

# Alex Klein

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## History as a Weapon: T. H. Green, Early Modern Empiricism, and the New Science of Mind

**Abstract:** This paper examines the surprising role historical scholarship played in a late 19th-century controversy over the scientific status of psychology. One side—led by T. H. Green and other erstwhile students of the Plato scholar Benjamin Jowett—contended that the history of philosophy is a more appropriate tool than naturalistic psychology for uncovering the nature of mind. Interestingly, defenders of naturalistic psychology—including T. H. Huxley, E. B. Titchener, and others—looked to admired historical figures of their own to provide credibility for the view that philosophical reflection must be based on a properly empirical science of mind. The upshot is that the controversy over psychology's viability as a natural science was partly fought on the battlefield of historical interpretation. This battle has an under-appreciated legacy: I contend that our contemporary notion of a British Empiricist tradition whose central figures are Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, is in part a by-product of the exigencies of this now-forgotten fight over psychology.

### Readings:

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Norton, David Fate. 1981. "[The Myth Of 'British Empiricism'](#)." *History of European Ideas* 1:331-344.

Loeb, Louis E. 1981. [From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy](#). Ithaca: Cornell University Press. CHAPTER 1.

Kuklick, Bruce. 1984. "Seven Thinkers and How They Grew: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz; Locke, Berkeley, Hume; Kant." In *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, edited



**Alexander Klein** is Canada Research Chair working on early analytic philosophy, broadly construed. Much of his work looks at various figures in the late 19th and early 20th century—including William James and Bertrand Russell—who in one way or another thought philosophy should become more “scientific,” though these characters all disagreed about what exactly that meant.

Prior to coming to McMaster, Klein taught at Cal State Long Beach, and held postdocs before that at the University of Toronto and Cornell University, and was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Sheffield. Klein is editor of the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of William James*,\* as well as author of a forthcoming monograph (also with Oxford) called *Consciousness Is Motor: Warp and Weft in William James*\*.

### **Selected Publications:**

(Forthcoming). "How American Is Pragmatism?" *Philosophy of Science*.

(2009). "On Hume on Space: Green's Attack, James's Empirical Response." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 47 (3): 415-49.

(2008). "Divide et Impera! William James and Naturalistic Philosophy of Science." *Philosophical Topics*, 36 (1): 129–166.