



Idealism: New Essays in Metaphysics

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198746973.001.0001>

Published online: 18 January 2018 **Published in print:** 14 December 2017

Online ISBN:

9780191863622

Print ISBN: 9780198746973

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CHAPTER

9 The Idealism of Mary Whiton Calkins

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198746973.003.0009> Pages 142–157

Published: December 2017

Abstract

At the beginning of the twentieth century, idealism was the metaphysical view to be beat. Mary Whiton Calkins was an important early twentieth-century philosopher (and psychologist), and a prominent advocate of a version of idealism. This chapter assesses her version of idealism. Among the topics discussed are whether the absolute is a person, whether finite persons have free agency, whether there is a correspondence between apparent physical objects and minds, and the status of relations. In addition, her version of idealism is contrasted with the idealistic views of some of her contemporaries, including F. H. Bradley and J. M. E. McTaggart.

Keywords: Calkins, absolute idealism, persons, personalism, McTaggart, Bradley, relations

Subject: History of Western Philosophy, Metaphysics

Collection: Oxford Scholarship Online

1. Introduction

According to the popular origin story of analytic philosophy, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, philosophy in the Anglo-American world was dominated by the great systems of idealism that were inspired by the metaphysics of Kant, Hegel, and other thinkers in the tradition of German Idealism that followed in their wake. This hegemony lasted until these thinkers were overthrown by proponents of a new analytic philosophy led by Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore. I am not interested here in providing an assessment of the extent to which this origin story is true, but I will note that one consequence of it appears to be the temptation to treat absolute idealism as one doctrine rather than as a family of doctrines, the members of which, like all families, resemble each other in various ways, are motivated by different considerations, and are committed to different consequences.¹ Perhaps this temptation is strengthened by the tendency to study only a relative few of the many idealists from this period. But we cannot truly understand our history by studying only a select few, even if the few we study are terrific philosophers now viewed as canonical. We must also assess the context in which they thought, and this also requires studying those figures that, whether rightly or wrongly, are now on the margins.²

p. 143 My plan here is to focus on the metaphysics of Mary Whiton Calkins, who I will henceforth simply refer to as 'Calkins.' Calkins was an important figure in this period. She defended a dissertation thesis under Josiah Royce and William James, who both taught at Harvard, but the institutionalized sexism at Harvard prevented her from receiving the degree she deserved, despite strong advocacy for her from her committee.³ During her professional career, she authored forty articles on psychology and philosophy, primarily dealing with metaphysics, the philosophy of mind, the history of philosophy, and ethics.⁴ She also authored many books, including *The Persistent Problems of Philosophy*, which was a popular textbook on the history of metaphysics that was reprinted five times from 1907 (the date of its initial publication) to 1927. She was the first woman president of the American Philosophical Association, and one of the few people to be elected president of both that APA and its sister, the American Psychological Association, after the two associations became two separate academic societies.⁵ Yet, despite these accomplishments, she is not well known today.⁶

Here is the plan for the remainder of the essay. In section 2, I will offer a preliminary characterization of absolute idealism. In section 3, I will discuss Calkins's views on the nature of the Absolute. In section 4, I will discuss how the Absolute relates to finite persons. In section 5, I will critically discuss two of Calkins's arguments for her version of absolute idealism, both of which turn on claims about the metaphysics of relations.

2. Absolute Idealism

All absolute idealists are committed to the claims that (i) there is a unique entity, the Absolute, that is in some way metaphysically prior to all other entities and (ii) that this entity is appropriately characterized as fundamentally mental in nature, rather than fundamentally material, fundamentally material and mental, or fundamentally neither. But in what way the Absolute is prior and the kind of mentality enjoyed by it are contested issues. Moreover, it is clear that absolute idealists must be committed to more than merely (i) and (ii), since all theists also accept that there is a unique entity that is in some way metaphysically prior to all others, who is appropriately thought of as mental. The absolute idealist also accepts that (iii) fundamentally everything is mental in nature, and the theist might not accept (iii). But again, a theist of a Berkeleyan or Leibnizian persuasion would, but they are not absolute idealists.⁷

p. 144 Many absolute idealists deny that the Absolute is a person, and this distinguishes them from classical theists who view God as a Supreme Person. Calkins is explicit that the Absolute is a person. (Whether the

Absolute is appropriately thought of as a God is also up for dispute; we will return to this question later.) The further thesis that distinguishes *all* absolute idealists from Berkeleyan or Leibnizian theists is that (iv) nothing is *distinct* from the absolute. Two things are *distinct* in this technical sense just in case they are numerically distinct, and neither is a part of the other, an aspect or feature of the other, or an abstraction from some fact about the other. On both the Berkeleyan and Leibnizian versions of idealism, human persons are distinct from (yet still dependent on) God, and hence those views are not properly classified as versions of absolute idealism.

We've now identified four theses that jointly distinguish absolute idealism from other doctrines it might be conflated with. But these theses are highly general, and each allows for a myriad of ways in which they might be made specific. In section 3, I will discuss how Calkins's version of absolute idealism puts flesh on the bare-bones statement of absolute idealism just provided.

3. The Nature of the Absolute

Calkins is an advocate of *personalism*, the view that reality is fundamentally personal in nature. On her version of absolute idealism, the Absolute is strictly and literally a person, and we are finite persons that are among the Absolute's parts.⁸ Many contemporaneous idealistic views deny this; some hold that the Absolute is, in a sense, less than a person, and many hold that the Absolute is, in a sense, more than a person. We'll discuss representatives of both positions in turn.

According to McTaggart, reality as a whole consists in persons, that is, reality as a whole decomposes into persons and parts of persons, the latter of which are states of persons, such as perceptions and episodes of love.⁹ But reality as a whole is merely a unified collection of persons, not a person, for McTaggart declares that no person can be a part of another person.¹⁰ Note that McTaggart does not accept this claim because he thinks that persons are mereologically simple. Far from it! Every person has infinitely many parts, none of which is mereologically simple.¹¹

p. 145 McTaggart merely declares the thesis that no person can be a part of a person rather than argues for it.¹² Interestingly, many contemporary philosophers find McTaggart's thesis plausible.¹³ But even if direct arguments for McTaggart's thesis are not to be found, analogies that might support or conflict with his intuition can be considered. Some kinds of entities—such as cities—do not seem capable of being parts of something of the same kind. Others are: business corporations can be parts of other business corporations.¹⁴

By contrast, Calkins has two arguments that persons can be parts of other persons. First, she appeals to the phenomenon of what was then called 'multiple personality disorder.'¹⁵ According to Calkins, it is not implausible that those afflicted with this disorder have many selves. Second, Calkins (1927a: 467) notes that many of us think of our past selves as being in some way non-identical with us and yet not distinct. My past self, who I barely remember, is a (temporal) part of me but is not all of me; nonetheless, my past self is a person. And within me, I have a conservative self and a liberal self, but I am able to reconcile those parts of me.¹⁶

Interestingly, there is a second point of conflict between McTaggart and Calkins. McTaggart (1918: 86) argues that, if the Absolute really is a person as opposed to a unified system of persons, then one ought to also say that social groups with sufficient degrees of unity, such as societies, colleges, and gangs of thieves, are also persons. But this is not so. Calkins (1920) concedes that, if absolute idealism is true, one barrier to the claim that, e.g., societies, are persons has been eliminated, since persons can be parts of other persons, but she nonetheless argues both that the proponent of personalist absolute idealism needn't think that such collections do constitute persons and in fact they should probably deny that they do.¹⁷

For a second version of the view that the Absolute is impersonal, let us consider Calkins's (1927a: 348–51) interpretation of Schopenhauer, according to which ultimate reality consist in the Will. On Calkins's interpretation, there is an Absolute and it consists in its act of willing. I say that this view is a view on which the Absolute is sub-personal, since although persons are capable of willing, they are capable of many other mental activities, and persons are not to be identified with their acts of willing. This is in fact the crux of Calkins's (1927a: 358–9) criticism of Schopenhauer's metaphysics. Calkins (1927a: 359) claims that Schopenhauer conceives of the Absolute as a person, but with little basis then denies of this person the attributes that all other persons enjoy.

p. 146 Let us now turn to a representative of the view that the Absolute is, in some sense, more than a person. On Calkins's (1927a: 325) interpretation of Fichte, Fichte is an absolute idealist who denies that the Absolute is a person on the grounds that all persons are limited while the Absolute is without limits, and so the Absolute cannot be a person. Calkins (1927a: 328) claims that Fichte believes that the Absolute is what she calls "an impersonal I," but the notion of an impersonal I is contradictory: nothing can be an 'I' or a 'self' and yet be impersonal.

Why think that personhood implies limitation? All persons are selves, and Calkins often talks of selves as conscious beings who are aware of their persistence, capable of change, related to an environment, and who are unique and irreplaceable.¹⁸ Calkins's (1927a: 427) conception of what it is to be unique and irreplaceable seems to commit her to a kind of haecceitism: a person is a "this or a that" and "a reality which cannot be replaced by another, however like it or qualitatively identical with it."¹⁹ In short, a person who is qualitatively indiscernible from me is not necessarily me.²⁰ Calkins (1927a: 330, 335, 455) denies that all persons are limited, since, to be without limits is to be not limited by anything distinct from oneself, but this is consistent with being limited by oneself in such a way as to satisfy the requirements for personhood.²¹

Given how Calkins characterizes selfhood, has Calkins adequately responded to the claim that the Absolute cannot be a person? Regardless of whether Calkins has properly conceived of *being limited*, the key issue is whether the Absolute has the qualities that Calkins attributes to selves. In reverse order, although (I assume) the Absolute is unique in the sense that it has no possible duplicates distinct from itself, this also guarantees that haecceitism is trivially false of the absolute. Probably Calkins should reply that haecceitism is only a consequence of how she understands uniqueness given that the person in question contingently exists. Since nothing is distinct from the Absolute, it seems that the Absolute has no environment. But perhaps Calkins could respond that a person's environment consists in those things numerically distinct from her that are also related to her, and if so, the Absolute has an environment.

p. 147 Change and persistence are trickier to address. Calkins (1927a: 46) explicitly states that the Absolute shares our experience of change, but does not itself change.²² Moreover, from the Absolute's perspective, nothing is past, present, or future. Since the Absolute does not change, it cannot have an experience of itself as changing, at least given the assumption that all of its experiences are veridical. Moreover, one might worry that since, from the Absolute's perspective, nothing is past, present, or future, nothing really is past, present, or future. As far as I am aware, Calkins does not explicitly discuss the questions of whether time is real, and whether time is real only if there are genuine distinctions between past, present, and future. But, as we will discuss in section 4, she does use the perspective of the Absolute as a criterion of truth, which suggests that she is committed to there being no real distinction between past, present, and future. But if nothing is past, present, or future, is time itself unreal?²³ If time is unreal, how could the Absolute have an awareness of its persistence?²⁴

What these considerations suggest is that Calkins should not take it to be definitional that selves are conscious beings who are aware of their persistence, capable of change, related to an environment, and who are unique and irreplaceable. Instead, to be a self is simply to be a conscious being, and to be a person is to

be a self who is aware of itself and its features. In earlier work, Calkins (1900: 495) claimed that the self is indefinable, though selves can be described as having the features she listed.²⁵ My suggestion is that Calkins should say that the characteristics that Calkins mentions are true of limited and embodied persons but not necessarily true of all persons.

The Absolute is neither limited nor embodied. According to Calkins (1927a: 456), bodies are complexes of sensations, ideas, and other mental phenomena. My body serves as a sign to others that I exist.²⁶ I am not my body; instead I have a body. But Calkins (1930: 204) denies that every physical object must correspond exactly with a self that has that body. She notes that a leaf might be a mere complex of sensations rather than an entity that either is or corresponds to a self, and this is one respect in which her view differs from a kind of panpsychism or animism.²⁷ And there is no reason to attribute to the Absolute a body.²⁸ Calkins (1927a: 146–7) claims that each of us can directly know that the Absolute exists by virtue of our partial identity with the Absolute, and so there is no need for the Absolute to have a sign of its existence.²⁹

It is not clear how it is that, since I am a part of the Absolute, I can directly know the existence of the Absolute. Suppose that Calkins's suggestion that I have had many parts who are themselves persons is correct. Consider my present self. Does he know that a (finite) person numerically distinct from it exists? And in general does one know that one is *not* one's present self, but rather contains it as a part? And if one can know the existence of a person directly when one is a part of that person, don't we have a strong reason to think that societies, corporations, and so forth are not persons, insofar as one can easily doubt that these things are properly thought of as single entities at all? (But wouldn't this be a rather strange argument for the conclusion that societies, etc. are not persons?)

p. 148 Calkins does give an argument for the existence of the Absolute that begins from self-knowledge. First, Calkins (1927a: 422, 455) claims that I know from experience that I have limits, and hence there must be something that is distinct from me. But in order for there to be something distinct from me, there must be a relation between me and it, and this is possible only if there is an Absolute. We will explore Calkins's views about relations further in section 5.

Suppose that there is an Absolute person. One pressing question concerns the moral status of this being: is the Absolute a morally good person? Bradley (1930: 363–5, 371, 380) argues that good and evil are themselves appearances. And for that reason, Bradley (1930: 386) holds that the Absolute is above good and evil. If so, the question of whether the Absolute is good is a poor question to ask, though Bradley (1930: 365) grants that, in a sense, the Absolute can be said to be good.

However, Calkins (1927a: 461–4) argues that the correct account of what it is to be supremely good implies that the Absolute is morally good.³⁰ According to Calkins (1918: 21), to be good—that is, to be a good person—is to will what is supremely good. But, according to Calkins, value in general necessarily requires the existence of persons who value; in slogan form, “value requires valuers.”³¹ This is because, for Calkins (1918: 200), to value, to desire, and to will are the same, and to be good is simply to be valued, willed, or desired by some person.³² Calkins (1927a: 463–4) claims that to be intrinsically or finally good is to be what she calls “an ultimate object of the will”: it is to be that which is willed for its own sake rather than for the sake of something else, and to be such its nature suffices to explain why it is desired.³³ And this is why she at least provisionally claims that for a person to be good is for her to will that “which to him is good” and that a man is good or bad to the extent that he measures up to the subjective standards that he holds.³⁴ On this view, the Absolute is morally good to the extent it measures up to what it ultimately values, and Calkins thinks that this must be the case. Calkins (1927b: 578) also seems attracted to the idea that to be supremely good is to be an ultimate object of a divine or absolute will. It seems to me that this view also makes it likely that the Absolute is morally good, since there is nothing to prevent it from acting in accordance with what it supremely values, and a failure to do so would imply that it is limited in a way that seems inconsistent with

its status as an Absolute. What is the supremely valuable state? According to Calkins (1918: 145), it is maximal desirable consciousness for the entire realm of selves.³⁵

p. 149 Given that the Absolute is an unlimited (or self-limited) morally good person, should we conclude that the Absolute is a god? According to Calkins (1927a: 466), there are “two significant considerations that forbid the identification of Absolute with God.” Note that Calkins omits the “the” in “the Absolute” here, which suggests that she is more interested in the extent to which the concept of God and the concept of an Absolute are identical rather than the extent to which the Absolute is God. This impression is confirmed at the bottom of p. 466, where she concludes that the terms “Absolute” and “God” are not synonyms. Here are her reasons for denying that they are conceptually equivalent. First, the existence of the Absolute is known, and known through theoretical reasoning, and needn’t be the object of a religious emotion or desire. Second, a religious worshipper might think of God as distinct from everything else, but one cannot think of the Absolute as being distinct from everything else.

Granted, the concepts are distinct. But is the Absolute a God? I am unaware of whether Calkins definitively answers this question.

4. The Absolute Person and Finite Persons

Let us now turn to the question of how the Absolute Person relates to finite persons. In order to assess this question, it will be useful to first articulate the outlines of Calkins’s views about philosophy and metaphysics. First, Calkins’s (1930: 199) conception of philosophy is that it consists wholly in metaphysics; other sub-disciplines of philosophy, such as ethics or aesthetics, are properly construed as normative branches of psychology, and perhaps some parts of logic and epistemology are as well.³⁶ That inquiry which is distinctively philosophical is metaphysical inquiry. According to Calkins (1927a: 9; 1930: 199), metaphysics is concerned with the question of what is ultimately real rather than real but merely derivatively so.

Let us first assess what Calkins has in mind by the expression “ultimately real.” Calkins does think that the Absolute Person is the sole entity that is ultimately real. Is to be ultimately real to have the highest amount (or form?) of reality? Are finite persons then to some *degree* less real?

Consider Bradley (1914: 448), who clearly and explicitly accepts that there are degrees of reality or being; he notes that if forced to reject degrees of reality, his position would amount to the view that there is exactly one object, the Universe-as-a-Whole. On Bradley’s view, in a sense, there are selves if they are understood as finite centers of the Experience that is the Absolute, but selves are not fully real, and the conception of the Absolute as consisting of selves is not fully true.³⁷

p. 150 But, unlike Bradley, I do not see any reason to attribute the view that there are degrees of reality to Calkins. First, I have found no direct textual evidence for this attribution, and so the primary reason for doing so would be based on the claim that an appeal to degree of reality is the best way to distinguish between the ultimately real and the derivatively real: that is, to take the ultimately real to be the most real. I personally find this account of ultimate and derivative reality attractive; in McDaniel (2013), I argue for it. But the positive case for attributing this view to Calkins is rather weak. Second, there is textual evidence against attributing this view to Calkins; Calkins (1919b: 125) seems to claim that selves (in the plural) are among the fully real. This suggests that the Absolute Person does not have *more reality* than finite ones: the Absolute Person is ultimately real but it has no more reality than its finite personal parts.

So we need a different interpretation of Calkins. Many philosophers accept a relation of grounding or metaphysical priority between entities that does not imply that the metaphysically prior has more reality

than the metaphysically posterior.³⁸ Calkins appears to be one of these philosophers: we are all proper parts of the Absolute Person and are grounded in the Absolute Person without being less real than the Absolute Person.³⁹ In the terminology of Schaffer (2010), she is a *priority monist*.

But it is not merely that the Absolute Person grounds the finite persons that are its parts. There is more to be said about how the Absolute Person grounds us. This relation of grounding is realized, albeit obscurely, in her metaphysics via the claim that finite persons are expressions of the will of an infinite self.⁴⁰ According to Calkins (1927a: 471), each of us is “distinctly willed” by the Absolute Person. Although these remarks are obscure, I think we can make some sense of them. We shouldn’t view these remarks as implying that we are the external consequences of actions of the Divine Person. We might be tempted to think this, since in the typical case, what we will is an action that brings about a change in our external environment. But since the Absolute Person has no external environment, this cannot be what Calkins means. But not all acts of will are directed toward changes in our environments: each of us also often wills that he or she be a certain way. I suspect that Calkins has this in mind and that on her view, each of us is the result of the Absolute Person’s willing that It be a certain way.

p. 151 There is still a puzzle to be confronted. To see this, let’s first discuss the conditions under which I can have desires directed toward particular objects. I can will that I be a certain way because I exist antecedent to my act of will, and so I am available to serve as the focal point of a desire. In general, I can will that some particular object be some way because I have an antecedent acquaintance with that particular object, or at least have some way of uniquely specifying it. But if I lack either of these with respect to an object to which a desire could be directed, I cannot have desires *about* that object. I can desire \hookrightarrow that there be some object or other that is some particular way, but I cannot desire of that particular object that it be that way.

How then can the Absolute’s willing that itself be a certain way ground me or the fact that I exist? Let us grant that we can conceive how an agent for which there is no division of past, present, and future can nonetheless will that it be a certain way, and that as a consequence of its act of will, there is a person with my qualities and (apparent?) spatial and temporal locations. But why is this result *me* rather than someone else with the same qualities? Given the understanding of uniqueness and irreplaceability suggested earlier, an efficacious will that there be a person with my qualities does not guarantee that the person is me.

I see two ways to respond to this worry. The first response is to accept a kind of haecceitism for acts of will. For any unique and irreplaceable person, there is a unique and irreplaceable act of will. On this response, there are two possible acts of will that are qualitatively indiscernible but numerically distinct, and each of which is responsible for the existence of a possible person—and these possible persons are themselves qualitatively indiscernible but numerically distinct. Frankly, this strikes me as an unlovely solution.

The second response is to deny that grounding induces necessitation: that is, there are cases in which x grounds y , but it is not necessary that x grounds y and it is not necessary that if x exists, then y exists. I am grounded in an act of will of the Absolute Person, and this suffices for me to be a derivative entity. But that act of will of the Absolute Person does not necessitate that its product be me. Whether grounding does induce necessitation is a subject of intense debate in the contemporary literature.⁴¹ Perhaps Calkins’s best response is to take a side in this debate.

Suppose that we are the consequences of acts of will by the Absolute. We are also agents who will. Is our free will compromised by our ontological status? The concern is that the desires of the Absolute dictate who we are and what we do, but we do not have control over what the Absolute desires. And hence we do not have control over who we are and what we do.⁴²

Some forms of compatibilism quickly resolve the worry facing Calkins. If, for example, a free action just is an action that is done without serious external compulsion and is caused by one’s desires that are not the

result of a psychological disorder, Calkins's version of absolute idealism does not threaten our freedom. The Absolute might will that we will what we do, but nonetheless what we do is often freely done.

p. 152 However, Calkins seems to reject compatibilism, although I am not aware of texts in which she explicitly states that she rejects it.⁴³ Calkins (1927a: 474) claims that the personalist substitutes 'the myth of rigid scientific law' with a conception of laws as statistical, and the surrounding discussion suggests that she conflates determinism with the denial of free will. And her response to the specific worry for freedom that her version of absolute idealism seems to generate also suggests that an absence of (in some sense prior) sufficient conditions for a person's action is necessary for that action to be free.⁴⁴ Calkins (1927a: 478–9) claims that absolute idealism is compatible with our having free will because, although the Absolute wills that I am, some of what I do is not willed to be done by the Absolute, but rather is merely permitted by the Absolute. So although my existence is the result of the will of the Absolute, not every aspect of my nature is.⁴⁵

5. Two Arguments from Relations

We have now carefully stated the contours of Calkins's absolute idealism. In this section, we will critically evaluate two arguments for this position, both of which turn on claims about the nature of relations. Concerns about the metaphysics of relations were one focal point of metaphysical discussion during the period in which Calkins wrote, and unsurprisingly these concerns are live for her.⁴⁶ Perhaps we are blasé about relations now, but for vast swaths of the history of philosophy, relations were viewed with puzzlement and suspicion. It is worth keeping this in mind in order to see why Calkins would have sympathy for the arguments to come.

Both arguments turn on a rejection of the idea that relations can be 'external.' But the way they reject this idea differs in the two arguments. Rather than painstakingly detail the various senses that have been (let alone could have been) given to the terms 'external relation' and 'internal relation,' I'll simply state the respective arguments. Neither statement makes ineliminable use of potentially contested terminology.⁴⁷

p. 153 The first argument for idealism is based on the premise that, in general, no relation can obtain between two things unless there is a qualitative commonality between the two things; relations are not instantiated independently of the 'inner properties' of things, and hence in this sense all relations are 'internal.'⁴⁸ The second premise is that a necessary condition of qualitative commonality is being of the same basic ontological kind. The third premise is that we are not material entities, but rather are mental entities, and that mental entities and material entities do not belong to the same basic ontological kind. (Note that this premise does not by itself imply idealism, since it is consistent with it that some form of dualism is true.) The fourth premise is that there is a relation of *knowing* between a person and an object of knowledge, the latter of which is a *thing* rather than, e.g., a proposition.⁴⁹ (Perhaps the kind of knowledge invoked here is better described as one that involves *acquaintance* with things, since it does not seem to be straightforwardly a propositional attitude.) It follows from these four premises that everything that we have knowledge of is a mental entity rather than a material entity. One of the things we have knowledge of is reality as a whole. So reality as a whole is a mental entity.

From the absolute idealist's standpoint, there are two notable weaknesses in this argument. The first weakness is that one might grant the premises about relations but claim instead that we are material entities rather than mental entities, and derive materialism rather than idealism as a conclusion. This is not to say that this argument is without interest, but merely to say that even if we set aside the contentious claims about the metaphysics of relations, other concerns remain. Second, the conclusion of this argument is some form of idealism but not necessarily absolute idealism, let alone personalistic absolute idealism. If

each of us is, strictly speaking, a mere bundle of ideas rather than a unified person who has these ideas, then the argument licenses a form of Humean idealism according to which we are merely bundles of ideas.⁵⁰

That said, Calkins (1927a: 451–2) does accept arguments for moving from some form of idealism to personalistic absolute idealism. The first such argument is based on the possibility of error. Obviously, some of our beliefs are false. But given idealism, what makes a belief false? What is the standard for correctness? According to Calkins, a statement can be said to be in error only if it is inconsistent with someone else's (true) experience. There are at least as many possible errors as there are finite individuals, and so in order for there to be an ultimate standard for correctness of belief, there must be an absolute person: to be correct is to be in accordance with the judgments of this person.⁵¹

p. 154 The second argument for moving from idealism to absolute idealism is based on the claim that otherwise the idealist cannot avoid a kind of solipsism.⁵² Calkins (1927a: 14,6–7, 454) claims that what is epistemologically first is our knowledge of ourselves and our own experiences.⁵³ How then can we know of the existence of anything beyond us? According to Calkins, we know that we are limited, and hence we know that there is ↪ something more than us, and we know that this something must be such that it can relate us to other things, including persons. Calkins seems to think that, in order for it to have this capacity, this something beyond us must itself be a person. Since this argument is closely connected to the second argument from the metaphysics of relations, I will now turn to the second argument, rather than pursue this particular train of thought further.

Here is the second argument from relations.⁵⁴ The first premise is that a relation can relate two objects only if (i) those two objects are parts of the same whole, and (ii) this whole can serve as the 'intermediary' of this relation.⁵⁵ Calkins (1927a: 448) notes that one might think that spatial relations are a counterexample to this premise, since one might claim that spatial relations can directly relate two things independently of whether they are parts of larger whole. But this is mistaken: two things can be spatially related only if they are embedded in a larger context, space as a whole. The spatial relations between, e.g., a hand and a desk, are not direct, but rather obtain in virtue of the structure of space.

The second premise is that only a person can serve as an intermediary of a given relation; the slogan is "relations require a relater."⁵⁶ As noted earlier, like many philosophers prior to her, Calkins finds the metaphysics of relations mysterious, but she does think that there is one context in which we know with certainty that things are related to one another: when we attend to our own experiences, we find various relations between these experiences.⁵⁷ But these relations are not ones that the experiences could flat-out bear to each other without being embedded in a larger context. Rather, the possibility that they are thus related requires the presence of a conscious being to contain them, to serve as their 'intermediary,' that is, the medium in which these relations can obtain. According to Calkins (1927a: 427), the self "must be regarded ... as the relater, or unifier, of the different parts or aspects of itself." This is the only model for how relations could obtain that is intelligible to us. Since in general there are relations between things, there must be an absolute person that contains all those things that are related to each other.

p. 155 How well do these two arguments fit together? If the idea that the relations require a relater is right, why can't a relater relate regardless of the intrinsic features of the objects in question? Where does the restriction come from? If relations are the result of an activity of the mind—a relating of things—why can't this mind relate things regardless of their nature? I can say, for example, that the number 2 is not identical with my dog Ranger. If non-identity is among those relations that require a relater, then this relater ↪ can relate things of fundamentally different ontological categories. This suggests that there is a tension between the two arguments.

I think this tension can be resolved. Calkins could say that, in order for a relater to relate some objects, these objects must be *internal* to the relater in the sense that they are not distinct from the relater but rather are

parts of the relater. Hence these objects are in some sense of the same basic kind as the relater, and hence of the same basic kind as each other. If this is the case, then instead of there being a tension between the two arguments, the first argument presupposes the results of the second argument rather than constituting a distinct second argument.

These two arguments are not the only arguments for idealism defended by Calkins. And considerations of space prevent me from detailing her responses to the anti-idealists of her time. Fortunately, Calkins is a clear writer and her arguments are typically presented in a straightforward manner, which probably partially explains the popularity of Calkins (1927a). Her work can be read with pleasure should you choose to do so.⁵⁸

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Notes

- 1 Compare with Mander (2011: 126–32).
- 2 This is not to say that such figures deserve their place on the margins. For careful reflections on the history of women philosophy in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States, see Rogers (2009). See also Kuklick (1979: 590–4).
- 3 See McDonald (2003: 113–14), Rogers (2009: 168), and Seigfried et al. (1993), the last of which contains a copy of the letter the Harvard Philosophy Department submitted on her behalf—a letter that stresses that her “scholarly intelligence” was exceptionally high when compared with almost all of the successful recipients of the Ph.D. Furumoto (1980) provides further details on the difficulties Calkins (and American women in general) confronted while navigating a life in academia.
- 4 These figures come from Rogers (2009: 168), who notes that she also published twenty book reviews as well. A lengthy bibliography of Calkins’s works can be found in McDonald (2006).
- 5 See McDonald (2006: 1) and Rogers (2009: 168). A brief biographical statement by the American Psychological Association can be found here: <http://www.apa.org/about/governance/president/bio-mary-whiton-calkins.aspx>.
- 6 See Rogers (2009) for a plausible, albeit depressing, explanation for her relative neglect. McDonald (2006: 1–4) briefly describes the extant scholarship on Calkins up to 2006; since then, I have been unable to find more than a small handful of additional articles that discuss Calkins’s work. For brief biographies of Calkins, see Kersey (1989: 67–8), Wentworth (1999), and Zedler (1995: 103–4, 111–12).
- 7 It is an interesting question whether Spinoza counts as an absolute idealist on this account. I think not, since on my view, Spinoza’s God is not fundamentally mental in nature, but rather fundamentally mental and material and ... (The ellipsis alludes to the infinite attributes Spinoza’s God enjoys that escape our acquaintance.) Thanks to Kenny Pearce for discussion here.
- 8 See Calkins (1920: 683) and Calkins (1927a: 442).
- 9 See McTaggart’s “An Ontological Idealism” in his (1934) for a representative statement of his view, and McDaniel (2009) and Mander (2011: 369–76) for an overview of McTaggart’s philosophical system.
- 10 See McTaggart (1906: 220). In McTaggart (1927: 401), he endorses the logically stronger claim that selves or persons cannot even mereologically overlap; he claims that this is an ultimate synthetic a priori claim. A similar claim is made in McTaggart (1934: 92–6). In McTaggart (1918: 82–8), there are direct arguments that the Absolute cannot be a person that are independent of the general claim that persons cannot mereologically overlap.
- 11 This is because, for McTaggart (1921: ch. 22), nothing has a mereologically simple part since there are no mereological simples.
- 12 See also Leighton (1964: 146–8).
- 13 For examples, see Hudson (2001: 127) and Sider (2001: 357).
- 14 See Mander (2011: 388–90) for further discussion; the analogies mentioned here are taken from this text.
- 15 See Calkins (1927a: 468). For contrasting takes on the relevance of this phenomenon to absolute idealism, see Bradley (1914: 436, fn. 1) and McTaggart (1927: section 404).
- 16 See also Calkins (1918: 12–13), Calkins (1927a: 450–1), and Zedler (1995: 116).
- 17 See also Calkins (1918: 194–6).
- 18 Some relevant texts from are Calkins (1908c: 273–4), Calkins (1919b: 128–9), and Calkins (1920: 682). See also McDonald (2007) for an extensive discussion of Calkins’s views on personhood.
- 19 Note that Calkins (1927a: 417) explicitly claims that qualitatively identical things can be numerically distinct.
- 20 But see McDonald (2006: 17) for a much less metaphysical reading of what Calkins means by ‘uniqueness.’
- 21 See also Calkins (1930: 213–14).
- 22 See also Calkins (1930: 212–13) and McDonald (2007: 759).
- 23 Whether time is unreal was a matter of controversy among the idealists; both McTaggart (1908) and Bradley (1930: chapter IV) deny the ultimate reality of time, although McTaggart’s denial is more straightforward than Bradley’s. See McDaniel (2009) for a discussion of McTaggart’s views on time and McDaniel (forthcoming) for comparisons of the position of McTaggart and Bradley.
- 24 Calkins could hold that although time is real, the division into past, present, and future is not. This is arguably the dominant view in contemporary philosophy of time, where it is called ‘the B-theory.’ See Mellor (1998) for a contemporary

- defense of the B-theory.
- 25 See also Zedler (1995: 108–9).
- 26 See also Calkins (1930: 214).
- 27 See also Zedler (1995: 113–14).
- 28 See McDonald (2006: 76–7) for further discussion.
- 29 McDonald (2003: 115–16) says that Calkins’s idealism is grounded on direct experiential knowledge of the self.
- 30 See also Calkins (1930: 215) and McDonald (2007: 759–60).
- 31 See Calkins (1919b: 121–2), Calkins (1927a: 401), Calkins (1928), and McDonald (2007: 759–60).
- 32 See Calkins (1918: 32–9). Bradley (1930: 356) also suggests a close connection between goodness and desire: “good, in the proper sense, implies the fulfillment of desire.”
- 33 In Calkins (1918: 75), she claims that the good is the object which the willing subject sets before himself as supreme and self-explanatory.
- 34 See Calkins (1918: 35, 39). See also McDonald (2006: 94–5), who also notes that Calkins discusses how to determine less ‘subjective’ standards for goodness.
- 35 See also McDonald (2006: 6–7).
- 36 See also Calkins (1918: 192–3) for a discussion of the relation of ethics, which she there calls a normative science but not a (part of) philosophy, to metaphysics.
- 37 See Bradley (1914: 245–6) for an instance of the claim that the Absolute is Experience. See Bradley (1930: 64–104) for Bradley’s views on the nature of selves. See also Bradley (1914: 432), where he denies that a personal God is to be found in Absolute reality. For these reasons, it seems inapt to describe Bradley as endorsing a personalistic version of absolute idealism, contrary to Calkins (1927a: 426). See also Mander (2011: 120), who analogizes Bradley’s view with Schopenhauer’s, and Sprigge (1998) for a defense of Bradley’s absolute idealism; Sprigge (1998: 194) also denies that the Absolute is a person.
- 38 See, e.g., Audi (2012: 118).
- 39 This view is suggested by Calkins (1927a: 442).
- 40 See Calkins (1927a: 146–7).
- 41 See, for example, Skiles (2015) for a defense of grounding without necessitation.
- 42 This employs a principle sometimes called “The Transfer of Powerlessness” in the free will literature: if P guarantees that I do A, and it is not under my control whether P obtains, and it is not under my control whether P guarantees that I do A, then it is not under my control whether I do A. See, e.g., van Inwagen (1983: 94–105) for a discussion.
- 43 That said, the remarks made in Calkins (1918: 13–15, 184) come very close to an explicit rejection of compatibilism.
- 44 By contrast, Bradley (1930: 385) characterizes the conception of free will as demanding that there be no antecedent determining conditions as “a mere lingering chimera.”
- 45 McDonald (2003: 115, 123) claims that Calkins is committed to determinism, because, as McDonald (2003: 123) puts it, “Calkins’s conception of the Absolute Self ... implies that the will of the Absolute Self determines the content of reality.” For the reasons discussed here, I do not think McDonald is correct.
- 46 Mander (2011: 89–93, 99–101, 104–11, 129–32) provides an excellent discussion of the problem of relations in T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley.
- 47 For further discussion of Calkins’s views on relations, see McDonald (2006: 55–8).
- 48 This is not to say that a relation simply reduces to the intrinsic properties of its relata; it is certainly not to say that a relation reduces to the intrinsic properties of one of its relata, a position rejected by Calkins (1930: 210).
- 49 See Calkins (1927a: 472).
- 50 Calkins (1927a: 426) refers to this type of idealism as “ideism.”
- 51 As Calkins notes, this argument has antecedents in Royce (2005: 350–3). See Trotter (2001: 4–12) for a discussion of Royce’s version of this argument. Brink suggests, in his introduction to Green (2003: xxvi–xxvii), a similar argument from error. Green (2003: 80) does argue that the existence of an absolute consciousness is necessary for each of us to have knowledge of facts independent of each of us.
- 52 See Calkins (1911: 451–2). Calkins (1927a: 146–7, 454) tells us that in order to avoid solipsism, the idealist should be a personalist absolutist. See also McDonald (2006: 53–6, 71–3) for further discussion.
- 53 See also Calkins (1911: 453).
- 54 I take this argument from Calkins (1927a: 442–8).
- 55 See Calkins (1920: 683–4), Calkins (1911: 452), in which she claims that there can be no relations between ultimately separate realities, and Calkins (1930: 209–11), in which she also invokes Bradley’s regress argument. See also McDonald (2006: 56–7).
- 56 See Calkins (1919a: 604–5) and Calkins (1920: 683–4). See Mander (2011: 93–4) for a discussion of a similar principle in T. H. Green.

- 57 See Calkins (1919a: 603–4). It might be profitable to compare with Green (2003: 33–4).
- 58 I thank two anonymous referees, David Bzdak, Neil Delaney, Tyron Goldschmidt, Dan Linford, Kenny Pearce, and Jonathan Schaffer for helpful comments on earlier drafts.