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“Based on a true story: the early modern tale.” In *Idea and Ontology*, Marc Hight argues that the story we have been told about early modern philosophy is false. What Hight calls the “early modern tale” tells us that beginning with Descartes and ending with Berkeley, metaphysics began its slide into the historical dustbin, replaced by epistemology as first philosophy. The categories of medieval metaphysics, substance and mode, so the story goes, could no longer serve the needs of the moderns, specifically their questions about the nature of ideas. Ideas could not easily be categorized as either substances or modes, and because of this difficulty, metaphysical questions were abandoned in favor of epistemological questions about the nature of representation and certainty. Hight reexamines the early modern tradition to find the metaphysicians behind the epistemologists’ masks supposed by the early modern tale.

Once the metaphysical questions are revealed as central to early modern philosophy, Hight argues that Berkeley’s immaterialism, rather than ridiculous, is the final and triumphant conclusion of the metaphysical speculations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By showing that ideas were neither independent substances nor fully dependent modes, Berkeley solves the metaphysical problem of ideas that had vexed Descartes, Arnauld, Malebranche, Leibniz, Locke, and Hume. Only once we have seen the metaphysical character of early modern debates and abandoned the early modern tale can we finally recognize, Hight argues, the importance of metaphysics for contemporary philosophy, and thus the current relevance of Berkeley.

One could criticize Hight for failing to properly identify the tellers of this early modern tale, and for attributing too much to those he finally identifies: Yolton, Lennon, and Watson. But surely this is a story we all have heard. Although outside the Vienna Circle it might be hard to find anyone willing to express this sentiment explicitly, Anglo-American philosophy in the twentieth century hardly celebrated metaphysics. To be taken seriously, historians working on philosophers like Berkeley, a metaphysician if ever there was one, needed to rehabilitate them. Hight argues that by turning early modern philosophers into epistemologists, historians have done violence to those figures who were clearly metaphysicians and to debates that clearly concerned metaphysical questions.

Although I am sympathetic to Hight’s project, I did not find the strongest form of his thesis, that these figures were primarily interested in the metaphysical status of ideas, completely convincing. Part of the difficulty resides in Hight’s criteria for what counts as “doing metaphysics.” For Hight, using a substance-mode ontology is enough to make one a metaphysician, but even if this is what we might assume today, it is not at all clear that this was true for early modern thinkers. Because he identifies metaphysics “by our lights,” Hight manages to side-step the central issue in the early modern tale, namely, were the early moderns abandoning metaphysics as they knew it?

The problem of the ontological status of ideas was neither virgin territory nor scorched earth in the seventeenth century; on the contrary, it was well-tilled ground. Bracketing metaphysical questions leading to unwelcome conclusions was a genuine strategy that early modern philosophers adopted to avoid what they took to be scholastic quagmires or theological-political minefields. Trying to understand the status of metaphysics in the early modern period without this background is problematic, and without explicitly addressing it, Hight’s case that these figures were primarily interested in metaphysical questions is weaker than it should be.

Hight’s book persuasively shows that the early moderns were exploring the ways in which the scholastic metaphysical categories could and could not be extended to answer questions about the nature of ideas. While Hight sees only Berkeley as having innovated within this history, creating a concept of “quasi-substances,” and thus as the only philosopher who broke the chains of substance-mode ontology to finally solve “the early modern problem of ideas,” each of the figures he covers could be seen as having extended these notions.
However, given the trajectory of Hight’s narrative, it is not surprising that the shrift given these figures is so short. Overarching narratives tend to distort the views of those who are, for their purposes, minor characters. By rewriting the history of modern philosophy and casting Berkeley as its hero, Hight goes too far, and ends up replacing one fictional narrative with another.

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Alexander Broadie is well known to those who have an interest in Scottish Philosophy. His 1990 book, The Tradition of Scottish Philosophy: A New Perspective on the Enlightenment (Barnes & Noble), attempted to show that there were two great periods in the history of Scottish culture, the “circle of John Mair” around 1500 and the so-called “Scottish Enlightenment” of the last half of the eighteenth century. Broadie argued that one could “trace a line of philosophical influence from Mair’s circle to the philosophers of the Scottish enlightenment.”

The present book has a much wider scope. It is an attempt to tell the entire story of Scottish philosophy from its beginnings to the 1960s. The book has twelve chapters, including a short Introduction (1–6) and an even shorter Conclusion (365–69). The first philosopher discussed is John Duns Scotus. The next five chapters are called “The Fifteenth Century,” “The Circle of John Mair,” “Humanism and After,” and “Scotland Moves into the Age of Enlightenment,” which deals with Gershom Carmichael, George Turnbull, and Francis Hutcheson. Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9, which constitute the bulk of the book, deal with David Hume, Adam Smith, and The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries are treated relatively briefly under the titles “The Nineteenth Century: Ferrier to Seth” and “Realism and Idealism: Some Twentieth-century Narratives.” The book has a fairly extensive bibliography and a very useful index.

The summaries of the different philosophical positions are lucid, balanced, and fair. They provide very useful introductions to the thought of the philosophers discussed in the book. Someone interested in the background of Hume and Reid and looking for a first orientation could do a lot worse than consulting this book.

I do have a problem with the way Broadie places the accents in his history. The two chapters on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries take up only about one sixth of the book, yet they are among the most interesting—at least for me. They would have deserved a more detailed treatment. The discussion of the Middle Ages and Humanism is rather long. The same holds for the eighteenth century. The discussion of Hume in particular, whose philosophy has received much attention of late, could have been significantly shortened. Thomas Brown, Dugald Stewart’s successor, who is not as well known, but was a brilliant philosophical mind, would have deserved a section of his own—or so I believe. Since he did discuss Mair and his circle extensively in his earlier publication, this part of the book could also have been abbreviated. Whether Duns Scotus belongs in a “history of Scottish philosophy” I do not know. In any case, it appears that the concerns of his earlier book on The Tradition of Scottish Philosophy exercise an undue influence on the new book.

I would have liked to hear a little more about what makes a certain philosopher a Scottish philosopher and what makes Scottish philosophy Scottish. It may well be impossible to write a national history of philosophy in the strictest sense of the word. Philosophy, perhaps still more than Literature and Literary Criticism, knows no national boundaries. As Lewis White Beck once pointed out, any national history of philosophy encounters the problem of figures whose importance transcends the limits of the philosophical discussion in any one nation or language: “No history of English or German philosophy can be understood