazlitt's theoretical philosophy, showing that it shares certain key features with Kant's and Berkeley's, though it differs from them in both its assumptions and its conclusions. What Hazlitt takes from idealism, I argue, is a conception of experience partly constituted by language. In the final section, I suggest that the idealist reading of Hazlitt is valuable as an exercise in intellectual history, serving as a corrective to long-standing misconceptions about idealism and its relation to empiricism in the early nineteenth century.

[9] Tim Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 108; and 'Seeing in the Dark: Hazlitt's Immanent Idealism', *Studies in Romanticism*, 39.1 (2000), 7.
[10] Philipp Hunnekuhl, 'Hazlitt and Crabb Robinson: The Common Pursuit', *The Hazlitt Review,* 6 (2013); quotation from 'Hazlitt, Crabb Robinson, and Kant: 1806 and Beyond', *The Hazlitt Review*, 10 (2017), 55.

2. Creeds and Systems

To begin, let us review some of the reasons why Hazlitt's philosophy has proved unusually difficult to classify.

Milnes claims that Hazlitt occupied a 'peculiar philosophical location' informed by his 'complex relationship[s]' with the thinkers who influenced him.[11] Hazlitt's interpretations of his predecessors are often unconventional and, while insightful, also impressionistic and in places flatly mistaken. His account of his own position in relation to these thinkers, then, cannot be taken for granted. Neither have subsequent interpreters reached a consensus on where to place him. Discounting his peers and obvious seventeenth- and eighteenth-century forebears, recent commentators have linked him with a diverse cast of thinkers. John Kinnaird sees in his common sense and resistance to dogma an anticipation of the pragmatists William James and John Dewey;[12] Raymond Martin and John Barresi link him with the late nineteenth-century utilitarian Henry Sidgwick and, with Terry Eagleton's support, the idiosyncratic neo-Lockean (at least with respect to personal identity) Derek Parfit;[13] for Deborah Elise White, he recalls the phenomenologist Martin Heidegger;[14] for A. C. Grayling, the ordinary language analytic philosopher P. F. Strawson;[15] and for David Bromwich, both William James (who, thanks to his pragmatic approach to metaphysical problems, is 'exempted from the idealist-realist debate') and, in a later assessment, even Plato.[16] Others continue to see Hazlitt's philosophical work strictly in the context of Romanticism and literary theory, as a somewhat unsuccessful experiment that led, serendipitously, to another career, in which his talents could really shine.

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[11] Milnes, 'Seeing in the Dark', 6.

[12] John Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt: Critic of Power* (New York, NY: Colombia University Press, 1978), 67.

[13] Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal Identity in the Eighteenth Century* (London, Routledge, 2000), 151; Terry Eagleton, 'Ulster Altruism: Francis Hutcheson and William Hazlitt', *The Hazlitt Review*, 6 (2013).

[14] Deborah Elise White, *Romantic Returns: Superstition, Imagination, History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 79.

[15] A. C. Grayling, *The Quarrel of the Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000), 364.

[16] Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic*, 89; and 'Disinterested Imagining and Impersonal Feeling', *Metaphysical Hazlitt: Bicentenary Essays*, eds. Uttara Natarajan, Tom Paulin and Duncan Wu (London: Routledge, 2005), 17.

One difficulty stems from the many forms and styles in which Hazlitt presented his ideas. The passage of his career from his thwarted attempts at metaphysics into more popular forms of writing meant that the development of his philosophy, after about 1812, occurred intermittently, in essays written with the intention to entertain a general audience as much as to prove a point. There is, of course, no reason why philosophical arguments cannot or should not be developed in journalistic, critical and even entertaining writings. The problem for Hazlitt's readers, though, is that these works greatly expand the number and variety of commitments that might be considered part of his philosophy, leaving wider interpretive gaps to be filled in some coherent form. Filling in the gaps in this larger canvas is all the more difficult without an obvious model to which he consistently referred.

We may add to this that Hazlitt was, by disposition, reluctant to identify wholeheartedly with any readymade tradition or school of thought. He returns frequently to the theme of cants, sects, systems, parties and 'party-feeling', all of which install prejudice and empty talk in place of hard thinking, and would give warrant to the

> ferrets and inspectors of a *Police-Philosophy*; who pay domiciliary visits to the human mind, catechise an expression, impale a sentiment, put every enjoyment to the rack, leave you not a moment's ease or respite, and imprison all the faculties in a round of cant-phrases—the Shibboleth of a party (xii, 181).

'We must keep the understanding free', he writes in a late essay. We cannot, in good conscience, allow 'interest and authority [to] interfere to patch up a ricketty conclusion, and [make] the mind… the advocate and slave of established creeds and systems' (xii, 369, 372)—as he says of the 'conceited fellow' in 'On People with One Idea', who 'talks of the Kantean system while he dances… [and] while he dines', though he 'knows no more about it than a pike-staff' (viii, 63). One of Hazlitt's great merits as a philosopher, on his own account, is that he 'has had no theory to maintain' and simply writes 'each thought as it occur[s] to [him], without bias or prejudice of any sort' (ix, 165). He acknowledges, especially in his late essays, that people are apt to change their minds and hold mutually inconsistent opinions, in some cases at the same time: 'No one is simply and absolutely any

one thing, though he may be branded with it as a name' (xvii, 351). This thought reflects his reluctance to settle into a readily classifiable position.

Then there is the strong flavour of empiricism throughout Hazlitt's work. A common strategy among those trying to classify his philosophy has been to contrast empiricist and idealist currents in his thought. This bifurcation is not one that he made himself, and in some respects reflects the ways later idealists characterised their distinctive position. Much of his philosophical language, especially in the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, is recognisably that of the British and French empiricism dominant in the preceding century, and as John Mahoney notes, he knew 'an enormous amount of eighteenth-century philosophical writing'.[17] However, he had little formal training in the discipline beyond what he had learned as a student at the New College, Hackney, in the 1790s. Writing the Essay proved a protracted, difficult and discouraging experience, on which he spent 'eight years in writing eight pages, under circumstances of inconceivable and ridiculous discouragement' (ix, 30). This lack of support or wider input from his peers, as well as the obsessive tendency that resulted in its completion, are reflected in the narrow, oddly placed focus of the argument. The shortage of sustained, good-faith critical responses meant that the argument was never systematically refined or realigned with an established class.

We may wonder whether 'idealism' is the best class to consider. After all, empiricism need not be opposed to idealism, for all that later nineteenth-century idealists sometimes suggested as much. Why not the more specific 'Kantian', say, or else the more descriptive 'anti-realist', or the more open 'anti-materialist'? Hazlitt sometimes aligns himself with the 'intellectual' philosophy (i, 127), as distinct from its 'material... modern' or 'mechanical' counterpart (xx, 12, 20). But as John Kinnaird warned in 1978, the meaning of this term is too broad to assist with Hazlitt's classification. 'The intellectual philosophy', he warns, covers 'Cartesian rationalism, Platonic or Kantian idealism,

[17] John L. Mahoney, *The Logic of Passion: The Literary Criticism of William Hazlitt* (New York, Fordham University Press, 1981), 34.

Berkeleyan immaterialism, Humean scepticism, indeed almost everything but a materialist empiricism and the Scottish "common sense" doctrine of unmediated perception'.[18]

Natarajan employs a capacious, varying definition of idealism to ensure that all the awkward branches of Hazlitt's theory will fit. She sometimes defines idealism simply as 'commitment to an ideal, according to common usage', and at other times (more often) to mean a doctrine that affirms the creative powers of self-consciousness.[19] It is in the former sense that Hazlitt himself most often uses the word 'ideal', defined as an aesthetic value, 'filling up the outline of truth or beauty existing in the mind, so as to leave nothing wanting or to desire farther' (xx, 302). But he uses the term 'idealist' only once to describe a philosophical position, and there he does not apply it to himself. His reluctance to use the term may be due in part to his sources: Willich, from whom he took much of what he knew of Kant, defines idealism as

> that ſyſtem of philoſophy, in which the external reality of certain intuitive repreſentations is diſputed or doubted, and ſpace as well as external objects are aſſerted to be mere fancies… [as in] the ſyſtem of the celebrated biſhop Berkley.[20]

This definition is misleading with respect to Berkeley's idealism and unrepresentative of later theories described as such, including Kant's, but the prevalence of such conceptions might explain why Hazlitt did not apply the term to his own philosophy. He considered Berkeley a fine stylist and perspicuous thinker who, through an elaborate *post-hoc* justification for his Christianity, ended up confining himself to an immaterial 'fairy-world' (xi, 32), but he, Hazlitt, was enough of a realist to accept the existence of a material world at face value. Elsewhere, in a passing remark about dreams, he notes that anyone able to argue 'in favour of the immaterial nature and independent powers of the soul in the sublime flights which it takes when emancipated from the intrusion of sensible objects… must have finer dreams than I have' (ii, 169).

[18] Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt*, 69.
[19] Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense*, 129; and 'Abstracting Passion: Hazlitt's Ideal of Power', *New Blackfriars*, 77.905 (1996), esp. 282–6.
[20] A. F. M. Willich (ed.), in Immanuel Kant, *Elements of the Critical Philosophy* (London: Longman, 1798), 161.

In the absence of a widely agreed, clear and crisp definition of idealism, the usual strategy among those who consider Hazlitt an idealist has been to link him with other thinkers to whom he was sympathetic and are usually classified as idealists. Kant described his own theory as 'idealism' only in a qualified sense—his 'critical' or 'transcendental' idealism, unlike Descartes's 'empirical idealism' and Berkeley's 'dreaming' or 'visionary' idealism, does not deny that the material world exists, only that its existence can be ascertained directly from sense experience.[21] Yet as the idealist most influential on the subsequent history of philosophy and, in a complicated way, on Hazlitt in particular, he is the most obvious point of comparison. When relying on this convenient, genealogical conception of idealism, then, we must take care not to overlook the ways in which idealist concepts and themes permeated the theories of philosophers not commonly identified as idealists *in general*. Schools and traditions of thought are defined with the benefit of hindsight; philosophers (and philosophies) need not always fit into one and no others.

3. Hazlitt and Idealist Practical Philosophy

The practical philosophy of the *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* has sometimes been taken as evidence of Hazlitt's idealism. While it was published before his first flush of enthusiasm for Kant in 1807, Natarajan sees a 'strong intellectual affinity'—though at first a result of 'intellectual coincidence'—between their ideas, especially in their conceptions of moral reasoning.[22]

The 'metaphysical discovery' of the Essay is a simple but effective counterblast to philosophers who believed that self-interest was the only intelligible motivation for action. We each exist, for practical purposes, only in the present. Our past selves are the product of memory, and are as such fixed and unchangeable; meanwhile our future selves are the product of imagination. These future selves are the only object of self-interested actions, and may turn out very differently, if at all, when the anticipated moment passes from the imagined future to the concrete reality of the present—as Hazlitt dryly notes

[21] Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics,* revised edition, trans. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 44–5, 4:293–4; cf. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans., eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 426–7, A370–1.
[22] Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense*, 6, 154.

in a later return to the same theme, 'I may be dead before this time to-morrow' (xx, 381). Self-interested action, then, is a form of altruism, since our future selves are not yet identical with our present ones. Given the 'insurmountable barrier' between our present and future selves, and disregarding the 'courtesy of expression' by which we ordinarily speak of selves as though they were enduring, material objects, we must recognise that our motivations to act are, in fact, naturally disinterested (i, 11): 'the moment we resolve self-love into the rational pursuit of a remote object', writes Hazlitt, we will see that 'the love of others *has the same necessary foundation in the human mind* as the love of ourselves' (i, 91; emphasis added).

It is not obvious what this theory has to do with Kant. In 1969, Park noted 'Hazlitt's insistence on the necessity of two principles [respect for law and respect for persons]… which correspond to the first two formulations of the categorical imperative in Kant's *Groundwork [of the Metaphysics of Morals]*'.[23] Developing this theme in *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense*, Natarajan claims that Hazlitt represents 'good' as something 'independent of interest, and to that extent, as deontological'. As such, she explains, Hazlitt's principle of goodness 'recognisably partakes of the deontological nature of Kant's categorical imperative'.[24] She finds support in Kant's characterisation of the purpose of 'practical philosophy' in the *Groundwork*. 'Common human reason is impelled… to leave its sphere… and to take a step into the field of a practical philosophy', writes Kant, in order to learn the source and 'correct determination' of its principle; thus reason distinguishes 'genuine moral principles' from those based on needs and desires.[25] Natarajan insists that if we grant Kant's definition of 'practical philosophy' and our reasons for engaging in it, '…then, only substituting "imaginative" for "rational" to signify non-empirical nature, we must acknowledge that [Hazlitt's] *Essay*… both fits this definition and is governed by this objective, i.e. we must acknowledge the "practical grounds" of the *Essay*'s metaphysic'.[26]

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[23] Roy Park, 'Hazlitt and Bentham', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 30.1 (1969), 372.
[24] Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense*, 157.
[25] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: a German–English Edition*, trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 39, 4:405. Natarajan quotes the equivalent passage from H. J. Paton's classic translation of the same work, under the title *The Moral Law*.
[26] Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense,* 165.

I am not convinced that Hazlitt enters 'the field of a practical philosophy' in the sense Kant describes. Even when he frames the argument of the Essay in explicitly moral terms, as in the unfinished sketch 'Outlines of Morals' in 1826, his focus remains on competing interests as they relate to true and false conceptions of the self. References to 'moral' judgments, claims and reasons are in large part identical to *altruistic* judgments, claims and reasons, as opposed to self-interested ones. His moral theory is 'deontological' in the trivial sense that it is not teleological, utilitarian or crudely consequentialist, but not in the more specific sense, characteristic of its use today, of maintaining a system of rules—Kant's 'imperatives'—and corresponding rights.

Kant's aim, which leads him to the categorical imperative, is to show that moral claims, correctly construed, are universally authoritative. Morally wrong actions, for Kant, are *always* wrong, right actions *always* right. This is not, and cannot be, contingent on any agent's preferences, circumstances, or assessment of the likely consequences in which an action will result. An action cannot be morally wrong (and as such impermissible) by one person's lights and right (and as such mandatory) by another's, since then there would be no final answer to the question of what anyone ought to do. A dairy farmer or postal worker has reasons to rise at dawn that a nightclub bartender, say, does not share, since these roles entail different duties. Yet in every case it is wrong to neglect one's duties, whatever they may be. Only a self-conscious commitment to duty for its own sake can motivate actions of genuine 'moral worth', thinks Kant. To act altruistically out of habit or disposition is not morally praiseworthy, since it conforms to the demands of duty at best by coincidence: 'what counts [for the purposes of morality] is not the actions, which one sees, but their inner principles, which one does not see'.[27]

Hazlitt's practical philosophy, if we may call it that, is motivated by different concerns. Kant wants to trace the authority of morality to a transcendental and therefore universally attainable point of origin, thereby distinguishing practical philosophy as a field of inquiry distinct from empirical psychology, practical anthropology, and history. But duty, for Hazlitt, is not the only thing that matters. He recognises the need for a moral standpoint, uncluttered by our personal interests, in order for us to

[27] Kant, *Groundwork*, 43, 4:407.

make judgments at all; but he is too pessimistic to believe, as Kant does, that we will know it when (or if) we find it—or that, if we ever do, we will freely agree in our interpretations of the view this heightened position affords. Natarajan's exchange of Kant's 'reason' for Hazlitt's 'imagination' is no trivial thing. After all, there is no guarantee that the imagination should lead us to treat others well, rather than making us fear them, suspect their motives, or rationalise our dislikes. The shift in emphasis from disinterestedness to 'the psychology of power' in Hazlitt's later works is testament to his deepening doubts about the power of philosophy to produce agreement by the force of reasoning alone.[28]

Hazlitt is too much of a realist, in the loose, everyday sense of that word, to think it possible to bring the complexities and foibles of actual behaviour under anything as neat as a universal moral principle. 'Reason, with most people, means their own opinion', he claims; we each think and act in the belief that we are in the right, favour arguments that support our prejudices, and hold firm to 'profitable delusion[s]' over 'dowerless truth[s]' (xii, 188; xx, 365). He sees that the adjective 'moral' expresses more than just a neatly defined principle, equally available to anyone prepared to set aside their irrational prejudices and soberly reflect on practical matters. It is instead an inescapably *political* word, connoting power and presumed authority; it forms part of a 'larger judgmental scheme', as Laurence Lockridge calls it, including 'passion, imagination, prejudice, and tradition'.[29] An apt illustration appears in Hazlitt's essay 'Guy Faux', in which he remarks on 'the spirit of martyrdom' and the unflinching sense of duty that underlies it:

> … a man's going resolutely to the stake rather than surrender his opinion, is a serious matter. It shews that in the public mind and feeling there is something better than life; that there is a belief of something in the universe and the order of nature, to which it is worth while to sacrifice this poor brief span of existence. To have an object always in view dearer to one than one's self, to cling to a principle in contempt of danger, of interest, of the opinion of the world, this is the true ideal, the high and heroic state of man. It is in fact to have a standard of

[28] Kinnaird, *William Hazlitt*, 89.
[29] Laurence S. Lockridge, *The Ethics of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 365.

> absolute and implicit faith in the mind, that admits neither of compromise, degree, nor exception. The path of duty is one, the grounds of encouragement are fixed and invariable (xx, 99).

Kant believes that the very idea or form of duty carries implications for the content of that duty. Attempted regicide is prohibited, presumably, on the same grounds as any other murder. Consider the first two formulations of the categorical imperative, to which Park referred: Fawkes cannot rationally will that killing one's oppressors should become a universal law, and he is treating the King and parliamentarians not as ends in themselves, but as means to the end of installing a Catholic monarch on the throne. Therefore, his belief that it is his duty to kill them must be mistaken. For Hazlitt, meanwhile, the idea of duty represents Fawkes's single-minded devotion to his cause, conceived as right regardless of mundane considerations of danger, interest and public opinion. 'An object of the highest conceivable greatness leads to unmingled devotion', he writes; and 'the belief in eternal truth embodies itself on practical principles of strict rectitude, or of obstinate, but noble-minded error' (xx, 99).

A major obstacle to Hazlitt's identification with idealism via Kant's ethics is the sheer ambition, indeed the peculiarity, of the central argument of the *Groundwork*. Kant seeks to justify the very enterprise of moral philosophy against the objection that it has no firm basis, that moral claims cannot be proven, and that normative language amounts to no more than grandiose expressions of culturally enshrined preferences. The categorical imperative, the great upshot of the *Groundwork*, represents the authority of reason over us as autonomous thinkers. Even other self-described idealists, Kantians aside, have tended to pause at this claim: Hegel, perhaps most famously, thought that such formalism effectively excluded any possible content.[30] These abstruse problems are neither addressed nor even acknowledged in Hazlitt's work. He takes for granted that moral action is altruistic action and attends to the question of what motivates it, given what he has said about the imaginary future self. He argues

[30] G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 163, §135.

that our real reasons for action must be expressed impersonally, since the beneficiaries of our actions exist, strictly speaking, only in the future, and as such hypothetically:

> The reason why a child first distinctly wills or pursues his own good is not because it is *his*, but because it is *good*. For the same reason he prefers his own gratification to that of others not because he likes himself better than others, but because he has a more distinct idea of his own wants and pleasure than of theirs (i, 12).

Does this 'recognisably partake of the deontological nature of Kant's categorical imperative', as Natarajan suggested? I am not convinced that it does. Hazlitt's claim that the good is desired simply *because it is good,* not for its own sake (or as a means to some further end desired as such), is compatible with a wide variety of theories. We might note at least a superficial resemblance to Plato's accounts of the good in *Euthyphro* and *The Republic*, as Bromwich has hinted.[31] Yet we should not overlook the slide back into more personal language in Hazlitt's references to 'gratification' and 'pleasure'. The question of how the child in his example recognises *anything* as 'good', quite apart from its own feelings and preferences, is left open. Criticising Locke in his 1812 lecture on 'Liberty and Necessity', Hazlitt gives a clearer account of his own position:

> From not accurately distinguishing between sensation and judgment, some writers have been led to confound good and evil with pleasure and pain. Good or evil is properly that which gives the mind pleasure or pain *on reflection*, that is, which excites rational approbation or disapprobation. To consider these two things as either the same or in any regular proportion to each other, is… to betray a very superficial acquaintance with human nature. (ii, 260; emphasis added)

Much hinges on the phrase 'on reflection' in this passage. The thought anticipates an objection that John Stuart Mill would later make of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism, but it would have been wholly familiar to eighteenth-century philosophers, too. Shaftesbury described moral reflection as a process in which the agent 'endure[s] the review of his own mind and actions… [with] representations of

[31] Bromwich, 'Disinterested Imagining and Impersonal Feeling', 17.

himself and his inward affairs constantly passing before him';[32] Butler describes right action as that which we choose after 'sit[ting] down in a cool hour' to reflect on our choices;[33] and Godwin the moral imperative 'to put ourselves in the place of an impartial spectator, of an angelic nature… beholding us from an elevated station and uninfluenced by our prejudices, [then] conceiving what would be his estimate of the intrinsic circumstances of our neighbour, and acting accordingly'.[34] The idea that moral judgment is to be differentiated from other kinds of judgment through sober, careful reflection—or that a distinctively moral standpoint, granting insight into that-which-is-good independently of that-which-is-good-for-oneself, is attained by degrees through abstraction from the standpoints of partial, particular, imperfect agents—is theoretically unassuming, neither relying on nor denying principles of idealism. Indeed, Kant makes an uncharacteristic reference to a 'rational impartial spectator' in the first section of the *Groundwork*, if only to insist that such a being could take no pleasure in the 'uninterrupted prosperity of a being… [without] a pure and good will… [which is] the indispensible condition *even of the worthiness to be happy*'.[35]

Kant's preeminence among moral philosophers, even (and perhaps especially) today, makes it hard to speak of ethics without invoking his specialist language and concepts. His influence can be seen even in the ways philosophers and intellectual historians now define the branches of their disciplines. Much of the practical philosophy of Hazlitt's Essay would, by today's standards, fall under the rubric of moral psychology rather than metaethics or normative theory proper. We certainly see in Hazlitt, as in Kant, the desire to explain how agents can ever have reason to act in the interests of others, and Hazlitt's solution is idealistic so far as it denies the direct identification of (moral) goodness with (empirical) pleasure—reflection is necessary to attain a standpoint of moral judgment. But this tells us little about what kind of philosopher he was, beyond the fact that he was not an intuitionist or a crude utilitarian.

[32] Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 208.
[33] Joseph Butler, *Five Sermons* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), 56.
[34] William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. K. Codell Carter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 72.
[35] Kant, *Groundwork*, 15, 4:393; emphasis added.

4. Hazlitt and Idealist Theoretical Philosophy

A more promising basis for the interpretation of Hazlitt as an idealist is his theoretical philosophy. In this domain Kant had more direct influence on Hazlitt, at least for a time. Hazlitt remembered the key lesson he learned from him, that 'the mind alone is formative', even when he had rejected the substance of Kantianism as so many 'dogmatical and hardened assertions' connected by 'machinery and scaffolding' (xvi, 123–4). As we shall see, he sets aside some of the idealists' metaphysically ambitious claims and reframes certain promising intimations, from Berkeley as well as Kant, as claims about the relationship between thought, language and experience.

The Essay is once again a useful reference point. Hazlitt believed the account of practical reason and personal identity in that book had further implications for epistemology and the philosophy of mind. These extensions of the core theory occur in his 'Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvetius' and the essay 'On Abstract Ideas', and are developed sporadically in later essays and lectures. Philipp Hunnekuhl describes a 'paradigm shift' in Hazlitt's philosophical thinking after 1807, bringing the earlier 'loose, accidental affinity' with Kant to the point of 'overall conceptual congruence'. From then on, until his seemingly decisive rejection of Kant in 1817, Hazlitt would present the thesis of the Essay with a quasi-Kantian 'tone and scaffolding'.[36]

A striking feature of this paradigm shift is that, despite its new scaffolding, the substance of Hazlitt's argument from the Essay remains fundamentally the same. From Kant—or, more precisely, from the idea of Kant he had constructed from materials furnished by Willich, Crabb Robinson and Coleridge—he draws a new critical vocabulary with which to express his dissatisfaction with the 'material or modern' philosophy centred on Locke. In the 'Remarks', Hazlitt turns his attention to 'the subject of consciousness, the most abstruse, the most important of all others, the most filled with seeming inexplicable contradictions, that which bids the completest defiance to the matter-of-fact philosophy' (i, 70n). The imagination, by the power of which we are 'thrown forward… into [our] future being' (i, 2), is the basis for our identities as agents and our capacities as active, creative

[36] Hunnekuhl, 'Hazlitt, Crabb Robinson and Kant', 55.

thinkers. The power of the imagination to give sense and abstract form to words makes possible communication and thought itself, refining the 'infinite number of parts' of every impression, and the 'infinite number of ideas answering to them', into something of intelligible proportions (ii, 206). Thus, by conceiving of the mind as the creator of its objects and experience as a process of creation rather than passive reception, we may account for the 'unity of consciousness' without resorting to crude 'physical analogy' as the modern philosophers have done (xx, 13).

The phrase 'the mind alone is formative' stands, in Hazlitt's work, as the summation of what was worth remembering in Kant's philosophy, and for some ten years before he rejected Kant in 'Coleridge's Literary Life', published in an 1817 issue of the *Edinburgh Review*, it served as a motto for his own metaphysical project. The first time he uses it, in the Preface to his abridgement of Abraham Tucker's *The Light of Nature Pursued*, he identifies it as 'the fundamental article of the transcendental creed' (i, 130). Nine years later, in 'Mr. Locke a Great Plagiarist', he still considered Kant's doctrine 'the only lever by which the modern [materialist] philosophy can be overturned' (xx, 74). Although he seems to have believed, mistakenly, that the motto originated from Kant himself, he more likely misremembered it from the Historical Introduction to Willich's *Elements of the Critical Philosophy*, where it is attributed to the anonymous author, now known to be G. E. Schulze, of the anti-Kantian pamphlet *Aenesidemus* (1792). According to Schulze, reports Willich, 'Kant… has not proved, that our mind alone can be the ground of ſynthetical judgments'.[37] On Kant's account, the mind is formative by virtue of its capacity to form such judgments, 'construct[ing] fuller concepts by amplifying what is given' rather than merely 'explicat[ing] given concepts by showing what predicates they contain', as in analytic judgments.[38] It is by forming synthetic judgments that we add to our knowledge of the world outside us. The question of what synthetic judgments do and do not enable us to ascertain—whether they can be made *a priori* to reveal truths about the non-empirical world, concerning the existence of God, for example, or free will—is the central problem of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

[37] Willich, in Kant, *Elements of the Critical Philosophy*, 21.
[38] Guyer and Wood, Introduction to Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 33–4.

The notoriety of Willich's translation and, by extension, Hazlitt's decidedly imperfect comprehension of Kant's theory, are well-known. His interpretation was, first, cramped by the limitations of his source materials and the empiricist technical language he used to describe it and, second, distorted as a result of him guessing what Kant would have said about points of detail which he, Hazlitt, did not know. What he admires in Kant is less the latter's grand attempts to establish the grounds of synthetic *a priori* judgments than his insistence that the mind is capable of *acting on,* perhaps even *creating* its objects, not just accommodating and responding passively to them.

Absent the elaborate apparatus of Kant's theory, this claim might seem banal. In everyday language, we require no special metaphysical theory to speak of a storyteller *creating* a character from her imagination, for example, or else *constructing* images in words, spending the afternoon *developing* new ideas, or *forming* conceptions, impressions, and judgments of some new acquaintance. The view common to empiricists like Locke and Hume—that the mind's functions are largely passive, perceiving or receiving the sequence of impressions and ideas that come to us from sense experience, and ordering them through language—is in this respect the more radical claim.[39] Their concern is that the ordinary way we describe the actions of our minds is ultimately baseless, a matter of convenience and convention rather than verified knowledge. Hume allows, for example, that we can imagine ourselves exploring places we have never visited, such as 'a golden city', drawing on our ideas of past impressions of other places and reassembling them in an original form to create new ideas of what such a place would be like.[40] But he cannot claim to have any *idea*, according to the empiricist definition of that word, of the mechanism that makes this possible. The imagination and its function are assumed, by not explained, by the empiricists. Thus they presuppose and rely upon concepts that their epistemology cannot accommodate: there is, so to speak, an ideal substrate that goes unacknowledged.

[39] Cf. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996), 94–5; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, second edition, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 1–7.
[40] Hume, *Treatise*, 3.

Hazlitt's central objection to 'the modern philosophy', then, is that it fails to give an adequate account of the processes and theory of mind underlying its epistemology without recourse to an idealist conceptual scheme. Locke claims not to be a materialist, but really, despite his protestations, he must be. He claims to give an account of human understanding, but he is unable to explain it as anything more than 'the faculty of simple perception', and its powers of 'thinking, comparing, discerning, reasoning, willing, and the like' as 'the operations of nothing' (ii, 146; xx, 17) and 'a mean and palpable play on words'.[41] When Locke tries to account for analytic *a priori* logical truths, he faces a choice between claiming that some knowledge is 'innate', or else that even these truths are generalisations based on experience, since empiricism, with its characteristically restrictive conception of beliefs as ideas and ideas as pictures, grants him no other options. Hazlitt responds:

> I do not know that Mr. Locke has sufficiently distinguished between two things which I cannot very well express otherwise than by a turn of words, namely, an innate knowledge of principles, and innate principles of knowledge. His arguments seem to me conclusive against the one, but not against the other, for I think that there are certain general principles or forms of thinking, something like the moulds in which any thing is cast, according to which our ideas follow one another in a certain order, though the knowledge, *i.e.*, perception of what these principles are, and the forming them into distinct propositions is the result of experience (ii, 165).

It is telling that Hazlitt finds this distinction difficult to express. Though we might think his objection to Locke, written in 1812, during the period when he was closest to Kant, is just another swipe at the inadequacies of the modern philosophy, here he shows notable restraint. He recognises the appeal of the idea of 'forms of thinking… like the moulds in which [actual thoughts are] cast', but he is unsure how best to describe them. His later complaints about Kant's account of the faculties stem from the same concern. He says Kant has summarily 'invented' certain faculties and decided they '*must* exist' without providing any proof (xvi, 124). Such groundless assumptions, he adds, appear throughout

[41] William Hazlitt (1809) 'To the Editor of the Monthly Magazine [A New System of Metaphysics]', in Duncan Wu (ed.), *New Writings of William Hazlitt,* volume 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

Kant's whole doctrine. Where the modern philosophers fail to recognise their debt to idealism, Kant claims too much.

Some of Hazlitt's objections to Kant, both in 1817 and in the mostly complimentary 'Madame de Staël's Account of German Philosophy and Literature' a few years before, are obviously misdirected. As René Welleck observed in 1931, some of them are directed against claims Kant explicitly denies from a position that is, ironically and seemingly by coincidence, close to an orthodox Kantian one (e.g. xx, 18n).[42] Hazlitt's complaint about Kant's account of the faculties, though, is more formidable. His worry is not that Kant appeals to the idea of faculties at all, but that he claims to know and describe the structure of the mind independently of any actual experience.

These doubts recall some that Hazlitt might have remembered from Berkeley, whose work he certainly read and admired for its style and the insights it contained. Natarajan finds affinities between Hazlitt and Berkeley's immaterialism, especially the claim that '*esse* is *percepi*' (to exist is to be perceived), which anticipates Hazlitt's 'strong sense of the mind's ability to turn thought to substance'. This ability is first described, she writes, in his account of 'a thinking or intellectual principle in the mind that is beyond the receptivity to sense impressions', and, later, in his argument for 'the authenticity of the mind's creation'.[43]

I confess that I am not sure what to make of these claims about the 'authenticity' of the mind's creation, nor of similar claims in Milnes's work about its 'validity'.[44] Yet by reference to Berkeley, we can see how an idealist might negotiate the relations between the content of knowledge and its basis in the mind. In his *Three Dialogues*, he has his Lockean speaker, Hylas, suggest that his ideas of qualities must be supported by 'a material *substratum*', though he does not perceive it directly through his senses, on the grounds that 'qualities cannot be conceived to exist without a support'.[45] In reply, Philonous, the speaker representing Berkeley himself, goads Hylas with questions about how an

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[42] René Welleck, *Immanuel Kant in England, 1793–1838* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1931), 166.
[43] George Berkeley, *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge,* in *Philosophical Works,* ed. M. R. Ayers (London: Dent, 1975) 78; Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense*, 31–3.
[44] E.g. Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose*, 109, 112
[45] Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, in *Philosophical Works*, 156.

immaterial idea can be supported by a material one: 'How! is it as your legs support your body?' Hylas complains that to take the word in such a 'strict literal sense… is not fair', but when further pressed, he concedes that he 'know[s] nothing' of matter, nor of qualities, independently of mind.[46]

The explicitly Christian presuppositions that motivate Berkeley's theory have tended to give readers a mistaken impression of his conclusions. He remains, for the most part, as much an empiricist as Locke. He does not deny the enduring nature of reality or conceive of it as an arbitrary, subjective invention of the mind. Natarajan, who finds in Berkeley's work an anticipation of Hazlitt's 'strong sense of the mind's ability to turn thought to substance', overextends the metaphor.[47] Berkeley's point is rather that, though the idea is intuitively appealing, we can have no knowledge of a material reality that exists independently of consciousness. Trading on a broad definition of 'idea', he argues that our positions as finite thinking subjects prevent us from perceiving any wholly objective reality 'existing out of the minds of all spirits'.[48] Instead, anything we perceive must be an idea *by dint of its being perceived*. There is no possibility of knowing a world unless we are conscious of it, so any world we know exists in consciousness, as an idea. And since we do not spend all of our time thinking of everything that can be thought, to explain the persistence and orderliness of reality when we are not thinking about it, we must appeal to some higher consciousness—hence the mind of God.

Hazlitt, neither a Christian nor willing to stretch the concept of 'idea' to justify becoming one, cannot follow Berkeley in taking that last great step. The broader point about the role of the mind in forming ideas, with its implications for the meaning of 'experience', is one he endorses, however. Berkeley nicely illustrates this theme with the example of 'look[ing] upon a picture… of Julius Cæsar': if two people see the same image, one may recognise it as Cæsar and the other not. The senses themselves perceive only 'colours and figures' in a certain composition. This tells us, says Berkeley (via Philonous), that some 'internal faculty of the soul', thinking, is needed to convert immediate sense perceptions to cognisable ideas.[49] We might reply that this much is obvious, and the problem of

[46] Berkeley, *Three Dialogues*, 157.
[47] Natarajan, *Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense*, 31–3.
[48] Berkeley, *Three Dialogues*, 158.
[49] Berkeley, *Three Dialogues*, 160–2

explaining the relation between our ideas, our knowledge and the world our knowledge reflects is that our *explanations* necessarily take the form of second-order representations—an experience described after the event, however accurate and exhaustively detailed that description might be, is not the same as the experience itself. Still, Berkeley's challenge remains open: the internal faculties are strictly unknowable as they are *in themselves*, as Kant would say. Unwilling or unable to give a transcendental account of the mind, Berkeley denies that the mind can be what Locke supposes it is. As he put it in one of his notebooks,

> Speech metaphorical more than we imagine insensible things & their modes circumstances &c being exprest for y[e] most part by words borrow'd from things sensible. the reason's plain. Hence Manyfold Mistakes.
>
> The grand Mistake is that we think we have Ideas of the Operations of our Minds. certainly this Metaphorical dress is an argument we have not.[50]

Hazlitt, too, recognised the pitfalls inherent in language. A central theme of 'On Abstract Ideas' is the way we mistake the structures of our conceptual schemes for the structure of reality itself. Language is run through with symbols and elisions. Our arguments are regularly presented in such 'metaphorical dress', though we often mistake words for things—the self, for instance—and are led to untenable conclusions. Ideas are not just weak or poor substitutes for sensory impressions; thinking is not just a matter of reviewing images dredged up from past experience and forming associations between them; experience is not one thing and our interpretation of it another. Instead, ideas are constructed out of language, serving as placeholders or prompts for the mind's activities.

5. Why it Matters

Hazlitt draws on idealism, though this tendency sets him in a marginal position within a wider group of empiricist thinkers rather than outside it. He sees, rightly, that his empiricist peers and predecessors

[50] Berkeley, *Philosophical Commentaries*, Notebook B, §§176–176a, in *Philosophical Works,* 226.

took much for granted in their accounts of knowledge, mind, motives and morals, and were thus unable to do justice to elements of our actual experience of thinking about and interacting with the world. A form of idealism represents, for Hazlitt, a way out of that empiricist bind, but he is (understandably) wary of exchanging one set of faulty presuppositions for another.

This may seem a disappointingly equivocal answer to our initial question. I would like to finish, then, with some remarks on the value of even such a tentatively idealist interpretation of Hazlitt's philosophy, and on why it matters whether we regard him as an idealist.

One reason is historical. The relation between Hazlitt and idealism jars with the conventional view of the relations between empiricism and idealism in Britain. The idealists who dominated British philosophy departments in the late nineteenth century tended to draw a hard distinction between their position and that of their empiricist, positivist, materialist colleagues. In doing so they cultivated a caricature of their opponents as crude reductionists, and—though unintentionally, and partly as a result of the sharp decline of idealism in the first half of the twentieth century—of themselves as metaphysical grandstanders, concerned with rarefied questions about the Absolute, divorced from the earthy problems of lived experience. This neat opposition between mundane empiricism and lofty idealism gave posterity a sequel to the debate between empiricists and rationalists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But idealism began with simpler concerns, like Hazlitt's, about the relation between thinking and the world thought about.

This yields another reason, which has to do with the methodology of intellectual history. Hazlitt's example shows that the Hegelians' sharp distinction between idealism and empiricism, as well as the view of idealism received by subsequent historians, is in some respects misleading. Idealism is not reducible to the works of certain famous philosophers and their followers, nor another philosopher's eligibility to be considered such simply a question of how much they have read and imitated one of those exemplars. Our familiar classes of philosophers sometimes signify common commitments, sometimes looser family resemblances, but usually also convenient groupings imposed by previous generations of intellectual historians. Hazlitt is not excluded from being an idealist on the grounds that

he did not use the term, because he misunderstood and partly rejected Kant, or because he did not agree with the best-known conclusions of Berkeley.

A final reason why it matters whether or not Hazlitt was an idealist, at least in the limited sense I have described, is that it changes our understanding of his whole metaphysical project. It goes some way to disarming the old view that he was simply confused, ignorant or narrow in his interpretations of other thinkers, too much a *Romantic* to add anything of value to *philosophy*. Michael Oakeshott, one of the last British idealists in the Hegelian mould—and one who read Hazlitt, whom he saw as an acute observer of human nature, though not as an idealist[51]—plausibly claimed that

> [a] philosopher is not, as such, a scholar; and philosophy, more often than not, has foundered in learning. There is no book which is indispensable for the study of philosophy. And to speak of a philosopher as ignorant is to commit an *ignoratio elenchi* [to miss the point]; an historian or a scientist may be ignorant, philosophers merely stupid.[52]

Viewed in this light, the picture of Hazlitt as a kind of idealist seems at once less surprising and more promising that it did at first glance. He was far from stupid. He aimed to make sense of life as he lived it, to reveal its 'general principles' without forcing it to fit some convenient formula or preconceived prejudice. He was not *simply* or even primarily a philosopher. His philosophical interests were narrower, stemming from his hard-earned knowledge of the world and his 'habit of abstract reasoning', or the 'disease of philosophy' (xx, 52). One favourable result of this, as readers of *The Hazlitt Review* will appreciate, is that he produced an abundance of work on topics beyond the familiar scope of philosophy. We have a remarkably rich understanding of Hazlitt's mind. Virginia Woolf remarked that his work seemed 'shadowed with the shape of some vast unwritten book that looms on the horizon'.[53] This is especially true, I think, when reading his philosophy. Because he did not have, nor ever attempt to cultivate, a system, and because he did not confine himself to traditional philosophical topics, what we have of his metaphysics is incomplete but suggestive. The gaps in his

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[51] Michael Oakeshott, *Notebooks, 1922–86,* ed. Luke O'Sullivan (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2017), 31, 135.
[52] Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 8.
[53] Virginia Woolf, 'William Hazlitt', *The Common Reader*, second series (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959 [1923]), 184.

philosophical writings prompt speculation about how they could be filled and which ways his theorising might have led him, had his life more fully borne out his ‘pretension… of being a metaphysician’ (xii, 98).

Hazlitt’s philosophy may be understood as a simple, metaphysically unassuming form of idealism, which serves as a corrective to empiricist epistemology, not a replacement for it. This lesson is salutary outside the philosophy classroom. Recognising the active nature of mind, thinks Hazlitt, helps explain, for example, why seemingly reasonable people continue to disagree over matters of which they have no knowledge, or why there are divisions of sect, creed and party—or philosophy—among people who share societies, languages and beliefs. We are less reasonable and less rational than we think we are, but if we acknowledge this, we stand a better chance of overstepping the confines of our narrowly partial points of view.