

**Jeffrey Blevins, “Absolutism, Relativism, Atomism: The ‘small theories’ of T.S. Eliot.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 40. 2 (2016): 94-111.**

This article traces T. S. Eliot’s intellectual development from F. H. Bradley’s absolutism to Bertrand Russell’s atomism, and then to his own relativism. It also analyzes the corresponding changes in Eliot’s poetry. Blevins offers ample evidence to show not only Eliot’s general attitude towards “small theories”, but also probes into his intricate relationship to them. One thorny issue about Eliot’s intellectual development is that he constantly changes his standpoint, sometimes to the degree of self-contradiction, and in his early works he is often too sceptical to believe in one philosophical system even when he uses it to attack another. Blevins notices the dynamic development of Eliot’s philosophical worldview, and in showing how Eliot cracks Bradley’s absolutism and Russell’s atomism he also notes the changes of Eliot’s attitude towards them, demonstrating Eliot’s efforts to amalgamate the two opposing theories into his poetic sensibility. As Blevins notes, Eliot sees Bradley’s and Russell’s works as not just philosophy, but also “as a style” (103).

It is worth noting that Eliot’s study of the absolute is not confined to F. H. Bradley’s version. According to Damayanti Ghosh, at Harvard Eliot enrolled on courses on Indian thought, especially Hinduism and Buddhism (*Indian Thought in T. S. Eliot*, 1971, 32). His major encounter with Henri Bergson’s philosophy offered him another approach to the understanding of the absolute, which occurred in 1911 according to Lyndall Gordon, before he finished the dissertation on Bradley (*T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, 1998, 55). Furthermore, his contemplation of the Christian absolute permeates most of his works. It is perhaps the comprehensive knowledge of the issue of the absolute that prevents him from totally abandoning Bradley’s philosophy, “especially the ‘spiritual’ side of it” (96). The major philosophical flaw Eliot finds in Bradley is that his vision of the absolute fails to penetrate the finite centres of experience, which Blevins describes as “[revealing] itself as atomistic” (100). In fact, in his dissertation, Eliot offers an alternative phrase, “point of view”, to replace Bradley’s “finite centres” (376). The idea of fusing different points of view helps Eliot form his own interpretation of the absolute, breaking the solipsism in Bradley’s absolutism.

Although Russell’s atomism is opposite to Bradley’s absolutism, Eliot discovers the same flaw in Russell as in Bradley. That which makes Bradley’s theory meagre is that which undermines Russell’s – the almost unconscious trust in their own feelings. Bradley’s bringing together the finite centres with only “an act of faith” is as damaging as Russell’s dealing with objects “which directly affect his sensibility” (100, 99). However, Eliot’s critical stand towards Russell is strategic. As Blevins points out, “Eliot inflates Russell’s atomism” for his own need to grow out of Bradley’s absolutism (99). As a poet, Eliot consciously – unlike the two targeted philosophers – applies his own sensibility to digest their theories and find a balanced relativism that, though “largely unsystematic,” is “self-styled” and suits his poetic need (98).

Eliot’s method of testing a philosophical idea with poetry is by no means philosophical, but it helps form what underpins his relativism – a sense of style. In other words, for Eliot, how life is lived is more important than defining life, and with the help of poetry, he bypasses both absolutism and atomism. The two early poems examined,

“First Debate between the Body and Soul” and “Spleen”, show how under the pressure and the empty promise of the absolute, the “vivacity” of life dissolves (98). The image of an old man is given full power in “Gerontion”, which, Blevins suggests, exemplifies the idea that “atomized decisions” only lead to “vicious repetition” without organization (101). This emphasis differs from the early poems, but the poet’s starting point remains the same: the direct experience of life. Blevins also painstakingly analyzes the “Sweeney” poems to show Eliot’s efforts to recognize the atomic world. The Eliotic relativism, as a “methodological bridge between Eliot’s philosophy and poetry,” concerns primarily the acts of organizing and reorganizing fragmented feelings, rather than imposing upon them a “bloodless” theory. In this sense, Eliot finds from Russel and Bradley what he needs to shape his poetic sensibility, as for him, the construction of a theory of relativism was perhaps less important.

All in all, this article, while comprehensively presenting Eliot’s sceptical attitudes towards both absolutism and atomism, also provides an insightful perspective that reads Eliot’s relativism as a methodology of poetic organization, not simply another small theory to be cracked. The subject of Eliot’s crossing the boundary between philosophy and poetry is handled deftly without claiming too much, though more contextual materials would have enhanced the argument. Finally, although Blevins’s article concentrates on the philosophical, the close proximity of the language of metaphysics and physics may well make it of interest to scholars of literature and science.

Chutian Xiao  
Durham University