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The Metaphysical Ideas of T.H. Green

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Abstract

T.H. Green's *Prolegomena to Ethics*, published posthumously in 1883, sought to develop a theory of morality based on the idea that the good will is one which seeks to achieve self-realization through the promotion of the common good. To justify this proposition Green first developed a Metaphysics which contained both an *epistemology*, according to which our knowledge of reality is constructed by the active operation of self-conscious mind, and an *ontology*, for which reality itself is the organised manifestation of an eternal consciousness or cosmic spirit. From these ideas Green proceeded to develop his ethics and his political philosophy. This paper outlines Green's Metaphysical ideas before critiquing them, arguing that Green's ontology of an eternal consciousness is an unjustifiable inference from his justifiable Idealist theory of knowledge.

The goal of T.H. Green's philosophical teaching was to provide an understanding of the nature of the universe and man's place within it with a view to sustaining a broadly Christian ethic of conduct in the context of an intellectual world shaped by empiricism and the rise of modern science. Its driving thrust was ethical. Yet, to arrive at an answer to the question: What ought I to do? Green thought it essential to answer a prior question: namely, what is the nature of reality and what is man's relationship to it? If a person's understanding of themselves and their relationship to society and the natural world is wrong, so will be their morality. Green believed that the British tradition of empiricism was incorrect and that it had yielded, in utilitarianism, a misguided ethical system. To overthrow the latter the empiricist approach to knowledge and ideas had first to be controverted. This is what his Metaphysical reasoning was designed to do, his basic goal being to demonstrate that modern science

did not, as many believed, disprove the idea that reality was ultimately spiritual, but rather *required* a spiritual or rational understanding of reality if it were to exist at all. Thus, says W.H. Fairbrother, ‘Green’s philosophy begins with Metaphysics, and is based entirely upon Metaphysics. It is to this that its entire consistency is due ... Green’s Metaphysical, Moral, and Political Philosophy thus form one whole, and offer a theory of life not only complete ... but consistent with itself throughout.’¹ There are three distinct steps in the elaboration of Green’s system:

1. Metaphysics: to understand the nature of man and his relationship to the world around him. This metaphysics supplies the basis for:
2. Ethics: what ought a good citizen to do? From this theory of conduct there arises:
3. Political Philosophy: the organisation of civic and social institutions so as to give objective expression to ethical conduct. So we have:

Metaphysical Philosophy	Moral Philosophy	Political Philosophy
What is the nature of reality? Is man a product of natural forces? Can he act morally?	Given that Green concludes that man <i>can</i> act freely and therefore morally: what ought he to do?	How ought society to be organised to give objective expression to the moral ideal.

In this paper we focus upon the first stage of this system of reflection, that is to say, Green’s concept of nature and the place of humans within it. The ideas Green developed, expounded chiefly in his *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883), were largely derived from the prior work of German philosophers, notably Kant and Hegel. ‘It was’, wrote Rudolf Metz, ‘with Green and not before him, that German idealism really began its mission on Anglo-Saxon soil ...’²

Experienced Reality

Nature is the object of possible experience, the world of phenomena. It is the world of science as experienced in consciousness. By reflecting upon conscious experience Green seeks to arrive at a true understanding of the place of humans in the world. There are two steps here:

1. The world of conscious experience
2. The conditions which make this experience possible - the conditions of experience. And this, argues Green, is the mind or spirit.

We start with the facts of experience: the world of nature as we experience it and which is the subject matter of science. This is the world of reality and the only reality that

¹ W.H. Fairbrother, *The Philosophy of Thomas Hill Green* (Methuen, London, 1896), p. 11.

² R. Metz, *A Hundred Years of British Philosophy* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1938), p. 268. While Green was open in expressing his debt to Kant, he was less explicit with regard to Hegel – who, as Metz notes, is not mentioned at all in the *Prolegomena*.

can exist to us – nature being defined as ‘the system of objects of possible experience ...’¹ What defines this world of reality? Its essential characteristic, says Green, is that it is a related whole. It is ‘the idea of a world as a single and eternal system of related elements, which may be related with endless diversity but must *be* related still.’² Reality is a complex system of relations between things.

But matter and motion, just so far as known, consist in, or are determined by, relations between the objects of that connected consciousness which we call experience. If we take any definition of matter, any account of its ‘necessary qualities’, and abstract from it all that consists in a statement of relations between facts in the way of feeling, or between objects that we present to ourselves as sources of feeling, we shall find that there is nothing left. Motion, in like manner, has no meaning except such as is derived from a synthesis of the different positions successively held by one and the same body; and we shall try in vain to render an account to ourselves of position or succession, of a body or its identity, except as expressing relations of what is contained in experience, through which alone that content possesses a definite character and becomes a connected whole.³

The experience which yields this real interconnected world is different from the experience, say, of a plant which experiences the effect of a downfall of rain, or the experience of hunger in an animal. It is a *thinking* experience in which the activity of human thought is present at every stage. It is an experience which is self-aware; which is conscious of the changes happening to it; it is, above all, an experience which is capable of yielding knowledge about nature. Reality, as it is known to us at all, must exist in consciousness. Because, writes W.D. Lamont, ‘the objective order exists for and in consciousness, we can never know or conceive of anything apart from consciousness, and that consciousness is the one supreme sustaining principle in reality.’⁴ *The only reality that exists for us is the reality which exists within consciousness.* A reality outside of or beyond consciousness experience simply cannot be said to exist at all. Reality is what we can know through conscious experience. What cannot be known to exist within consciousness does not, for us, exist. In saying this Green is (like Fichte and Hegel before him) parting company with Kant. While Kant contended that the world, as we experience it, is located within consciousness, he yet argued that this conscious world – the world of *phenomena* – is constructed by us from the data received from the world beyond conscious experience, the world of things-in-themselves, or *noumena*. This ‘noumenal’ world is the origin of our experience but we can never know it as such since it is, by definition, beyond experience. The result was a dualism between the world of experience, which is known to us, and the world beyond experience, which is forever unknown to us. Green dispenses with this dualism

¹ T.H Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1883), p. 35.

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14

⁴ W.D. Lamont, *Introduction to Green’s Moral Philosophy* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1934), p. 36.

by rejecting the concept of the noumenal world outside of experience. ‘Nothing can be known by help of reference to the unknown.’¹ Since we can know nothing about this world we cannot even know that it exists, and so it serves no function and has no meaning. Hence, for Green, reality is and can only be the world revealed by human experience.

What, Green asks, must be true if this world is to be known as we experience it? This, of course, is the method of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, and Green (like most British Idealists) was strongly influenced by Kant’s work. Following Kant, Green asks: *what are the preconditions for the world of experience being as it is?*

Experience as Consciousness

First, there must be a consciousness to have experience at all. Experience must be experienced if it is to exist. Hence, there must be a conscious self – an entity that has, and knows itself to have, that continuous stream of experience which is necessary for a world of experience to exist at all.

If there is such a thing as a connected experience of related objects, there must be operative in consciousness a unifying principle, which not only presents related objects to itself, but at once renders them objects and unites them in relation to each other by this act of presentation; and which is single throughout the experience. The unity of this principle must be correlative to the unity of the experience. If all possible experience of related objects ... forms a single system; if there can be no such thing as an experience of unrelated objects; then there must be a corresponding singleness in that principle of consciousness which forms the bond of relation between the objects.²

Kant called this connected stream of experience the Transcendental Unity of Apperception and its very existence implies the continuous existence of a self-aware consciousness. ‘A knowledge of sequent states is only possible when each is accompanied by the “I think” of an identical apperception ... All knowledge or experience, then, presupposes a Self.’³ Such consciousness is not derived *from* experience; it is a condition *of* experience. Unless some form of consciousness existed events would simply be random and isolated occurrences. Each event would stand alone. What unites a succession of events as a series is that they occur to the *same* consciousness, which is thus able to conceive of the series as a connected whole: to know that it really *is* a series. For a succession of events to exist as a related series of events, a world of events as such constituting our understanding of reality, there must be a single consciousness which exists throughout and holds the series of events together as a series. ‘A consciousness of certain events’, writes Green, ‘cannot be anything that thus succeeds them. It must be equally present to all the events of which it is the consciousness. For this reason an intelligent experience, or experience as the

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 34-5.

³ Andrew Seth, *Hegelianism and Personality* (Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1892), p. 12

source of knowledge, can be neither constituted by events of which it is the experience, nor be a product of them.¹ Experience, in other words, presupposes consciousness, it does not generate it.

Experience as a System of Mind-Dependent Relations

The second key feature of experienced reality is that it is characterised by *relations*. The concept of experience as a system of relations is the key to all Green's metaphysics. As A.J. Balfour observes: the whole fabric of Green's 'philosophy rests on his theory of relations; and that his theory of relations consists mainly of these two propositions: first, that objects are constituted by relations; secondly, that relations are the work of the mind.'² Green's target here is the epistemology of the British empiricists, who had analysed experience down into the action of atomistic sense data. We do not, countered Green, experience the world as a chaotic, fragmented, array of sensory impressions. Such an array of 'unrelated sense particulars', comments Fairbrother, 'are for us nothing.'³ It may be that sensory impressions impact themselves upon us in this way, but this is not how they exist within consciousness for us. We must not confuse the sensory stimulant which generates a perception with the perceived object we are conscious of. For us, sensory impressions exist in the form of relations between objects within perception. Every 'object we perceive', writes Green, 'is a congeries of related facts, of which the simplest component no less than the composite whole, requires, in order to its presentation, the action of a principle of consciousness ...'⁴ 'We cannot', writes Seth, 'look at anything "in itself"; everything is indissolubly connected with other things, and its very existence involves this reference – or rather multitudinous references – beyond itself.'⁵ Every object of perception exists within relations of space and time. It exists in relation to other objects; it has qualities attributable to it; its motion is its movement relative to other objects; it is larger than some and smaller than others; it causes change on other objects and is changed itself by others; it subsists over time, and so on. 'Abstract the many relations from the one thing, and there is nothing ... Without the relations it would not exist at all.'⁶ Put simply, a thing is real for us only when it exists in some relation to other things. 'Take away from things their relations', writes Metz, 'and virtually nothing remains. Hence Green's doctrine that the reality of things consists in nothing but the relations that bind them together.'⁷

These perceived relations, says Green, do not come to us already formed. We do not passively receive them from outside. The vibration of an optic nerve is not an

¹ Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 21.

² A.J. Balfour, Green's Metaphysics of Knowledge, *Mind*, Vol. 9, January 1884, p. 76.

³ Fairbrother, *Philosophy of Thomas Hill Green*, p. 32.

⁴ Green, *Prolegomena*, pp. 69-70.

⁵ Seth, *Hegelianism and Personality*, p. 8.

⁶ Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 31.

⁷ Metz, *Hundred Years of British Philosophy*, p. 275.

object of perception. Perception is an act; it is something we do. It is an interpretation of the world. As Lamont summarises:

Whether or not the contents of experience are entirely dependent on consciousness, it is at any rate clear that the *conception* and the *perception* of an ordered system of nature are dependent on the activity of consciousness. The perception or conception of objects is something very different from merely having a feeling or sense impression ... Hence we may say that, while the exciting cause of sensation is external to the animal organism, the object conceived or perceived is not external to consciousness.¹

What this means, says Green, is that the world as we experience it is a mind-dependant phenomenon. It is an act of the understanding, of which the essence is the holding of impressions of objects or ideas within the conscious mind within a system of relations. As he summarises the matter in an unpublished manuscript:

Nature = system of sensations referred to objects. That what makes the sensations a system is reason.²

A moment's reflection will show how much mind-dependent activity is involved when we perceive a pen lying upon a sheet of paper, a blue book upon a shelf, a tree in a garden, or a cloud moving across the peak of a mountain. If these relations within experience are mind-dependent, then we can conclude that a condition of the objective world as we experience it is the activity of mind in bringing sense impressions into relations *via* the process of perception. In this process sense-impressions as such do not enter at all. Whatever the origin of the stimuli we receive, in so far as we are conscious of them then they exist as complex related objects. We do not experience a patch of brown: we experience in perception a table – a table with terms-in-relation (legs, top, extension, colour) and which is itself in relation to other objects in space and time: the floor, shelves, room, chair and so on. The reality we encounter through experience is always 'a unified and *systematized* manifold.'³ In making this point Green parts company with Locke and Kant. While both these philosophers accepted that the relations between objects in experience are constituted by the active work of our own minds, they still argued that the content of that experience, its raw-material of sense impressions, is generated externally to us by what Kant called 'things-in-themselves'. It is this Green rejects. For, as we have seen, Green believes it is meaningless to talk of things as existing outside or beyond experience since they have no meaning or existence for us. For a thing to exist outside of consciousness it must stand in some relation to consciousness – and relations can only exist within consciousness. We 'are not entitled to say that anything is without or outside consciousness; for externality, being a relation which, like any other relation, exists

¹ Lamont, *Introduction to Green's Moral Philosophy*, pp 37-8.

² Quoted in B. Wempe, *T.H. Green's Theory of Positive Freedom* (Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2004), p. 98.

³ Lamont, *Introduction to Green's Moral Philosophy*, p. 47.

only in the medium of consciousness, only between certain objects as they are for consciousness, cannot be a relation between consciousness and anything else.¹ We can say absolutely nothing about a thing beyond experience – and this means, of course, that we cannot even say that it exists. The only things that exist for us are the things that exist within consciousness, and such things – objects and the relations between objects – are both equally mind-dependent. Both the content and form of experience is generated by the consciousness that perceives them.

Objective Reality

The third element Green posits of experienced reality is *the objective stability of its systematized relations*. Although he holds that reality is constructed through thought, Green is not a solipsist. He does not hold that the world of experience as a system of relations is merely my own personal world – a world that I alone create. He believes that the world of relations we each of us experience exists independently of us personally. It existed before we were born and will exist after each of us, as individuals, die. As Green sketched his perspective in some lecture notes in the late 1860s:

Nature is *there – given*. We find it don't make it. We, that is, in our limited human personality. The reason that makes it must be communicated to us, if we are to understand it. But the natural world is made apart from this communication. [The natural world] is *there* whether we understand it or no.²

As Milne summarises, for Green '[T]he facts of which we have knowledge must be the same, whether we have knowledge of them or not.'³ This world of relations existing independently of any given one of us Green designates as reality and is defined by its permanence. Our idea of a fact, he says, is that of 'an idea of a relation which is always the same between the same objects'; while our idea of a real (as opposed to a fanciful) object is of an object 'which is always in the same relations.'⁴ We need to be clear about how Green defines objective reality: it is 'a single and unalterable system of relations' which we, as individuals, access through experience.⁵ 'With sufficient time and command of detail', he writes, 'it would not be difficult to show how the conviction here illustrated, that whatever anything is really it is unalterably, regulates equally our most primitive and our most developed judgements of reality – the everyday supposition of there being a magnitude of separate things which remain the same in themselves while their appearances to us alter, and the scientific quest for uniformity or unalterableness in a law of universal change.'⁶ How do we know that this real world exists independently of each of us? Because it is possible for each of us to perceive

¹ Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 65.

² Quoted in Wempe, *T.H. Green's Theory of Positive Freedom*, p. 99.

³ A.J.M. Milne, *The Social Philosophy of English Idealism* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1962), p. 94.

⁴ Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

things of this world which are false. It is evident that the world of relations between objects that exists within my experience can be at variance to what is the case within objective reality. This is obvious when I dream or construct fictions in my mind. It is possible, also, when what I think is true within the world is not. Green gives the case of someone looking at a hill which, due to changing weather conditions, looks far away one day and close the next. It is quite possible for someone to mistake the distance of a hill – to think that the objects in the world are related in a way other than they really are. Quite simply, we are all aware that our conception of the world at any given time may not be the actual state of that world at that time. This is the difference between subjective experience and objective experience. It is the latter that is the subject-matter of science and the relations which constitute it are valid for all observers and do not depend upon our own, specific, interpretation – which may be wrong. A true statement is one which corresponds to an actual permanent set of relations between objects.

True knowledge in this or that individual no doubt consists in agreement between his thought and [the] reality of things. But true knowledge, as such, means that which is valid always & for all men. Take any body of science, this is not the state of mind in this or that individual. [The] individual's state of mind is true so far as he has attained the science.¹

The Eternal Consciousness

So the question is: what makes a world of permanent stable relations possible? We begin by noting that the external world does indeed assume the form of a system of interrelated objects which together integrate to constitute a world. There is 'a synthetic principle operative in reality quite as much as in thought.'² No more than individual experience can we say of reality, the natural world, that it is a mere array of uncoordinated events. Reality, too, is a world; a world constituted by terms in relations with each other, occupying positions in time and space in a coherent and stable pattern. Reality, in other words, appears to display the same characteristics that are the product of mind in our own conscious experience. The difference is that the objects and relations of reality are stable where the objects and relations of my experience are impermanent and subject to misinterpretation or imagination. Now I see a tree in a garden; the next moment I see a cloud passing across the sun. But while, in my experience, the tree and garden have vanished, in the real world they remain as they were. But, however different, my 'own' world and the 'external' world are sufficiently analogous as to suggest a similar underlying process operative in each – *the principle of an organising consciousness*. 'Our conception of an order of nature, and the relations which form that order, have a common spiritual source.'³ External reality, as much as my own individual subjective experience, being in both cases a

¹ Quoted in Wempe, *T.H. Green's Theory of Positive Freedom*, p. 103.

² Lamont, *Introduction to Green's Moral Philosophy*, p. 47.

³ Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 35.

diverse manifold unified within a systematised world of relations, is a product of thought. ‘We can attach no meaning to “reality,” as applied to the world of phenomena, but that of existence under definite and unalterable relations; and we find that it is only for thinking consciousness that such relations can subsist.’¹ Put simply, there exists in the external world a permanent system of relations, and if this system ‘is to be real otherwise than merely for us’ then ‘we must recognise as the condition of this reality the action of some unifying principle analogous to that of our understanding.’² In this way, write Dunham, Grant, and Watson, Green stretches ‘Kant’s “synthetic unity of apperception” from the phenomena to the noumena’, generating, in the process, ‘an ontologically distinct unifier, which is the primary ground for singular things.’³

This, Green admits, goes against the commonsense view that, while the ordered relations of our personal experience may be mind-dependent, they are acted upon and relate to a world which is not mind-dependent: there is held to be an ‘anthesis between the known or knowable world and the subject capable of knowing it’.⁴ But such a dichotomy between experience and the world experienced is, he says, unsustainable. For how, then, can we explain the fact that the relations we construct in our mind correspond to the relations that exist outside our mind, in the real world? To the relations of our mind there correspond relations in reality: it is this very correspondence that constitutes knowledge. And if such knowledge is possible then there must exist such relations independent of our own perception of them – which means they must exist in conscious experience or thought too, for only consciousness can unite different terms into a single unified whole of relations between terms. Knowledge emerges when our individual minds grasp the relations present within this larger cosmic mind. ‘If it is true that there would be no intelligence without nature, it is equally true that there would be no nature without intelligence. Nature is the system of related appearances, and related appearances are impossible apart from the action of an intelligence’.⁵ In other words, if a permanent objective world of relations is to exist independent of the mind of any given one of us, there must be, says Mander, ‘a single and really existing principle which comprises the source and purpose, as well as the totality, of all that there is.’ The ‘whole of reality exists *for* – or, perhaps one might better say, exists *in* the awareness of a mind both infinite and eternal.’⁶ This is the all-encompassing ‘eternal consciousness whose experience *does* make up the whole of reality.’⁷ To quote Fairbrother: ‘the cosmos, as we know it, is a single objective system

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³ J. Dunham, I. Hamilton Grant, and S. Watson, *Idealism: The History of a Philosophy* (Acumen, Durham, 2011), p. 164.

⁴ Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

⁶ W.J. Mander, ‘In Defence of the Eternal Consciousness’, in M. Dimova-Cookson and W.J. Mander (eds), *T.H. Green: Ethics, Metaphysics, and Political Philosophy* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2006), p. 187.

⁷ W.J. Mander, *British Idealism: A History* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011), p. 89.

of intelligible relations – the manifestation or handiwork of an Intelligence which is the source alike of both the world I gradually learn to know, and of me.¹

Thus, according to Green, the nature of reality, as a system of unity in diversity, of an interconnected series of relations between objects existing within space and time, implies the existence of a ‘world-consciousness’, since only such a consciousness could integrate a multiplicity of individual instances into a world. As is true of individual experience, an organising consciousness is not an object of experience it is a *condition* for its existence at all – rather as we might say that the design blueprints of a building are not visible to someone looking at a building, but are a condition for the building standing at all. As Green explains:

If by nature we mean the object of possible experience, the connected order of knowable facts or phenomena – and this is what our men of science mean by it when they trace the natural genesis of human character – then nature implies something other than itself, as the condition of its being what it is. Of that something else we are entitled to say, positively, that it is a self-distinguishing consciousness; because the function which it must fulfil in order to render the relations of phenomena, and with them nature, possible, is one which, on however limited a scale, we ourselves exercise in the acquisition of experience, and exercise only by means of such a consciousness.²

The existence of nature, then, implies a principle that is not natural, a principle that is not in our experience of the real world, but makes that experience possible. This principle he labels spiritual, in the sense that it is a permanent ‘self-distinguishing consciousness.’³ It does not exist in time and space – it makes time and space possible; it is immaterial and immoveable and always present; it is eternally one with itself. For it is these characteristics which are necessary for a world of phenomena. ‘The supreme function performed by the eternal consciousness is that of affording as it were a locus for the unalterable relations constitutive of reality. It is by this eternal consciousness that all real things consist.’⁴ Peter Nicholson sums up Green’s argument as follows:

Just as the condition of the scientist’s knowledge is his consciousness holding all its constituent relations together in a single system of unalterable relations, and the condition of science generally is the idea of the sum of all the relations held by individual scientists forming a single system of unalterable relations (in human consciousness), so the condition of the actual world is a universal consciousness which thinks the totality of the unalterable relations which make up the world.⁵

¹ Fairbrother, *Philosophy of Thomas Hill Green*, p. 44.

² Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 54.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴ E.B. McGilvary, ‘The Eternal Consciousness’, *Mind*, Vol. 10, October 1901, p. 489.

⁵ P. Nicholson, ‘Green’s “Eternal Consciousness”’, in Dimova-Cookson and Mander (eds), *T.H. Green: Ethics, Metaphysics, and Political Philosophy*, p. 143.

How does the individual consciousness of particular persons stand in relation to this eternal cosmic consciousness? For Green there is only one world – the real world. All experience is real. Even when we are dreaming or making up stories, the terms and relations that constitute our conscious experience are real – they are part of experience. They are not unreal. However, they are not significantly true either. There are degrees of truth or reality, which is the degree to which our perceptions within experience, our knowledge of the world, accords to the actual permanent relations between things in the eternal consciousness. These relations are what we mean by truth, and they exist whether any individual consciousness knows them or not. ‘They must exist as part of an eternal universe – and that a spiritual universe or universe of consciousness – during all the changes of the individual’s attitude towards them, whether he is asleep or awake, distracted or attentive, ignorant or informed.’¹ The more closely and accurately our experience of things accords to the objective permanent relation between things the more true and the more real our experience becomes.

The complete determination of an event it may be impossible for our intelligence to arrive at. There may always remain unascertained conditions which may render the relation between an appearance and such conditions of it as we know, liable to change. But that there is an unalterable order of relations, if we could only find it out, is the presupposition of all our enquiry into the real nature of appearances; and such unalterableness implies their inclusion in one system which leaves nothing outside itself.²

There is, that is to say, a system of relations constituting the world which is known to the cosmic consciousness. This world exists independently of any particular consciousness. Any consciousness, once existing, will grasp a part of the total system of relations. Its experience of the world will consist of relations between objects in time and space, which is how the world appears to the cosmic consciousness. But it will only perceive and know a fragment of this total system of relations. What it considers knowledge will fall far short of what is ultimately true. But it is a part nonetheless. And as this knowledge grows and deepens – through the activity of science for example – so will the experience of the individual conscious mind approach more closely to that of the cosmic mind. It will grow towards the cosmic consciousness. The unchanging order of reality, says Green, is an order of relations, and as such must exist within a consciousness. ‘They are relations of facts, which require a consciousness alike to present them as facts and to unite them in relation. We must hold then that there is a consciousness for which the relations of fact, that form the object of our gradually attained knowledge, already and eternally exist; and that the growing knowledge of the individual is a progress towards this

¹ Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 74.

² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

consciousness.¹ The more our empirical experience of the world of nature becomes intelligible as a system of relations between things, so the more we know the active principle of the cosmic consciousness. And as the individual consciousnesses of humans grow towards understanding the system of relations between objects that constitute the world, so does this human mind become increasingly one with the cosmic mind whose activity underpins and explains the unity of external reality.² Indeed, Green goes further and suggests, in Hegelian fashion, that in this process of growth in understanding within the individual human consciousness the cosmic eternal consciousness is operating to bring to fruition its own already existing consciousness as expressed through concrete reality:

The true account of it [reality] is held to be that the concrete whole, which may be described indifferently as an eternal intelligence realised in the related facts of the world, or as a system of related facts rendered possible by such an intelligence, partially and gradually reproduces itself in us, communicating piece-meal, but in inseparable correlation, understanding and the facts understood, experience and the experienced a world.³

And, of course, human consciousness exists within the conscious world of the cosmic consciousness, and over time within this consciousness it reflects more and more the imprint of the ordered relations that are eternal to it. This growth to knowledge of the individual consciousnesses can never be complete: human experience is too transitory, the array of sensory phenomena too extensive and changing, the complexity of the relations that constitute the world too rich. *But human understanding grows continually towards that cosmic consciousness even if it is never able, fully, to realise itself.*⁴ As such there is an important teleological element in Green's system: the human comprehension of reality evolves through time towards the perfect comprehension of reality possessed by the eternal consciousness. Subjective mind and objective mind tend to merge – where the objective eternal mind is, says Nettleship, 'not some unknown opposite of consciousness, but the ideal completion of that world of which we are already incompletely conscious.'⁵ As Nicholson usefully explains:

So far as the individual has knowledge, he or she thinks what the eternal consciousness thinks; and to that extent, we may say either that the eternal consciousness realizes itself in him or her, or that he or she manifests the eternal consciousness; and in both cases, more so as their knowledge increases.⁶

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-5.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵ R.L. Nettleship, *Memoir of Thomas Hill Green* (Longmans, Green, London, 1906), p. 114.

⁶ Nicholson. 'Green's "Eternal Consciousness"', p. 146.

As such, 'Green's metaphysics of knowledge and nature', observes Wempe, constitutes an 'essentially closed system.'¹

Here is Green's summary of his understanding of the place of mankind in nature from his *Prolegomena*:

Arguing, first, from the characteristics of his knowledge ... our conclusion is that, while on the one hand his consciousness is throughout empirically conditioned – in the sense that it would not be what at any time it is but for a series of events, sensible or related to sensibility ... on the other hand his consciousness would not be what it is, as *knowing*, or as a subject of intelligent experience, but for the self-realisation or reproduction in it, through processes thus empirically conditioned, of an eternal consciousness, not existing in time but the condition of their being an order in time, not an object of experience but the condition of their being an intelligent experience, and in this sense not 'empirical' but 'intelligible.'²

Freedom and Ethical Action

Now Green conducted this analysis of man's relationship to nature, remember, as a prelude to reflecting upon the ethical rules that ought to guide human action within this context. The crucial connection between metaphysics and ethics in Green's system is the concept of freedom. Ethics as a subject, he says, is only feasible if humans are considered to have free will – to freely choose between alternative courses of action. It is Green's belief that his metaphysics creates just this possibility. The reason he contends this is that he has shown that the essence of what it means to be human is consciousness, and this human consciousness is not an object in the world, it is a condition of the world. It is consciousness that forms the world of experience, which takes sense-data, meaningless in itself, and forms it into a world of objects situated within a pattern of relations. The world we inhabit as conscious beings, which we investigate by science and seek to understand in ever-greater depth, is made by us, by the active principle of our minds. This means that the relationship of cause to effect, which precludes free will in natural phenomena, does not apply to man as self-conscious mind. Quite the opposite: the determinist connection of cause to effect is itself something created by our minds. Humans in their mental aspect (as distinct from their physical bodily aspect) are not locked into a pattern of cause and effect. They actively make reality, and because they make reality they are free. Man is free, summarises Fairbrother, 'in the sense that his activity cannot be explained except by reference to itself. It is self-originated. We understand it only through our exercise of it.'³ Put another way, there cannot be a natural science of man as conscious being. Human consciousness is not an object within the natural world and cannot be the subject of science. Human experience, including science itself, *presupposes* consciousness: consciousness is the condition of experience and knowledge of the

¹ Wempe, *T.H. Green's Theory of Positive Freedom*, p. 80.

² Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 79.

³ Fairbrother, *Philosophy of Thomas Hill Green*, p. 55.

natural world, it is not part of it. While there cannot, write Dunham, Grant, and Watson, 'be a science of man ... there *can* be a metaphysics of freedom, since it is provable that man's free will is outside the system of mechanical causes.'¹

Critical Reflections

The chief problem with Green's reasoning was identified long ago by Andrew Seth, who observed that, while Green claimed 'to follow out the transcendental method to its legitimate issue, and to make Kant consistent with himself, but in so doing he avowedly transforms Kant's theory of knowledge into a metaphysic of existence, an absolute philosophy.'² The point here is that what Kant was inquiring into was the conditions necessary for conscious experience to exist at all. He was concerned with the conditions of knowledge about the world. His inquiry was epistemological. 'But if this is so, it must be in the highest degree improper to convert consciousness in general without more ado into a universal consciousness.'³ Green begins by analysing the conditions necessary for experience, finding them to be the presence of a consciousness which can hold in relation objects and relations between objects as a coherent world. This follows pretty much Kant's procedure and the reasoning is unexceptional. However, he then takes two further steps: he says that if these relations within experience are to count as true they must correspond to actual relations in an objective world independent of particular consciousnesses; and then that if relations between objects are to exist independent of particular consciousnesses they must exist in some universal eternal consciousness. In effect, he posits the existence of a real world mirroring the world of our individual human experiences, and then says that since this world bears important similarities to our world of experience it must be generated in the same way as ours – but on a cosmic, eternal, basis, in which case it must be due to the operation of an eternal cosmic consciousness. In this way a proposition in epistemology has become a proposition in ontology, regarding the ultimate nature of reality.

It [Green's Neo-Kantianism] takes the notion of knowledge as equivalent to a real Knower; and the form of knowledge being one, it leaps to the conclusion that what we have before us is the One Subject who sustains the world, and is the real Knower in all finite intelligences. It seems a hard thing to say, but to do this is neither more nor less than to hypostatise an abstraction ... It is resting on a fallacy to believe that the eternally complete self-consciousness is proved in this fashion by the theory of knowledge.⁴

How, indeed, can Green's theory of knowledge ever yield an understanding of the ultimate nature of reality independent of human perception? Kant, when faced with this issue, answered that we cannot know what reality is like independent of our

¹ Dunham, Hamilton Grant, and Watson, *Idealism*. p. 161.

² Seth, *Hegelianism and Personality*, p. 23.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

consciousness – hence his reference to unknowable ‘things-in-themselves’. Green, like Kant, accepts that there is a reality independent of our own particular consciousnesses. Unlike Kant, however, he believes we really *do* know it: and what we know about it is that it is an eternal world of relations between objects. Now, this is exactly the world we know within our own experience. Reality is, essentially, our own conscious experience writ large. But this, of course, is hardly surprising. Why? *Because the only way we can know reality at all is through our own conscious experience.* So obviously ‘reality’ replicates the relationships that define our own human perception of the world. It can do nothing else. Reality, surely, is just another way of talking about human experience, and human experience rests upon a conscious mind able to integrate constructed objects – so reality necessarily seems to imply a consciousness to bring it about. It does. But it is not the consciousness of God or the Absolute cosmic spirit: it is the consciousness of humans. To know a fact is not, comments Milne, to know the nature of the world independent of ourselves – it is to ‘know something, not as it is in itself apart from thought, but as it is for thought.’¹ That nature of things beyond our thought is something we can never access.

... according to Green’s theory of human experience ... we have no knowledge of independent realities as they are in themselves. We know only that the individual things and events with which we deal in classification and science, exist and happen within the context of our experience as rational agents. What they are in themselves, apart from this context, we do not and cannot know.²

Green is like a man wandering around a mirror shop who is surprised to encounter his own reflection at every turn. He infers the existence of a cosmic spirit creating each image, whereas he is, of course, the author of them all.

¹ Milne, *Social Philosophy of English Idealism*, p. 96.

² *Ibid.*, p. 100.