

Virginia Woolf among the Apostles

S. P. ROSENBAUM
TORONTO UNIVERSITY

1. **A** conference on the topic of “Virginia Woolf among the Philosophers” might well begin, if not end, with a consideration of the philosophers she actually was among. All the philosophers that she knew were from Cambridge, and all but one were associated with a remarkable, secret society. The society was known formally as The Cambridge Conversazione Society, and informally as the Apostles, the brethren, or simply the Society. In her late memoir “A Sketch of the Past” Virginia Woolf includes it among the “invisible presences” impinging on her life. They impinged on her writing as well and need to be recognized in the philosophical interpretation of her work. First, however, it is necessary to say something about these philosophers and their brethren Virginia Woolf was among.
2. The one Cambridge philosopher not an Apostle was her father. Not many writers whose fiction and essays attract philosophical interest have had philosophers for fathers. Leslie Stephen, well-known as an agnostic, attempted in his family-centered *The Science of Ethics* (1882) to reconcile the nineteenth-century ethical philosophies of intuitionism and utilitarianism. The reconciliation was based on a Darwinian notion of evolving duty within that primitive relation that Stephen thought held people together: namely the family. The prominent Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick found, however, that *The Science of Ethics* had not really reconciled intuitionism with the modified liberal utilitarianism Stephen really favoured. Sidgwick, whom Stephen admired, was known to Virginia Woolf. She probably did not read his famous *The Methods of Ethics*, but she must have been aware of his efforts on behalf of women’s education at Cambridge (he helped found and continued to support Newnham). I will come back to Sidgwick.
3. “Read Mill” was Leslie Stephen’s cry at Cambridge, and his daughter had certainly read John Stuart’s autobiography along with his writings on liberty and on the subjection of women. She may have read the conservative critique of *On Liberty* by her uncle James Fitzjames Stephen (who was

an Apostle). But the cry of Virginia Stephen's Cambridge contemporaries was "Read Moore". G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* dismissed evolution as moral concept in Herbert Spencer's philosophy, and thus in Stephen's which he does not mention. Even without knowing Moore's criticism, Virginia would not have found a family-based ethics very satisfactory in theory or practice, though she remained an agnostic and committed to the freethinking and plain speaking that Leslie Stephen proclaimed in the title of a collection of essays.

4. Among the philosophers Virginia Woolf actually knew aside from her father, G. E. Moore, the man as well as the thinker, was the most impressive and influential. She read his celebrated *Principia Ethica* carefully and later came to know him well when he stayed with her and Leonard on various occasions. *Principia Ethica* is quoted in Virginia's first novel and a philosopher like Moore is alluded to (under the charming name of Bennett — no first name given) in both *The Voyage Out* and her next novel, *Night and Day*. The analytic, common-sense tone of Moore's philosophy was described by Leonard Woolf as astringent; he thought, as he wrote in his autobiography, that its purifying effect could be found "in the clarity, light, and absence of humbug in Virginia's literary style"¹ — qualities also to be found among her father's stylistic aims, it should be noted.
5. The influence of G. E. Moore's epistemology of philosophical realism on Virginia Woolf's assumptions in her fiction about the nature of consciousness was the subject of a long paper that I wrote some forty years ago — and included in a collection of essays on English literature and British philosophy by various critics. I tried to show there how Moore's dualistic emphasis on subjective immaterial consciousness and its objective, independent material contents underlie Virginia Woolf's fictive accounts of perception and what is perceived. Most familiarly this is expressed in *To the Lighthouse* when Mr. Ramsey's philosophy is described to the painter Lily Briscoe by his son as "Subject and object and the nature of reality"; and when she says she did not understand, he adds, "Think of the kitchen table [...] when you're not there."² Virginia Woolf's epistemological dualism is assumed in her novels in different ways — in *The Waves*, for instance, with its pageant of soliloquising consciousnesses set against the sea of time.
6. To the relevance of Moore's philosophy of sense perception needs to be added the significance of his principles for ethical presuppositions of Virginia Woolf's work. The character of Moore's influence has been much discussed by his disciples and others. John Maynard Keynes thought he and his friends adopted Moore's religion, as he called it, but ignored his morals: "nothing mattered except [...] timeless passionate states of contemplation and communions [...]"³ But Leonard Woolf disagreed, insisting

1 L. Woolf, *Beginning Again*, from *The Autobiography of Leonard Woolf*, 25.

2 V. Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, 23.

3 J. M. Keynes, *Two Memoirs*, 242.

their contemporaries were fascinated by questions of right and wrong and argued endlessly about the moral consequences of actions. Others have maintained Moore's impact was chiefly a matter of personality, but Moore's tough-minded Cambridge followers such as Keynes, Lytton Strachey, and Leonard Woolf cared very much about ideas as well as personalities.

7. The ethical principles of *Principia Ethica* were fundamental to Moore's influence. These have sometimes been reductively described, under Keynes's influence, as ideals of personal relationships and aesthetic pleasures. These ideals are fundamental to his moral philosophy, but their significance needs to be understood in the context of a basic ethical distinction that underlies the values not only in Virginia Woolf's work, but in Leonard's, as well as in the writings by their friends Keynes, Strachey, E. M. Forster, Desmond MacCarthy, Roger Fry — all Apostles — as well as Clive Bell, who was a devoted follower of Moore.
8. Moore's fundamental distinction is expressed in the preface to *Principia Ethica*. He explains there that he has attempted to distinguish two kinds of questions which moral philosophers claimed to answer but are mostly confused. In Moore's words, "These two questions may be expressed, the first in the form: What kind of things ought to exist for their own sakes? the second in the form: What kind of actions ought we to perform?"⁴ These are questions about ends and about means, about intrinsic and instrumental values, and they reverberate throughout the work of Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury friends as well as her own. They are implicit in her fiction and explicit in non-fiction works such as *A Room of One's Own*, with its means of £500 and its ends of rooms where women writers can think of things in themselves, or in the introduction to working women's memoirs where Virginia Woolf wrote of ladies desiring "things that are ends, not things that are means."⁵ Once she said to Vita Sackville-West, for whom Moore was the name of a novelist not a philosopher, that she, Virginia, had been "educated in the old Cambridge School", and concluded, "My dear Vita, we start at different ends,"⁶ meaning "ends" in more than one sense.
9. Distinguishing ends and means is a common enough practice in ethics, but what made the distinction revelatory for Moore's followers was his conception of intrinsic value. At the centre of Moore's ethic, for all its rigorous analytic rationalism, is a notion (derived from Henry Sidgwick) of good that is ultimate, intuitive, and indefinable. With it Moore undermined hedonistic, vitalistic, and evolutionary ethics. Also basic was Moore's conception (not in Sidgwick) of organic or complex wholes that were not merely the sum of their parts: as wholes their value might be more or less than their value as totalities. Aspects of these concepts of indefinable good and organic wholes are reflected in Virginia Woolf's fictive moments of

4 G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 1.

5 V. Woolf, "Introduction," *Life as We Have Known It*, xxvi.

6 V. Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*: 3, 86.

vision, as are Moore's ideal states of mind involving personal relations, aesthetic objects, and the pursuit of truth for its own sake.

10. Though Moore was the most important philosopher Virginia Woolf was among, his was certainly not the only philosophy she knew. She read Plato in Greek, and perhaps Plotinus, but Platonic influences are not easily disentangled, for they were also central to Moore's philosophy, as was Kant. Virginia Woolf did not, as far as is known, read Kant but she could hardly have escaped his significance. Moore's ethical emphasis on things in themselves is Kantian, and Kant's exposition of disinterestedness in aesthetics was central to Roger Fry's and Clive Bell's aesthetics, as Desmond MacCarthy pointed out after the first post-impressionist exhibition. Virginia Woolf also read Montaigne (on whom she wrote) and Rousseau, but not Bergson, as used to be supposed. The closest she may have come to Bergson's thought would have been through the writings by her sister-in-law before Karen Costelloe Stephen became a psychoanalyst. Later, if not earlier, Virginia read Freud whom the Hogarth Press was publishing. And in the English tradition besides Mill, she may have read Hobbes and Locke, probably Berkeley, and certainly Hume, his empiricism perhaps, his history, and also maybe his remarks on suicide.

11. After G. E. Moore, and closely associated with him initially was the most well-known philosopher Virginia Woolf found herself among was Bertrand Russell, whose significance for Woolf's work has been well argued by several commentators. It was not Russell the mathematical philosopher — though she knew his collaborator Alfred North Whitehead and his wife — but the author of *The Problems of Philosophy* and popularizing works of social and moral philosophy that Virginia Woolf was familiar with, including some wartime lectures she attended. As with Moore, but in very different ways, Russell's personality interested her, as she indicated in her diary in 1924:

His luminous, vigorous mind seems attached to a flimsy little car, like that on a glinting balloon. His adventures with his lives diminish his importance. He has no chin, & he is dapper. Nevertheless, I should like the run of his headpiece.⁷

12. Russell came to reject Moore's common-sense epistemology and his ethics, but he remained friends with the Woolfs, and in the Thirties they would publish two large volumes of his parents' letters and diaries, edited by Russell and his wife.

13. A third Cambridge philosopher Virginia Woolf was acquainted with has become the object of much attention and analysis. She did not read Ludwig Wittgenstein, though he read her. Even if she had not met him, Virginia would have known of Wittgenstein from Leonard, from Keynes, and particularly from her nephew Julian Bell, and Julian's satirical poem "An Epistle on the Subject of the Ethical and Aesthetic Beliefs of Herr Ludwig Wittgenstein (Doctor of Philosophy)". Despite the distance between

⁷ V. Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*: 2, 295.

Wittgenstein's misogyny and Virginia Woolf's feminism, one could speculate on the applicability of some of Wittgenstein's ideas in both his earlier and later thought to her fiction — his later conception of philosophy as description rather than explanation, for example. It is an idea he applied to aesthetics and criticism and is useful for an account of the philosophers Virginia Woolf knew.

14. Among the other Cambridge philosophers Virginia Woolf was acquainted with there was the older Idealist J. M. E. McTaggart who influenced Russell and Moore before their revolution of philosophical realism. Virginia would probably not have read any of McTaggart's mystical Hegelianism but may well have known his more popular critique of religious dogma. McTaggart's contemporary, the political philosopher Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, was a friend of the Woolfs. Virginia became impatient with Goldie's smooth prose abstractions, but he influenced Leonard's ideas about the League of Nations.
15. Not all the philosophers Virginia Woolf can be described as among were her elders. Two were contemporaries of Julian Bell's at King's College: Richard Braithwaite and the brilliant Frank Ramsey. Julian Bell's poem on Wittgenstein was originally addressed to Ramsey then he changed the dedication to Braithwaite after Ramsey's tragic early death. Virginia had met Ramsey, thought him a true Apostle, and would have heard more about him in the course of Julian's affair with his widow Lettice.
16. It is striking how all the Cambridge philosophers that Virginia Woolf knew or knew of at one time or another were connected with the Apostles — all, that is, but Leslie Stephen. His brother, Fitzjames, was a member, as was Fitzjames's son, the well-known comic poet J. K., who disturbed the Stephen household in his madness and died young. Virginia may have first read about the Apostles in Leslie's biography of Fitzjames, where the Society was described as a group cultivating "the freest discussion of all the great topics"⁸, except perhaps current political ones, and whose members were contemptuous of humbug and looked out for others with intellectual originality.
17. Founded in the early nineteenth century by twelve Cambridge evangelicals, the Apostles met weekly to discuss a paper by one of them usually on a topic with sceptical philosophic, religious, or moral implications. Sidgwick, McTaggart, Dickinson, Whitehead, Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, Braithwaite, and Ramsey were all Apostles. (Wittgenstein quit the Society as an undergraduate, and was ritually cursed, but Keynes brought him back so that he could properly resign after his return to Cambridge in

8 L. Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen*, 100.

1929.) And the influence of the Apostolic philosophers was extended and renewed for Virginia Woolf by her husband, her nephew, and her close Apostle friends Lytton Strachey, Maynard Keynes, Desmond MacCarthy, Roger Fry, E. M. Forster, and Saxon Sydney-Turner. (Duncan Grant, who did not go to Cambridge, was considered something like an adopted brother by some of them and later wrote an unpublished memoir on his amusing experiences among the Apostles.)

18. The Society was not just an undergraduate affair. An important feature of its discussions of it was the participation not just of undergraduate Apostles but others who had graduated and were either visiting or in residence, like Sidgwick, McTaggart, Dickinson, Moore, and for a time Russell. Annual Society dinners in London brought the Apostles together again, and Leonard's accounts of some of these are mentioned in Virginia's diaries. None of the Apostles — be they philosophers or friends — were, of course, women, though some now are.
19. The character of the Cambridge Conversazione Society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries appears in a famous account of the Apostles by Henry Sidgwick. As quoted by Leonard Woolf in his autobiography, Sidgwick described in a memoir the spirit of the Apostles
- [...] as the pursuit of truth with absolute devotion and unreserve by a group of intimate friends, who were perfectly frank with each other and indulged in any amount of humorous sarcasm and playful banter, and yet each respects the other, and when he discourses tried to learn from him and see what he sees. Absolute candour was the only duty that the tradition of the society enforced [...]. It was rather a point of the apostolic mind to understand how much suggestion and instruction may be derived from what is in form a jest — even in dealing with the gravest matters [...]. It came to seem to me that no part of my life in Cambridge was so real to me as the Saturday evenings on which the apostolic debates were held; and the tie of attachment to the society is much the strongest corporate bond which I have known in life.⁹
20. So wrote one of the university's leading philosophers and educational reformers whose whole career was spent in Cambridge. Sidgwick went on in his memoir, in a passage not quoted by Leonard Woolf, to note that it was his experience as an Apostle that led him years later to devote himself to philosophy.
21. Leonard Woolf observed autobiographically that all the Apostles of his generation would have agreed with every word of the quotation from Sidgwick. Leonard also noted that from time to time various Apostles came to dominate the society; Sidgwick was one, G. E. Moore another, and Lytton Strachey a third. Strachey and Keynes were critical of Sidgwick's endless Victorian religious doubts and his inhibited friendships as expressed in his memoir, but they were in accord with him about the spirit of the Apostles. And they continued to use Apostolic jargon to distinguish, in a Platonic cum Kantian way, reality from mere phenomenal appearance: real

⁹ L. Woolf, Sowing, from *The Autobiography of Leonard Woolf*, 129-130 .

people understood things valuable in themselves whereas inauthentic ones were preoccupied with appearances, with means rather than ends. Echoes of these distinctions are to be heard in Virginia Woolf's various uses of the word *real* and its cognates.

22. The influence of the philosophy and the philosophers of the Cambridge Apostles began in earnest for Virginia when Thoby Stephen invited his college friends to evenings in Bloomsbury where they met his sisters. Neither of Virginia's brothers nor her brother-in-law to be were Apostles, but a number of their Cambridge friends were. (Leonard, Lytton, and Saxon would regret not having elected Thoby to the Apostles.) The early death of Thoby Stephen intensified the friendships, with Vanessa and later Virginia marrying Thoby's college friends.
23. Following the dispersal of the First World War, the influence of Cambridge and the Apostles became manifested again in the Memoir Club started by Molly MacCarthy in 1920 to bring her old Bloomsbury friends together again and incidentally help her dilatory husband Desmond to write his memoirs. It is evident from her invitations to various prospective members that Molly — daughter and wife of Apostles — thought of the Club as a kind of continuation of the Society in London where their pursuit of truth could now to be carried on through memoirs and their ensuing discussions — among women now as well as the brethren and men such as Clive or Duncan who were not Apostles. The intimate friendship, truthful candour, and humour recalled by Sidgwick, were Apostolic characteristics of the Memoir Club, in addition to a feature not mentioned by him, namely its secret exclusiveness.
24. Meditating on the influence of what she called "invisible presences" in biography and autobiography while writing "Sketch of the Past", Virginia Woolf wonders why these were never analysed in memoirs. By "invisible presences"¹⁰ she means
- the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves, public opinion; what other people say and think; all those magnets which attract us this way to be like that, or repel us the other and make us different from that [...].¹¹
25. The influence of her mother (who did not want the vote) is her primary example but also referred to, though capable of less definite description, are "the influence on me of the Cambridge Apostles, or the influence of the Galsworthy, Bennett, Wells school of fiction, or the influence of the Vote, or of the War [...]."¹²
26. In her criticism Virginia discusses the limitations of Galsworthy, Bennett, and Wells as well as the impact of the war. As for the Cambridge Apostles, Virginia describes more definitely their felt presence in various

10 V. Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", *Moments of Being*, 80-81.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

writings, early and late, most specifically perhaps in her “Old Bloomsbury” memoir that she wrote for the the Memoir Club and other friends but never published.

27. Virginia Woolf read “Old Bloomsbury” to the Club in 1928 (it has been misdated earlier by biographers and editors). Among the audience were Apostolic friends and relatives. The memoir continued for a little her first memoir to the Club on life with father and step-brother George Duckworth at Hyde Park Gate. After Leslie Stephen’s death in 1904 and the move to Bloomsbury, Virginia’s memoir brings in the Apostles. In “Sketch of the Past” Virginia wondered if scene-making was the origin of her writing impulse, and it is in three scenes of “Old Bloomsbury” that she most vividly describes her recollection of the effect of Apostles on the lives of herself and Vanessa. The first scene is about the Thursday evenings when Thoby’s Cambridge friends joined his sisters in Bloomsbury. Out of these gatherings Virginia thought the Bloomsbury Group developed. At first Thoby’s friends – Lytton Strachey, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Ralph Hawtreay were silent, though Clive was not. Then a remark, about beauty by Vanessa perhaps, started a discussion which, culminating at two or three in the morning, resulted in a very important edifice that proved beauty was, or was not, part of a picture, Virginia was not quite sure which. Atmosphere in fiction was another topic, maintained successfully by Virginia against the scepticism of Cambridge.
28. Noting in her humorous account how she and Vanessa thought they derived the same kind of pleasure that undergraduates had with their friends at Cambridge, Virginia goes on,
- part of the charm of those Thursday evenings was that they were astonishingly abstract. It was not only Moore’s book had set us all discussing philosophy, art, religion; it was that the atmosphere [...] was abstract in the extreme.¹³
29. The philosophical origins of the Bloomsbury Group are being described here in the Apostolic discussions, that *Principia Ethica* stimulated, and in which Virginia now participated. Her memoir continues,
- It had been very austere, very exciting, of immense importance. A small concentrated world dwelling inside the much larger and looser world of dances and dinners had come into existence. It had already begun to colour the world and still I think colours the much more gregarious Bloomsbury which succeeded it.¹⁴
30. The progression from the first to the second chapter of Old Bloomsbury, as Virginia calls them, was divided by Thoby’s death, followed by Vanessa’s marriage to Clive. The “immense importance” of the discussions remained, if not the excitement and the abstract atmosphere. That immense importance is worth remembering in Virginia’s subsequent accounts of the Apostles.

13 V. Woolf, “Old Bloomsbury,” *Moments of Being*, 190-192.

14 *Ibid.*

31. The early talk in Bloomsbury was about philosophy, art, literature, religion, but not love and friendship — yet. That talk would involve Apostolic discussions of reality as distinguished from phenomenal appearance, though in a rather different sense, it was the absence of appearance that Virginia Woolf found odd. Thoby's friends criticized Virginia's and Vanessa's arguments but never seemed to notice the way the sisters looked, which had so obsessed their half-brother George Duckworth in Hyde Park Gate days. Not only that, but the friends themselves appeared shabby, even dingy. Henry James, for one, seeing Strachey and Sydney-Turner, wondered how Sir Leslie's daughters could have taken up such deplorable-looking young men. The answer was, among other things, a philosophic one.
32. Appearance and reality figure in the next scene of Virginia's "Old Bloomsbury" memoir. Although the austere, exciting, immensely important first chapter of Bloomsbury had ended with Vanessa's marriage, its atmosphere and ideals remained influential in the second chapter, but within a larger, looser social world. The time is five years later, the setting of the second scene the Cambridge college rooms of Lytton's younger brother James and his friends including Rupert Brooke. Virginia quotes from a recently recovered old diary. The young men's views were honest and simple, Virginia wrote there; they had no padding, and yet had nothing to say in response to her laborious talk. She then realizes not only her talk but her presence was being criticized, for though the young men wished for truth, "they doubted if I [her diary actually says 'a woman'] could speak it." And the later Edwardian Thursday evenings that Virginia and Adrian had tried to continue were boring failures, she was convinced, because there was no physical attraction between the sexes.
33. Then shifting her language for the post-war Georgians of the Memoir Club, Virginia tells her auditors that she had known there were buggers in Plato's Greece and suspected there were in Cambridge, but never realized they were also present at the Thursday evenings hosted by Thoby (it was not a question he could be asked). The abstract simplicity of the immensely important discussions about art or about truth, but never about love, was a consequence; the young men, it seems, discussed personal relations endlessly among themselves, but not in the presence of women.
34. The third scene of Virginia's memoir is the famous one in which Lytton Strachey, pointing to a stain on Vanessa's dress, inquires "semen?"
- With that word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down. A flood of the sacred fluid seemed to overwhelm us. Sex permeated our conversation.¹⁵
35. Nevertheless in 1912, writing to Lytton Strachey at Cambridge, Virginia still began "How difficult it is to write to you! It's all Cambridge — that detestable place; and the ap-s-les are so unreal, and their loves are so unreal..."

15 V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 195-196.

36. The advent of the older Apostle Roger Fry and the young Duncan Grant now fleshed out Bloomsbury conversations about art and beauty. No longer as austere and exalted, Virginia, her relatives and Apostle friends like Maynard Keynes encountered Ottoline Morrell's world of "lustre and illusion", which however also included another Apostle philosopher, namely Bertrand Russell. Russell in his autobiography claimed that with Strachey and Keynes the Apostles became a mutual admiration clique, among whom homosexual relations became common, though they were unknown in his time. Unknown to Russell, perhaps, but hardly to his Society brethren like Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson.
37. Their sexuality was not the only aspect of the Apostles that Virginia Woolf, despite her immense admiration for them, had misgivings about. She could tease Vita Sackville-West that she — Virginia — had been educated in the old Cambridge school, but she was acutely aware of how indirect that education had been. The differences between male and female education are remarked upon throughout her writing. As early as 1906 she was mocking the anonymous versifiers of *Euphrosyne* — an anthology by Thoby's friends most of whom were Apostles. She found there ironic evidence of the advantages women had in being educated at home and thus protected from "the omniscience, the early satiety, the melancholy self satisfaction" of men like the young poets who had been educated at Oxbridge. And as late as 1940 in her essay on the "leaning-tower" writers of the Thirties, as she calls them, Virginia contrasts the education in which they learned their art with the teaching received by women and other outsiders such as those of the workers' education association she was addressing. As an example of male education she quotes from a recent column of Desmond MacCarthy's in which he wrote of his old Moorean philosophical education (influenced perhaps by Keynes's recent memoir to the Memoir Club):
- We were not very much interested in politics. Abstract speculation was much more absorbing; philosophy was more interesting to us than public causes [...]. What we chiefly discussed were those "goods" which were ends in themselves [...] the search for truth, aesthetic emotions, and personal relations.¹⁶
38. Then, when MacCarthy complained in a later column, that Virginia should not have included herself among an audience of workers, she wrote him privately that her wretched little education was closer to her audience's than was his or Lytton's or Leonard's — a mere toadstool beside their towers. Yet it was by his Apostolic ideals that she measured her disadvantage.
39. Years earlier Virginia Woolf had quarrelled in print with MacCarthy over the supposed intellectual inferiority of women that Arnold Bennett had maintained in a book with which MacCarthy agreed in a favourable review.

16 V. Woolf, *Collected Essays*: 2, 167.

40. The attitudes of Bennett and MacCarthy may well have been behind Virginia Woolf's only published comment on the Apostles: an oblique satire on the Society entitled "A Society" that she included among the stories she brought out in 1921 but later decided against republishing. In "A Society" a group of young women form themselves into a society for asking questions, like the Apostles, except that they seek answers not in discussion but by examining the occupations of men. Some go disguised on a warship like the *Dreadnought* that Virginia had helped hoax before the war; others proceed to scholars' studies or businessmen's meetings; still others to libraries, concerts, galleries; and one (dressed as a man) reviews books by Bennett, Wells, etc. The women have all agreed that the ends of life "were to produce good people and good books" (the Apostles presumably being limited to the latter). Their inquiries try to determine how far men have achieved these aims, and the women of the Society vow, Lysistrata-like, to bear no children until they are satisfied with the answers. The war intervenes with questions of why men fight, then the members finish by discussing chastity and the great fallacy of male intellect. Finally the Society's papers are all presented to the tearful child that one of the members had borne in spite of the Society's resolve. Eventually they would be useful to the author of *Three Guineas*.

41. While writing the scattered satire of "A Society", Virginia Woolf was also composing her first modernist novel. The Cambridge of *Jacob's Room* is taken seriously and also amusingly. The characters, present and absent, are wholes and cannot, the narrator insists, simply be summed up. The discussions that Jacob has with his friends resemble in their generality those among the Apostles in London that Virginia would recount in her memoir. The light Cambridge sheds is symbolic as well:

So that if at night far out at sea over the tumbling waves one saw a haze on the waters, a city illuminated, a whiteness even in the sky, such as that now over the Hall of Trinity where there are still dining, or washing up plates, that would be the light burning there — the light of Cambridge.¹⁷

42. The words were quoted in 1941 by another Apostle writing of Cambridge: "How splendidly these words express our faith!" exclaimed E. M. Forster, who added laughingly, "How unlucky that they should have been written by a woman!"¹⁸ The same year Forster paid his Cambridge memorial tribute to Virginia Woolf in the lecture where, referring again to the light of Cambridge, he cherishes a fantasy that she had taken a degree disguised as Orlando. (Despite the efforts of reformers such as Henry Sidgwick, who died in 1900, women were not granted full Cambridge degrees until 1948.)

43. Ambivalence then characterizes the Apostles' visible and invisible presence in Virginia Woolf's work. On the meanings of reality that they were much concerned with, for example, she was forthright in *A Room of*

¹⁷ V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 33.

¹⁸ E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy*, 345-347.

One's Own. She concluded there that young women should “to live in the presence of reality” yet could not justify her belief in this, “for philosophic words, if one has not been educated at a university, are apt to play one false.”¹⁹ So she turns away from philosophical abstractions like those of the Apostles to writers who may live more than others in the presence of a reality that is “very erratic, very undependable”²⁰ as it fixes and makes permanent random physical events, groups in rooms, casual sayings, stars, omnibuses, shapes — whatever remains “when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge”²¹. Then comes the peroration which returns to Apostolic values: “Do not dream of influencing other people, I would say if I knew how to make it sound exalted. Think of things in themselves.”²²

44. At the end of the Twenties Virginia Woolf’s interest in the Apostles was renewed when Julian Bell became caught in their web — the image is his aunt’s. By then the topics of conversation in the Society had to do more with political issues, though Julian did have a brief affair with the Apostle Antony Blunt, later renowned as an art critic and — along with Guy Burgess, another contemporary Apostle of Julian’s — as a spy.
45. Becoming an Apostle, Julian felt, was the most tremendous thing that had happened to him. For Virginia he mixed their “bleak integrity” with his own goodwill, but she felt, as she wrote to him later in China, societies like the Apostles did more harm than good with their jealousies, vanities, and exclusions; it was wrong to draw chalk circles and keep people like Clive outside. Then writing *The Years* around this time, she set its college scenes not in Cambridge but in the Oxford where her cousin Herbert Fisher was master of a college.
46. Virginia Woolf’s last published remarks on the Apostles are in her biography of Roger Fry. From a outsider’s view of them at the time as careworn youths discussing the ethics of determinism, she shifts to Fry’s writing his mother of “the priding thing” of being elected to the “very select, very famous and very secret society”²³ (Virginia’s words) for “the discussion of things in general”²⁴ (Roger’s words). It became the centre of his Cambridge life, as it had for Sidgwick and others. No other election meant as much to him, says his knowledgeable biographer, for the Apostles turned out not to be quite as careworn after all. They talked chiefly of politics and philosophy; art for them was literature with its prophetic messages of Shelley and Whitman, which is why they may have appeared to outsiders as “eyeless, abstract, and austere in their doctrines.”²⁵ Roger Fry’s aesthetic development from his Cambridge brethren is prefigured in these descriptions.

19 V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 121.

20 *Ibid.*, 120.

21 *Ibid.*, 24.

22 *Ibid.*, 122.

23 V. Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 40, 41.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*, 42.

47. Cambridge and the Apostles remained a standard of value for Virginia Woolf, however. Lives like those of Rebecca West and her husband, she remarked in her diary, were filled with appearances “as the Apostles would say”. And those of Harold Nicolson or Hugh Walpole, while more colourful than those of Cambridge intellectuals, did not command her respect the way Moore did, as she noted in “Sketch of the Past”. And it was in “Sketch of the Past”, where she had referred to the Apostles as invisible presences that she also formulated a “philosophy”, as she called it, but without troublesome philosophic words. Her idea was that behind the cotton wool of daily non-being appearance, there is in reality a pattern connecting human beings which is revealed in moments of being which can be shocks of ecstasy or desolation. Turning these into words, she deprives them of their power to hurt her by making them real, as she wrote. It is a writer’s philosophy which delights in the creation of Moorean organic or complex wholes out of the fragments of experience.
48. Fragments and wholes, unity and dispersity, are concerns in Virginia Woolf’s final novel — the “un... dis” of *Between the Acts*.
49. Appearance and reality, like means and ends, are philosophical commonplaces. The particular forms they assumed in Virginia Woolf’s writing philosophy are connected in various ways to the influence — the invisible presences — of the philosopher Apostles and their followers, among whom she passed her life. The communion of love and friendship, the aesthetic contemplation of art and literature, and the pursuit of truth for its own sake were their ideal values. That these were originally confined to the prerogatives of masculine sexuality and education limited the appeal of the Apostles for Virginia Woolf.
50. Little of this that I have been rehearsing is new. But it is not merely historical either. Recently Henry Sidgwick — whose influence Lytton Strachey thought brought the discussions of the Apostles out of medieval Victorian theology — has been hailed again as the most significant English moral philosopher of modern times. Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics*, eventually written, he noted, out of his experience as an Apostle, attempted to combine of two broad kinds of moral theory which Leslie Stephen and others including G. E. Moore also attempted to reconcile. One of these kinds of theory, to oversimplify, maintained teleologically that actions are good or bad according to their results; the other asserted deontologically that certain acts are right or wrong in themselves, regardless of their consequences. Among the issues debated in these theories are questions of good versus right actions and of instrumental versus intrinsic values. These types or groups of moral theory have been variously named, the current terms for them apparently being consequentialism and Kantianism.

51. A recent exhaustive attempt to bring these theories together by the Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit has been called as the most important English ethical work since *The Methods of Ethics*. Parfit's acknowledged philosophical masters are Henry Sidgwick and Immanuel Kant. Sidgwick with his pluralistic common-sense and lucidity, and Kant with his dense, insightful metaphysics were (along with Plato) G. E. Moore's principal sources as well, and their influences are pervasive in Apostolic ethics. Without approaching the analytic intricacies of current consequentialist/Kantian debates, it may be worthwhile to suggest that future philosophical analyses of Virginia Woolf should consider how elements of these theories converge in her writing as they did in the Apostolic assumptions she was influenced by. These might involve descriptions of how moments of being and non-being, of reality and the skin of appearance, come together in her work, and how thinking of things in themselves and the means to these thoughts are involved in the ways she combines common-sense clarity and lack of humbug with intuitive insight, ultimately and creatively combining in her writing feminist conviction and mystical experience.
52. Such interpretations should always keep in mind, however, the words Virginia Woolf gives to Bernard at the end of *The Waves*, and that is "the sense of the complexity and the reality and the struggle"²⁶ of her art.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

53. This paper is based on and developed from my early literary history of the Bloomsbury Group: *Victorian Bloomsbury* (1987), *Edwardian Bloomsbury* (1994) and *Georgian Bloomsbury* (2003) as well as on essays reprinted in *Aspects of Bloomsbury* (1998). Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics* was first published first in 1874; his *Memoir* by Arthur and Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick appeared in 1906. G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* was published in 1903. For Leonard Woolf on the Apostles, see his autobiographies *Sowing* (1960) and *Beginning Again* (1964). Virginia Woolf's memoirs were published in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind and Hermione Lee (2002), and *The Platform of Time: Memoirs of Family and Friends*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (2008); information on them is also taken from my work in progress on history of the Memoir Club. Virginia Woolf's essays, were edited by Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke (1986-2011), her letters, by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (1971-80), her diary, by Anne Olivier Bell (1977-84), and her shorter fiction by Susan Dick (1989). Virginia Woolf's novels and book-length non-fiction have been meticulously edited for Blackwell's Shakespeare Head Press Edition (1995-2004). For biographies see those by Quentin Bell (1972) and Hermione Lee (1996). On her feminism see Naomi Black's *Virginia Woolf as Feminist* (2004). J. M. Keynes's "My

26 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 190.

Early Beliefs” (1938) was published in his expanded *Essays in Biography* (1951). For Bertrand Russell, see his *Autobiography* (1967) and Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table* (2000). E. M. Forster on Cambridge is reprinted in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951). W. C. Lubenow’s *The Cambridge Apostles* (1998) is a detailed account. For Julian Bell see the revised biography by Peter Stansky and William Abrahams (2012). Derek Parfit’s *On What Matters* appeared in 2011.

WORKS CITED

- FORSTER, E. M. *Two Cheers for Democracy*. Abinger Edition, Vol. VI. Ed. OLIVER STALLYBRASS. London: Edward Arnold, 1972.
- KEYNES, JOHN MAYNARD. *Two Memoirs: Dr. Melchior, a Defeated Enemy and My Early Beliefs*. London: Hart-Davis, 1949.
- MOORE, G. E. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: CUP, 1903.
- STEPHEN, LESLIE. *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen: A Judge of the High Court of Justice*. London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1895.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *A Room of One’s Own*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929.
- WOOLF, LEONARD. *The Autobiography of Leonard Woolf*. 5 Vols. New York: Harcourt, 1975.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *Collected Essays: II*. Ed. LEONARD WOOLF. London: Hogarth Press, 1966.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: 2*. Ed. ANNE OLIVIER BELL. London: Hogarth Press, 1978.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *Jacob’s Room*. Ed. EDWARD BISHOP. The Shakespeare Head Press Edition of Virginia Woolf. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *Life as We Have Known It*. Ed. MARGARET LLEWELYN DAVIES. New York: Norton, 1975.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *Moments of Being*. Ed. JEANNE SCHULKIND. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *Roger Fry*. Ed. DIANE F. GILLESPIE. The Shakespeare Head Press Edition of Virginia Woolf. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *To The Lighthouse*. Ed. SUSAN DICK. The Shakespeare Head Press Edition of Virginia Woolf. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *The Waves*. Eds JAMES M. HAULE and P. H. SMITH, JR. The Shakespeare Head Press Edition of Virginia Woolf. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.