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### **The Common Good, Freedom, and the State: T.H. Green's Ethical Theory**

**Dr Ian St John**  
Stjohn\_i@habsboys.org.uk

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## **The Common Good, Freedom, and the State: T.H. Green's Ethical Theory**

**Ian St. John**

### **Abstract**

In his *Prolegomena to Ethics* and *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation*, both posthumously published in 1883, the Oxford philosopher T.H. Green (1836-1882) set out a comprehensive theory of ethical conduct. On the basis of an Idealist metaphysics, according to which the essence of both the self and the world is rational consciousness, he proceeded to outline, first, a concept of personal morality, arguing that a good action is one through which the individual seeks to realise their permanent, best, self as a free, rational, consciousness. When an individual self-actualises in this manner they are also said to be realising their positive freedom, which Green defined in terms of the full exercise of a person's capabilities. However, man's nature as a social animal means that the self-realisation of the individual can only properly be attained within the context of a society of self-realising individuals. Hence, to promote their own realisation and freedom an individual ought to act to promote the realisation and freedom of all others. Correctly understood, therefore, a good act is one which promotes the collective good. From this doctrine Green developed a theory of the state, according to which its role is to promote the collective good of all by sustaining laws conducive to the rational conduct of individuals and to remove obstacles hindering the moral and free behaviour of its citizens. The all-encompassing reach of Green's system is an impressive intellectual achievement, yet it is held to rest upon a series of unexamined assumptions, the most important of which is that the underlying essence of the universe is a cosmic consciousness which Green took to be a God of reason and love. Green's metaphysics, it is argued, are insufficiently robust to bear the weight of such a comprehensive ethical and political theory, the true foundations of which lie more in faith than in reason.

Moral philosophy involves reflection upon, not what *is*, but what *ought to be*. It is concerned with the world, not given to humans, but made by humans through practice, judging whether the actions initiated by humans are, on balance, ones they ought or ought not to be doing. But what *is* and what *ought to be* are not separate categories in T.H. Green's philosophy: what *is* determines what *ought to be*. A good act is one which helps to realise the underlying essence of humans and the universe.

For Green, what *is* and what *ought to be* are inextricably connected, for it is only by knowing what is true of humans that one can know what they ought to do – the one implies the other. Quite simply, the rules by which we live should reflect the truth of our nature. Knowing what we are tells us how we should behave and what we can become. The question of what we truly are was answered in the first, metaphysical, part of Green's *Prolegomena to Ethics*, where, critically reflecting upon our experience of reality, Green concluded that our defining essence as human beings is *self-consciousness*; the individual self-consciousness that gives form to our experience of reality as a set of relations through time, and that is part of an eternal consciousness that underpins and gives form to the world of objective reality.<sup>1</sup> The rules of ethics are simply the carrying over into our practical social lives of these metaphysical truths. It might be inferred that Green deduced his ethics from his metaphysics, whereas the opposite was more the case: his mind, comments Rudolf Metz, was 'predominantly moral in its bent' and his ethics bore 'the weight of the system': the function of Green's metaphysics of reality was to provide a justification for his moral and political theory.<sup>2</sup>

### **Action as Motive and Self-Realisation**

The intimate connection between Green's metaphysics and morals is apparent in the pivotal place he attaches to self-conscious reason in both. It is man's self-conscious reason that constructs the external world out of the rudimentary elements of sensation. In like fashion, it is his self-conscious reason that generates human action out of rudimentary wants. 'As man is capable of knowledge', writes Richard Nettleship, 'because he is a being for whom there are facts, so he is capable of conduct or morality because he is a being who has objects.'<sup>3</sup> Humans, like any animal, are subject to the stimulus of wants, like hunger, thirst, exercise, companionship. But whereas an animal, it seems, is triggered by a want to act to satisfy it, for humans a distinct element intervenes between the want and its satisfaction: *self-consciousness*. Self-consciousness is aware of the feeling of wants but is distinct from them; it then translates those wants into possible objects of desire; it then reflects on when and how to act on those desires – if at all. *So, for humans, to act upon a stimulus is to consciously exert the will*. When I act I do so for a reason, and Green calls this reason

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<sup>1</sup> For an extended outline of Green's metaphysical theory, see I. St. John, 'The Metaphysical Ideas of T.H. Green', *Haberdashers' Aske's Occasional Papers*, No. 47, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> R. Metz, *A Hundred Years of British Philosophy* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1938), p. 273.

<sup>3</sup> R.L. Nettleship, *Memoir of Thomas Hill Green* (Longmans, Green, and Co, London, 1906), p. 197. Nettleship was a student and colleague of Green's at Balliol College, Oxford.

for action the *motive*. This motive is an object or goal present to my mind – a conscious object of desire. To act is to exert our will, and we exert our will because we have a motive or reason to do so, and the motive is the object or state of affairs we wish to realise through our action.

Why, then, are we motivated to do some thing? Green says that when we wish to realise some object it is because it will yield us *self-satisfaction*. This is not simply an alternative way of saying utility or pleasure. For what Green means by self-satisfaction is far broader: *it means to realise some ideal of our future selves*. In other words, we conceive obtaining an object or state of affairs that will satisfy us by realising some ideal of ourself (where that ideal could be anything from satisfying our hunger, or going to a football match, or coming top in an exam, or writing a poem), and we act to bring that state of affairs or object – that vision of ourselves – about.

An object of desire is always in the last resort an idea of self-satisfaction. The object of which hunger, for instance, is the desire, is not, speaking strictly, food, but the particular kind of satisfaction which is got through eating food. To have an object, then, is to be conscious of something which we are not but we wish to become, and the existence of objects of desire implies the existence of a self-conscious of unrealised possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

We may summarise the process of conscious volition as follows:

Want → Self-consciousness → Conceived Object/Ideal → Motive → Will

Two important points emerge from this: first, that what motivates us are *ideas*, not biological processes or instincts or impulses; second, human action is literally self-realising – we are, in each voluntary act, seeking to make a possible imagined self real.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the conscious mind is crucial to distinctively human action as such. While an animal may act unconsciously, and humans in their animal capacity do so too (as when we breathe or draw our hand from the flame), in our *human* capacity our actions are always *self-conscious*, they involve purposeful volition, and they are motivated to achieve some end which we consider, in our minds, will yield us satisfaction. There is always a conscious reason why we do something. Thinking activity is central to the whole process: first, as we form the idea of an end or state that we may wish to realise; and second, in choosing whether to realise it or not. For example, while my animal nature might provoke the uncomfortable sensation of hunger, my human consciousness forms the idea of dinner as the means to satisfy it, and I choose whether to stop now to eat or delay my meal, and I choose what to eat among the various items I anticipate will satisfy my sensations of hunger. It is the *idea* of dinner that motivates me to lay down my pen and head for the kitchen.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> M. Dimova-Cookson and W.J. Mander (eds), *T.H. Green: Ethics, Metaphysics, and Political Philosophy* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2006), p. 9.

It is precisely because we consciously posit our ends and choose to act upon them that we are *free* and *responsible* for all that we do – what we do we choose to do (positing within consciousness ends and means) and could have done something else. All our acts are conscious acts of will: an attempt by a self-consciousness to being about an object adequate to itself. Man is free, writes William Fairbrother, ‘not as undetermined by motive, but in the fact that the motive lies in the man himself. He makes it, and is responsible for it.’<sup>1</sup> In this way, our mind makes our world of conscious practice just as it makes our world of experience. And this, of course, is why morality is possible at all: it is because we choose to do what we do, because we form motives and elect to act upon them, that we can ask at any time: what ought we to do? What is the right motive for me to act to achieve through my action? What was the right thing to have done – did I choose to do the right thing or do I regret my action? To quote Nettleship:

Moral responsibility, then, with the various feelings and acts to which it gives rise, is a consequence of self-consciousness; shame, remorse, repentance, praise and blame, reward and punishment, and all the agencies of moral education, owe their existence to the fact that each man is conscious in himself, and assumes others to be conscious in themselves, of originating the objects for which he and they live and act, in other words, their motives.<sup>2</sup>

And as our conscious mind makes the world of practice, it forms, at the same time, the character of each actor. For it is through our actions to realise the goals we set for ourselves that we realise the person who we are: *we actualise who we are as persons through the ends we posit as the means to our self-satisfaction*. The succession of motives we act upon both forms and reveals the kind of person we are – what is important to us, what we identify as the means to our self-realisation.<sup>3</sup> We self-determine ourselves through our behaviour in the world. Fairbrother sums up Green’s teaching as follows:

Human action may thus be explained somewhat as follows: A want – animal or other, conditioned by antecedent natural events – arises and is presented to the self in consciousness *as such*; it is recognised as something in which self-satisfaction will be found, a means by which that self would become its true self ...; by this recognition the want is transformed into a motive, i.e. an end in which the self perceives its good, and which it tries to realise. Human character is built up of the self thus successively determined by the consciousness of these ends, and the desire to realise them; the identification of the Self with a motive constitutes an act of Will, and the fact that all

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Fairbrother, *The Philosophy of Thomas Hill Green* (Methuen, London, 1896), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Nettleship, *Memoir of Thomas Hill Green*, p. 200.

<sup>3</sup> As Hannah Arendt argues in *The Human Condition*, a distinct quality of ‘action’ is that it is self-revealing.

human action, with consequent human character, is due to this Self-determination, constitutes Freedom.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, according to Green, all action is motivated by the desire of a human to achieve self-satisfaction through the realisation of some object or goal. We are always pulled towards some state of affairs by its perceived desirability – we are not pushed into an action, but rather our action is to be understood teleologically, as the means to the realisation of some end. As such, all action is moral action in the sense that we are *responsible* for it. Anything we do because of a motive, because we freely chose to pursue that end or object, is a moral act for which we can be held to account. But, to revert to Green's basic question, is the end a good one? We have a reason for everything we do, but is our reason a good or bad one? This is the essential ethical question.

### **Moral Action – Realising the Good**

Green's answer to this question begins and ends with the individual. The basic unit of his analysis is the particular human being – reflecting, says Metz, 'the typical individualism of the English.'<sup>2</sup> 'The moral progress of mankind', stated Green in an 1879 lecture, 'has no reality except as resulting in the formation of more perfect individual characters ...'<sup>3</sup> For something to be good it must be good for individual persons, not some abstract entity like a nation or the state or a religion.

Our ultimate standard of worth is an ideal of *personal* worth. All other values are relative to value for, of, or in a person. To speak of progress or improvement or development of a nation or society or mankind, except as relative to some greater worth of persons, is to use words without meaning.<sup>4</sup>

His ethic is therefore a humanist one: it is about what is good for persons. So what is good for a person? Well, in one sense, all freely chosen objects of motivation are good. They are good because the individual chooses to do them. And a person is assumed by Green to be acting to realise their own good – which is self-satisfaction. When I choose to do y to achieve x it is because I consider that x will yield me satisfaction and realise a vision I have of myself – a kind of me + x. I eat food to satisfy my hunger and become a satiated me; I work hard at my studies to satisfy my desire for a good grade and see myself as winning a prize or getting the plaudits of my parents; I go for a walk to satisfy my desire to be healthy or to enjoy a country landscape, picturing myself surveying a

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<sup>1</sup> Fairbrother, *Philosophy of Thomas Hill Green*, p. 73-4.

<sup>2</sup> Metz, *Hundred Years of British Philosophy*, p. 283.

<sup>3</sup> T.H. Green, 'On the Different senses of "Freedom" as Applied to Will and to the Moral Progress of Man' (1879), in T.H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1883), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> T.H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1883), p. 193.

beautiful vista. All my ends are conceived of as satisfying myself through realising myself and, to this extent good, are good to me.

But this does not mean that they are *truly* good in a moral sense, that I *ought* to do them. Green argues that while all the things by which we satisfy our desire are good for us at some level, they are not equally good and some can be positively bad – bad for me (like taking a drug that damages by body) or bad for society (like when I steal to satisfy my desire for a new phone). Obviously, we need a criteria or standard for judging between human goals, a means by which we can judge between ends we wish to realise and determine which are morally good which we ought to do, and those which are bad and which we ought not to do. According to Green, all humans have had an intimation of such a standard all through their history – a sense of their better as opposed to their actual selves, which is ultimately a product of their binary nature as both a child of nature and a creature of God with a soul indwelling.<sup>1</sup> Hence all societies have had some moral code grounded in their sense of the better-selves they want to be. But these better-selves have not, in themselves, been the best. Rather, they have been steps on the way to it. We cannot truly know our best selves since humans are imperfect and are always developing. What Green was seeking to provide was a definition of the best as comprehensible by reflection in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, of the ideal against which the conduct of European Christians ought to be judged.

All conduct is an exertion of the will to realise an end or object as a means to self-satisfaction. The will is *good*, says Green, when *the self finds satisfaction of its true or essential self in an object of desire*. And what is this true self-satisfaction that represents the ideal against which we can judge our particular objects of desire? Green answers this question by reflecting upon what is necessary for us to act consciously at all. When we act to achieve some object we anticipate a feeling of self-satisfaction upon its realisation and we consciously bring it about for that reason. In our lives we proceed from object to object, consciously willing each object as a means to our satisfaction. But, clearly, if we are to consciously will a series of objects in this way there must be a continuous self that we are seeking to satisfy. This continuous self is our self-consciousness, the self-consciousness which makes possible our experience of the world as such and determines all our objects of desire. Hence we can ask of any given object of conscious desire, not merely will it satisfy some transitory felt-need, but will it satisfy our continuous self – our self-conscious self which is the condition for conscious desire and the sensation of satisfaction in the first place? Only if it satisfies the latter can the motive be considered good in an overall sense for a person.<sup>2</sup> Given this, Green concludes that the *standard or ideal of true self-satisfaction is the perfect development of our own capacity for self-conscious reflection*. Why? Because in developing these capacities we are realising what we truly, essentially, are. All human action involves self-realisation. But the degree to which this is achieved can

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<sup>1</sup> Metz, *Hundred Years of British Philosophy*, p. 279.

<sup>2</sup> C.f. D.G. Ritchie, *The Principles of State Interference* (Swan Sonnenschein & Co., London, 1902, p. 142. Ritchie was a student of Green's in the 1870s and a Tutor at Balliol in the 1880s.

vary radically. When we act in response to some felt need, say to eat a bar of chocolate, we are self-realising indeed, we are realising our desire for chocolate, and many of our actions through the day will be of this ‘quick-fix’ variety – as when we put on the TV and watch a comedy show, or when meet up with a friend for a gossip. But we are all aware, when we pursue these series of desires to attain particular states through the day, that they may conflict with our bigger, more considered, ends – our deeper understanding of the kind of person we wish to be. Thus, if a woman who wants to be an Olympic athlete skips a training session to go to the pub she will be aware that, though gratifying an immediate desire, she is compromising her permanent self by doing so. An athlete self-realises when they eat chocolate or go for a run, but they *more truly realise themselves* when they run than when they eat chocolate. To quote Nettleship:

The best life is that in which the consciousness of possible perfection is the most operative, i.e. in which it leads a man to have the greatest amount of objects and do the greatest amount of acts with the fullest consciousness that they are each and all only means to a more absolute end and elements in a larger activity.<sup>1</sup>

We only truly self-realise when we realise our true selves. Even running to progress an Olympic ambition is not, for Green, the truest or highest form of self-realisation since it does not lead someone to realise their true, permanent, essential self. A gold medal is not an absolute end, and in winning such a medal an individual does not realise their true self.

What, then, is a person’s true self? To this question, Green’s metaphysics provides the answer. *For Green, in the first part of his Prolegomena, established through the consideration of what it meant to be a human in the world that the true human self is self-consciousness, the conscious mind which is the condition of all experience and through which we access the underlying essence of reality, which is the eternal consciousness.* The eternal consciousness is the ultimate ground for all reality, including ourselves. Hence, to realise our capacity for rational thought, to understand the system of relations and the laws which govern the relationships between phenomena which constitute reality, and in so doing to come closer to the eternal consciousness which structures reality and which manifests itself in our own minds and in the society within which we live, is to realise what we essentially are as human beings. What separates humans from animals is self-consciousness, and the more our actions are reflective of rational disciplined thought and the less they are stirred by animal wants, the more we understand that the essence of reality is self-consciousness and that our individual minds partake of the quality of the cosmic mind, the more human we are and so the more self-realised as essentially thinking or spiritual beings. *A morally good action, therefore, is one which is motivated by a desire to realise our ideal as persons – to realise our essence as thinking, conscious,*

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<sup>1</sup> Nettleship, *Memoir of Thomas Hill Green*, p. 207.

spiritual humans whose acts of will are guided by permanent reason rather than transitory impulse or selfish desires. While we can never actually attain to that ideal, given our limitations as humans with bodies and senses and minds of finite capacity, we are acting in a morally good way when we are motivated by objects which progress our development towards the ideal. As Nettleship writes:

A man is good in proportion as his will is at one with his reason; i.e. in proportion as the several objects which he makes his own, and the several acts which he does, embody that idea of perfect self-satisfaction through perfect self-sacrifice in which the self-conscious reason makes itself known to him.<sup>1</sup>

Green's ethic, then, is one of self-realisation. Good motives and actions are ones which conduce to the development of our truly human capabilities, with the individual freely positing ends in the realisation of which they attain self-satisfaction, only to posit new ends – all the while seeking to realise their ideal selves as rational, self-conscious, beings. In short: 'realise your possible self'.

### **Society and the Common Good**

It might be considered, from this, that Green's ethic is egotistical – that it is all about the individual's quest for self-actualisation, to be realised through the development of rational thought. While not incorrect, this is not the heart of his system. For the weight of Green's system lies less with the individual and more with society. For Green argued that we each of us develop our own spiritual essence through our participation in society. To quote Dimova-Cookson and Mander:

Green holds that the true good is a common or social good. Transforming his earlier egoism into something almost directly its opposite, Green argues that while it is indeed true that the moral ideal is one of personal development and that the only possible motive for action is the attainment of personal good, it needs to be recognised that people are fundamentally social creatures, and hence that our true personal good properly understood turns out to be a social good. To pursue a selfish life is to misunderstand one's own true nature, and hence where one's own true happiness lies.<sup>2</sup>

Each of us is a member of a society and we exist in and through society. 'Without society,' says Green, 'no persons: this is as true as that without persons, without self-objectifying agents, there could be no such society as we know.'<sup>3</sup> From our earliest origins as humans we formed interrelations with other humans. We are social animals and as we interact with others, to our mutual benefit, we begin to grasp that we have common interests, that there is such a thing as a common good among the members of a social network. We learn that our own well-being is dependent upon the well-

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> Dimova-Cookson and Mander, *T.H. Green: Ethics, Metaphysics, and Political Philosophy*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 199.

being of the other members of our social group and that this conception of shared interests secured through membership of a group is the basis of why societies exist at all. As Green writes:

The perfection of human character – a perfection of individuals which is also that of society, and of society which is also that of individuals – is for man the only object of absolute or intrinsic value.<sup>1</sup>

The development of us all as free, conscious, rational beings is the condition for the development of each of us and *vice versa*. The more each of us helps, through our actions, to make a society in which all individuals can realise their true, permanent, selves, the more each one of us can approximate to our ideal. I can only realise my own rational, spiritual, nature when I inhabit and interact with a society of other rational, spiritual, persons, where the laws and customs and language and ethical rules structuring social action are attuned to the ability for all individuals to realise their capabilities. Only in such a mutually reinforcing social context can any one of us hope to progress towards realising our ideal essential selves. An individual seed contains within itself the blueprint for its future growth as a plant; but only if that seed falls on fertile, watered, soil can it flourish. And the same is true of humans.

It follows, for Green, that the good of society as a whole is structurally integral to the good of the individual. It is not as if I can prioritise my own good and then, in my spare hours, devote some time to the good of others. ‘My own good’, remarks Skorupski, ‘is “the common good”’:

The truer my understanding of my own self and my own good, Green thinks, the more I understand its identity-in-difference (metaphysically speaking) or differentiated at-one-ness (ethically speaking) with other selves and their good.<sup>2</sup>

As an Idealist, Green sees the idea of society as a rational community of thinking beings as being its ultimate cause, and that actual societies exist to realise this end ever more completely. As Fairbrother explained in his lectures on Green delivered at Oxford in the 1890s:

Society begins in the consciousness of a common good, of common interests. These interests necessitate definite interrelations. It is recognised that order and organisation are part of the actual life of the community. Individuals become no longer atomic units, the integral parts of a (more or less dimly) recognised whole, clothed with various but appropriate rights and duties. Force, sovereign power, is in no sense the originator of these rights, though it co-operates in sustaining their regular

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in M. Richter, *The Politics of Conscience: T.H. Green and His Age* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1964), p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> J. Skorupski, ‘Green and the Idealist Conception of a Person’s Good’, in Dimova-Cookson and Mander, *T.H. Green: Ethics, Metaphysics, and Political Philosophy*, p. 50.

performance. Every society is constituted and held together by a conscious, intelligent recognition of a common good. It is solely due to this recognition that individuals have attributes and rights; and the “power which in a political society they have to obey, is derived from the development and systematisation all those institutions for the regulation of a common life, without which they would have no rights at all.”<sup>1</sup>

So, if a good object is one which helps to realise the true, rational, capacity of the self, it entails, when properly understood, an object which promotes the self-realisation of *all* persons: for to truly realise myself, I must inhabit a society where others realise their true selves also. ‘All virtues’ remarks Green ‘are really social; or, more properly, the distinction between social and self-regarding virtues is a false one ... every virtue is social in the sense that unless the good to which the will is directed is one in which the well-being of society in some form or other is involved, the will is not virtuous at all.’<sup>2</sup> When I behave selfishly and pursue my own good at the expense of others then I am not behaving morally: I am not advancing the self-realisation of others, nor am I truly realising my own self, since a society where individuals pursue their own ends at the expense of others is not one in which anyone can truly and fully realise their best selves. The true good, then, is the common good, the common good of a society and, ultimately, humanity as a whole. *A purely good will is the will which wills the common good.*

It was Green’s recognition of the social context for individual flourishing that made his ethical philosophy distinctive. Indeed, though a self-professed and active Liberal in politics, it was this awareness of the intimate and mutually determining relationship between individual and society that gave a new social bent to his Liberalism, leading him away from the older individualist *laissez faire* doctrines of the political economists and early Utilitarians and towards a ‘New Liberalism’ more open to the need for state intervention – not to limit freedom but *increase* it. Where Liberalism had first struggled for *political* freedom and then *economic* freedom, it was now, Green believed, moving onto the question of *social* freedom.<sup>3</sup> In ethical terms, it led him to define the moral good as the good will, where the good will is the will which acts to promote the common good. We act rightly when we act to promote the self-realisation of the true selves of all members of society – including, obviously, ourselves. ‘The ideal is not only personal’, writes Fairbrother, ‘it is also social. Not that these two conceptions are opposed to each other – still less inconsistent with each other. They are different sides of one fact’.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fairbrother, *Philosophy of T.H. Green*, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation*, p. 244.

<sup>3</sup> D. Boucher and A. Vincent, *British Idealism and Political Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Fairbrother, *Philosophy of T.H. Green*, p. 85.

## The Development of the Common Good

‘Society’, comments Fairbrother, ‘is the very condition of the development of persons, and its special function is to render possible and to further this development. Hence, our Moral Idea is necessarily an ideal society – a *whole*, not an *aggregate*, made up of parts in normal inter-relation – each part fully conscious of itself, as such, while finding its true well-being in the relations to other parts, these relations being simply the perfect development of the special capacities of the individual members. Neither aspect of this ideal can be left out of sight; the social whole is indeed organic, it has life and growth, but the parts of the organism are self-conscious individuals.’<sup>1</sup> In the words of Green:

The perfection of human character – a perfection of individuals which is also that of society, and of society which is also that of individuals – is for man the only object of absolute or intrinsic value.<sup>2</sup>

Perfection, itself, man cannot achieve. And we cannot even know, truly, what it looks like. What we can know, by observing human history and the social world around us, is what progress towards it looks like. Humans have strived, though long ages, after the better:

The practical struggle after the better, of which the idea of there being a best has been the spring, has taken such effect in the world of man’s affairs as to make the way by which the best is to be more nearly approached plain enough to him that will see. In the broad result it is not hard to understand how man has bettered himself through institutions and habits which tend to make the welfare of all the welfare of each, and through the arts which make nature, both as used and as contemplated, the friend of man.<sup>3</sup>

The good will, the will which seeks the common good, first emerges when a person sees themselves as part of a larger social unit and deliberately seeks to forward the wellbeing of that group as an end in itself – to pursue the good of the members of a family or village community, sublimating their own personal good within the good of that wider community. Again we note how for Green all action, in this case moral action, involves the free conscious exercise of thought. We are always motivated by an idea. At its simplest the idea will be that of a want whose realisation will satisfy us. But such a motive will not be a moral one. A moral motive aims at the satisfaction of an idea of the common good, and this is transparently an idea, an idea which must be constituted by thought since it involves reflection to grasp the concept of the good of a family or tribe as a whole and the means by which it might be promoted, and to grasp that only by promoting this common good of the family or tribe can my own permanent

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>2</sup> Green, *Prolegomena*, pp. 266-7.

<sup>3</sup> Fairbrother, *Philosophy of T.H. Green*, pp. 103-04.

essential good be realised. ‘Every society’, writes Fairbrother, ‘is constituted and held together by a conscious, intelligent recognition of a common good.’<sup>1</sup>

Two things happen to this concept of the common good over time.

1. **First, it deepens as to its character** – ‘in the growing distinctness’, says Nettleship, ‘with which such consciousness has expressed itself in the organisation of life.’<sup>2</sup> At first it may be chiefly connected with material needs – food supply, defence, shelter. But gradually it takes on a more rational or spiritual character as the common good is seen as involving customs and laws; concepts of honour and honesty; religious ideas and organisation; the celebration of art or music or literature; ideas of self-discipline and service. All these aspects of social behaviour come to be seen as good in themselves, their basic tendency being the development of character. A certain kind of character will be promoted, and wrapped up with this character will be that of acting on the basis of, not short-term need or pleasure, but of the common good – the moral imperative to promote the wellbeing of the community and to do one’s duty.
2. **Second, it widens in its application.** Initially the common good may be seen in terms of social elites which exclude many others – women, children, slaves, poor people. Of course, a common good which is not common to everyone is not a common good at all. True self-realisation of all is the condition for the self-realisation of each and this idea is more and more grasped, extending the common good to ever larger numbers within society until, in a modern democracy, most (if not all) citizens are included. Furthermore, the conception of where the boundaries of the community lie will steadily widen. From the family to the tribe, from the tribe to the nation, from the nation to the union of nations, from the union of nations to the entire world. Strictly speaking the common good is the good of all humanity and only when all humans are free and able to realise their essence as rational beings will the ideal of true self-realization be achieved for everyone. To quote Nettleship:

The conception of self as related to other beings who are also selves, with whom therefore there is something to be shared, to whom there is something to be given, and from whom there is something to be received, has expanded from its germ in the simplest forms of family feeling into the recognition (at least in theory) of a brotherhood of mankind and a duty to humanity.<sup>3</sup>

Over time, that is to say, we come to understand that the full realisation of the capabilities of the human soul – the rational, self-conscious, thinking essence of humans – requires us to seek the realisation not only of our own capabilities, but the realisation of the capabilities of others in ever-widening social networks, beginning with the family and ending with the entire world. To fully realise my capacity for mathematics, for example, it is not enough that I study

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> Nettleship, *Memoir of Thomas Hill Green*, p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

mathematics, or even that other members of my family or College do so, but that the whole world does so – since only when the mathematical capacities of all the world’s people have been realised can the ideal of mathematical excellence be most realised among humans. And this applies to all distinctly human capacities, including moral action itself.

Green summarises his ethical theory as follows:

Our theory has been that the development of morality is founded on the action in man of an idea of true or absolute good, consisting in the full realisation of the capabilities of the human soul ... The good has come to be conceived with increasing clearness; not as anything which one man, or set of men, can gain or enjoy to the exclusion of others, but as a spiritual activity in which all may partake, and in which all must partake, if it is to amount to a full realisation of the faculties of the human soul. And the progress of thought in individuals, by which the conception of the good has been thus freed from material limitations, has gone along with a progress in social unification which has made it possible for men practically to conceive a claim of all upon all for freedom and support in the pursuit of a common end.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, a good act is one undertaken with the end of promoting the realisation of the thinking or spiritual aspect of human existence, for oneself and for others. When we recall that, for Green, the thinking consciousness of man is part of the eternal cosmic consciousness that underlies all reality, and that as each individual mind comes to greater self-knowledge and a deeper understanding of the rational spirit that underlies reality so does it more fully express the cosmic consciousness of which it is part, it is, clearly, but a short step for Green to be able to say that in acting to realise the common good humans are, in so doing, realising the cosmic consciousness or divine spirit in the universe: that they are, in short, doing God’s work and bringing human society into greater conformity to God’s plan. To cite a passage from one of Green’s celebrated Balliol ‘lay-sermons’:

God is forever reason; and His communication, His revelation is reason; not, however, abstract reason, but reason as taking a body from, and giving life to, the whole system of experience which makes the history of man. The revelation, therefore, is not made in a day, or a generation, or a century. The divine mind touches, modifies, becomes the mind of man, through a process of which mere intellectual conception is only the beginning, but of which the gradual complement is an unexhausted series of spiritual discipline through all the agencies of social life.<sup>2</sup>

The divine idea, wrote Green in his early essay *The Influence of Civilisation on Genius*, is ‘manifested in every created thing, under certain limitations from which it is

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<sup>1</sup> Green, *Prolegomena*, pp. 308-09.

<sup>2</sup> T.H. Green, ‘The Witness of God’, in R.L. Nettleship (ed.), *Works of T.H. Green* (Longmans, Green, and Co., London, 1888), Vol III., p. 239.

evermore working itself free; the mind of man is the only manifestation which can enjoy the consciousness of its perfect original; it alone can win its way to harmonious communion with the idea, and apprehend that living will, on which “its dark foundations rest”.<sup>1</sup> God, the eternal cosmic consciousness, is the essence of the human in its ideal or perfect form. ‘It is’, said Green, ‘the God in you which strives for communication with God.’<sup>2</sup> And to facilitate this journey towards the God of the cosmic spirit there was, for man, the example of Jesus Christ, who, whatever his nature and origins (divine or human), represents for humankind the *idea* of morality and reason.<sup>3</sup> ‘Christ, as an idea’, write Boucher and Vincent, ‘is the “true good” of Green’s moral theory, i.e. the “good” which provides abiding satisfaction. He is the ideal object or ideal self which is striven for in self-realisation.’<sup>4</sup> Or, as they neatly summarise: the true good of the possible self is the ‘Christed self.’<sup>5</sup>

### **Positive Freedom**

In doing good, then, we realise the cosmic consciousness on earth: we make a world where more and more people are realising their spiritual essence as rational beings, and in so doing realise the divine principle in human affairs. And in doing this we do something else: we realise our own freedom. Green, as is widely known, originated in Britain the contrast between negative and positive freedom, where positive freedom is the true character of freedom for humans. Whereas for negative freedom, to be free means to be exempt from rules and regulations telling us what to do, positive freedom, for Green, is the power to become what it lies within our capabilities to become. To be free is to self-actualise: to flourish as the kind of person we essentially are, to become more real. For, as Nettleship writes, ‘it must be remembered that in the moral development of the self, as in any other development, the result which is being developed is the true reality, while that which we are accustomed to call our “real” self, the self as it happens to be any given point in its development, is only a stage on the way to the completer self, relatively to which it is unreal.’<sup>6</sup> One can see here the parallels with the idea of lower and higher goods. To be positively free is not just to realise any potential we may have – the potential to kick a stone down the street or to spend long hours watching TV. To be free is to have the maximum power to make the best of ourselves, that is, to realise our true, defining, essential capability – the thing which is our essence, the end within us that permanently embodies what we are. It is the kind of freedom which the seed possesses when it grows and blossoms as a flower; which an eagle enjoys when, released from a cage, it takes wing and realises its potential as a hunter. As Green stated in 1879:

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<sup>1</sup> T.H. Green, ‘The Influence of Civilisation on Genius’, *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Nettleship, *Memoir of Thomas Hill Green*, p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> Boucher and Vincent, *British Idealism and Political Theory*, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Nettleship, *Memoir of Thomas Hill Green*, p. 141.

‘Freedom’ is the natural term by which the man ... describes to himself the state in which he shall have realised his ideal of himself, shall be at one with the law which he recognises as that which he ought to obey, shall have become all that he has it in him to be, and so fulfil the law of his being or ‘live according to his nature.’<sup>1</sup>

What, for humans, is this essential quality which is the true good of the person to realise? Yes, of course, it is man’s rational self-conscious mind, the immaterial spirit or thought world which resides at the core of us and makes us who we are. Not only is this conscious thinking self the essence of what it means to be human, but it is the exercise of this conscious rational self in choosing between objects of action that constitutes our freedom in the first place. As Green explains:

The determination of will by reason, then, which constitutes moral freedom, or autonomy, must mean its determination by an object which a person willing, in virtue of his reason, presents to himself, that object consisting in the realisation of an idea of perfection in and by himself.<sup>2</sup>

Man is free because he deliberately acts according to reason, and the more he acts deliberately and rationally the more free he is. Green’s former student David Ritchie summed it up succinctly: freedom is ‘self-determined action directed to the objects of reason ... Free acts are rational acts’.<sup>3</sup> As Ben Wempe remarks, for Green positive freedom is the condition in which a man self-determines himself as a rational consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Man is self-consciousness, and to truly realise himself he must merge his own consciousness with the cosmic consciousness of which he is but a part. In doing this humans satisfy their true selves. And this is their freedom.

So far as this state [of human perfection] is reached, the man may be said to be reconciled to ‘the law of his being’ which ... prevents him from finding satisfaction in the objects in which he ordinarily seeks it, or anywhere but in the realisation in himself of an idea of perfection. Since the law is, in fact, the action of that self-realising subject which is his self, and which exists in God as eternally self-realised, he may be said in this reconciliation to be at peace at once with himself and with God.<sup>5</sup>

When, by contrast, a person seeks satisfaction in an object the attainment of which interferes ‘with the realisation of the seeker’s possibilities or his progress towards perfection’ then he is not free since ‘the objects to which his actions are directed are objects in which, according to the law of his being, satisfaction of himself is not to be

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<sup>1</sup> Green, ‘On the Different senses of “Freedom” as Applied to Will and to the Moral Progress of Man’, pp. 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26

<sup>3</sup> Ritchie, *Principles of State Interference*, p. 146-47.

<sup>4</sup> B. Wempe, *T.H. Green’s Theory of Positive Freedom* (Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2004), p. 117.

<sup>5</sup> Green, ‘On the Different senses of “Freedom” as Applied to Will and to the Moral Progress of Man’, pp. 21-22.

found.<sup>1</sup> So when we act well and promote the common good, the common realisation amongst humans of the life of the rational spirit within us, we act according to the 'law of our being' and so we realise the positive freedom of those persons – we help them, each and every one, to be more rational, more spiritual, more conscious, more, in short, free. As Green put the point in a lecture to Liberals in Leicester in 1881:

When we speak of freedom as something to be so highly prized, we mean a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying, and that, too, something that we do or enjoy in common with others. We mean by it a power which each man exercises through the help or security given him by his fellow-men, and which he in turn helps to secure for them. When we measure the progress of a society by its growth in freedom, we measure it by the increasing development and exercise on the whole of those powers of contributing to social good with which we believe the members of the society to be endowed; in short, by the greater power on the part of the citizens as a body to make the most and best of themselves ... the full exercise of the faculties with which man is endowed.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Good and the State**

The liberation of the powers of all people to realise their potential as rational conscious persons is the end of any political community, and any laws or government policies are to be judged relative to that end. Like Hegel, Green sees the object of the state as freedom. What does this entail? For Green, the freedom of persons is promoted by removing obstacles to their own self-realisation. It is not a duty of the state to make a person good or free. Such a notion is a contradiction in terms. A good act is a freely chosen end which promotes the common good. When we are forced to do something we are, by definition, not freely choosing to do it, and thus whatever we do has no quality of moral goodness. Morality is a matter of choice and responsibility, not compulsion. What we can do, and what is our duty as moral members of society, is promote the creation of conditions within which people are free to make moral choices, to have the potential to realise their capacities as rational, conscious, human beings. This character of societies, namely to further the realisation of the capacities of their members, is why societies exist in the first place. As ever, Green's reasoning is teleological. To understand a thing, such as a society, is not to observe its empirical manifestations or history, but to deduce its essence *a priori*: what it fundamentally is and what it exists to realise. It is axiomatic for Green that the essence of a society is the common good of its members since humans would only associate in societies if, by doing so, they would promote their mutual good, and thus we must judge a society's rules and laws and customs and governance according to how far they facilitate this end. 'The real function of government', says Green, is 'to maintain conditions of life in which morality should be possible', where morality consists 'in the disinterested

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> T.H. Green, 'Lecture on Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract' (1881), in Nettleship (ed.), *Works of T.H. Green*, Vol. III., p. 371.

performance of self-imposed duties ...<sup>1</sup> The ‘value of the institutions of civil life’, he continues, ‘lies in their operation as giving reality to the capacities of will and reason and enabling them to be really exercised ... so far as they do in fact thus operate they are morally justified.’ As Nettleship observes, the point of view from which Green ‘regards political society throughout is as a product, the most conspicuous product, of self-consciousness.’<sup>2</sup>

A society then, and its laws and its government actions, exists to promote the self-realisation of its members and as such is a moral entity. Its purpose is a moral one – the realisation of the good of its members. There are two aspects to the society’s moral role.

First, the laws, which are the most fundamental feature of a political society, should be framed with a view to furthering the common good. This, after all, is the purpose of law and the justification for its injunctions – that it promotes the self-realisation of the members of society. As Fairbrother summarises:

The function, then, of Law and of civic institutions is to help man to realise his idea of self-perfection as a member of a social organisation in which each contributes to the better being of all the rest. In this fact of ‘nature’ lies the true ground of political obligation.<sup>3</sup>

To do this the laws ought to embody or reflect the common good of the community, and what is the common good of all people is that the laws be rational and in conformity to the rational consciousness of all persons. Now all human communities, from the moment of their commencement, are organised through laws, codes of behaviour, and customs. All such rules manifest, however inadequately, the operation of reason in human affairs. Just as the cosmic consciousness realises itself in the individual minds of all men, so does it realise itself in the collective organisations of all human societies. ‘Society’, remark Boucher and Vincent, ‘is part of an unfolding of Reason in the world. We thus come into a world embodying Reason.’<sup>4</sup> The thinking self-realising individual should thus see the political community and its rules and customs as expressive of their own personal rational capacity, and it is, therefore, the first duty of the individual to accept and obey the law and learn to see it as the collective expression of the human capacity for reason and self-realisation – which, for Green, is their freedom. To take an example: the law relating to private property will be accepted by each member of that society (however much property they personally have) because they will recognise that private property is necessary for the full development of human capacity – the ability of individuals and society to realise their capacities. They will see laws relating to property, not as class legislation or historical accidents, but as rationally related to the common good. This does not mean that

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<sup>1</sup> Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>2</sup> Nettleship, *Memoir of Thomas Hill Green*, p. 232.

<sup>3</sup> Fairbrother, *Philosophy of T.H. Green*, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Boucher and Vincent, *British Idealism and Political Theory*, p. 47.

actual states will exemplify the rational relations of the common good in anything like a perfect form; but the establishment of law itself among men is a step towards the realisation of this state and over time the laws of a society will tend towards those embodying the common good. This concept of law and its developing relationship to the individual over time is, evidently, similar to Hegel's concept of objective spirit. Starting from this position, it follows that the active self-realising citizen informed by an understanding of the common good will endeavour to amend the laws and rules of society so they more fully represent the rational relations necessary for the attainment of the individual and collective good. The individual, says A.J.M. Milne, 'must act as a member of the political community in which he finds himself, and his responsibility is to try and make it more of a political community, to raise the general level of rationality which it embodies.'<sup>1</sup> Hence a law can be judged as bad, and in need of change, when it prevents members of a community realising the level of rationality (and hence morality) they would otherwise be capable of. Slavery, for example, is a moral evil says Milne 'because it arbitrarily restricts rational human achievement.'<sup>2</sup>

Second, given that the state exists to help realise the collective good of its members, the question arises: how far should society act to promote the development of each individual? As we have noted, Green did not believe that a government, however well intentioned, ought to compel people to be good, for to do so would be destructive of the very principle of free development which is the whole ground of moral conduct. This was the ground of his rejection of paternalistic government:

The real function of government being to maintain conditions of life in which morality shall be possible, and morality consisting in the disinterested performance of self-imposed duties, 'paternal government' does its best to make it impossible by narrowing the room for the self-imposition of duties and for the play of disinterested motives.<sup>3</sup>

Against paternalism Green set the concept of active citizenship. To realise the collective good *all* members of society needed to be able to realise their potential *and* take an active and constructive part in the life of the community. To promote this ideal of free, active, citizenship the society might (and indeed ought to) intervene to remove obstacles to the free development of its members: after all, that is what society exists for. Ritchie, again, puts the point simply:

The State has, in his view, not the mere policeman's business of stepping in to arrest the wrongdoer, nor the sole function of ruthlessly enforcing fulfilment of contracts ...; but the duty of providing such an environment for individual men and women as to

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<sup>1</sup> A.J.M. Milne, *The Social Philosophy of English Idealism* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1962), p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Green, *Lectures on Political Obligation*, p. 40.

give *all*, as far as possible, an equal chance of realising what is best in their intellectual and moral natures.<sup>1</sup>

What was required, in other words, was an ‘enabling state’, a state enabling the active citizenship of its self-realising members. Expressed otherwise, the role of the state was to promote the conditions within which its individual members might realise their *positive freedom* and thereby the good of themselves and the community.<sup>2</sup>

Just what this might entail is hard to define and has the potential to become a charter for very wide intervention indeed. It might be argued that we create the best conditions for self-realisation when we educate someone from birth, feed them, build them a home, give them a car or computer or free tickets for their holidays. But this was not Green’s meaning: indeed, he opposed such paternalistic intervention since it would compromise the very freely-determined action he wished to promote. As a 19<sup>th</sup> century Liberal he was, fundamentally, an individualist and saw the development of each person as essentially their own responsibility, the sphere of their own reason and will. Hence what he had in mind was more limited intervention to secure the conditions essential for anyone to make moral choices at all: free education, protection from long hours of labour, restrictions on access to alcohol which could destroy reason and family life, urban sanitation to banish disease, and the right to own and enjoy private property so long as that ownership does not prevent others from realising their potential. The good person would promote the common good when they helped to ensure that their fellow citizens had access to these basic amenities. Consider the labour contract. Classical liberalism taught that each adult should be free to make a contract to supply their labour they pleased. Green disagreed, arguing that the state had a duty to intervene ‘to prevent labour from being sold under conditions which make it impossible for the person selling it ever to become a free contributor to social good in any form.’ Hence the state can and does intervene to prevent workers working in unsanitary or dangerous workplaces even when they might be prepared to do so. It also should intervene to limit the hours of work of women or children, since excessive hours of work lower the physical and moral resources of a society. The trade in alcohol, too, should be limited since excessive drinking frequently ruined the ‘health, purse, and capability’ not of the drunkard only, but of his family, and while some may complain of an infringement of liberty to drink, Green countered that a liberty could only be allowed to an individual when it did not, ‘as a rule, and on the whole’ impede the social good. Compulsory education, too, it should provide, since without ‘command of certain elementary arts and knowledge, the individual in modern society is as effectively crippled as by the loss of a limb or a broken constitution. He is not free to develop his faculties.’<sup>3</sup> The point was to create a space within which the individual

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<sup>1</sup> Ritchie, *Principles of State Interference*, pp. 149-50

<sup>2</sup> C.f. Boucher and Vincent, *British Idealism and Political Theory*, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Green, ‘Lecture on Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract’, pp. 373-74.

could self-realise through their own free volition – to learn to become good themselves. As Green remarked:

Our modern legislation then with reference to labour, and education, and health, involving as it does manifold interference with freedom of contract, is justified on the ground that it is the business of the state, not indeed directly to promote moral goodness, for that, from the very nature of moral goodness, it cannot do, but to maintain the conditions without which a free exercise of the human faculties is impossible.<sup>1</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

In Green's theory of morality we find a remarkable integration of a series of powerful ideas – ideas such as individual self-realisation, reason, spirit, the collective good, freedom, history as moral progress, the duties of the state, and God. Richter summarises the grandeur of Green's ambition:

Green thought he could vindicate the compatibility of Idealism with liberalism, individualism and the reforming spirit. The divine mind, or spiritual principle, gradually reproduces itself in man under certain limitations, but with the two characteristics of self-consciousness and self-objectification. Man deliberately pursues certain ideal objects. Because the spiritual principle, or reason, is within him, he possesses unique capabilities for good. Only in seeking to realise them can he satisfy himself and attain his true good, which is also freedom.<sup>2</sup>

It was a heady mix, and we can understand, even now, how such a combination of ideas could intoxicate the young Oxford students of the 1860s and 1870s. For here, apparently, was a faith which encompassed through rigorous reasoning, not only the conventional language of religion, morality, and duty, but such 'modern' ideas as reason, science, freedom, and progress. All were united in a vision of history which, like Hegel's, saw the principle of reason realise itself through the actions of individuals and thereby, at the same time, in the institutions and laws of society – a society whose bounds steadily extend to embrace all of humanity. And this rational principle which gradually shapes and forms the human world is the cosmic or divine spirit, which for Green was coterminous with God, in which humans increasingly recognise their essence and their freedom. To quote Green's words in the *Prolegomena*:

Thus in the conscientious citizen of modern Christendom reason without and reason within, reason as objective and reason as subjective, reason as the better spirit of the social order in which he lives, and reason as his loyal recognition and interpretation of that spirit – these being but different aspects of one and the same reality, which is the operation of the divine mind in man – combine to yield both the judgement, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>2</sup> Richter, *Politics of Conscience*, p. 208.

obedience to the judgement, which we variously express by saying that every human person has an absolute value; that humanity in the person of everyone is always to be treated as an end, never merely as a means; that in the estimate of that well-being which forms the true good every one is to count for one and no one for more than one; that every one has a 'suum' which every one else is bound to render him.<sup>1</sup>

Combining the idea of God with the example of the historical Jesus, Green arrived at a position which Nettleship characterised as that of a 'religious radical'.

He was 'religious,' in so far as his theory required for its coherence the conception of a spirit which is revealed in nature and man, but is not contained in either; he was 'radical,' in so far as he believed that participation in a common rational nature conferred on every man the right of free development and imposed on every man the duty of furthering that development in himself and others.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, precisely because Green's system compasses both religion and radicalism with such aplomb, we might wonder if it can truly be sustained. Green says that an action is moral if it helps to realise the true end of man, the real capabilities possessed not just by one person but by society (even the world) as a whole. If it is self-actualising and leads to the perfection of human character as a whole it is good. This striking result rests upon a series of assumptions:

1. We can know what the true end or capability of man is.
2. That this true end is good.
3. That its attainment yields all people the fullest satisfaction.
4. That it is the same for all persons, so we can sum individuals to obtain the common good.

Green felt able to accept all these propositions with little question. He was able to do so because of another, meta-assumption, namely that the underlying essence of the world is cosmic spirit or thought. This, for Green, is simply so, and it makes little sense to reject or kick against it. Of course, to deduce ought from is represents a well-known fallacy: for example, today we might accept that nature develops through the laws of evolution, but it does not follow that we simply let those laws play out in human society – we intervene to heal the sick and support the weak. Hence, if Green does not simply identify the cosmic consciousness as reality and leave the question of ethical behaviour to be considered separately it is because he assumes something more – namely, that the underlying structure of reality is not simply the case, it is also good as such. Again, Green doesn't question this – because he starting point is the divine spirit which is both reason and love. In the famous Hegelian formula: the rational is the real. Once

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<sup>1</sup> Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 231.

<sup>2</sup> Nettleship, *Memoir of Thomas Hill Green*, pp. 24-5.

this is accepted, the rest of his reasoning falls into place: to be good is to be like God – to be rational and loving, to pursue the common good of man as Jesus did.

The logic is impeccable, yet it is contingent upon the view that the divine spirit exists and is love and reason and that it ought to be realised and it is the essence of humans to do so. In this way Green was able to build the most stunning structures on the most unscrutinised of assumptions. The problem is, as Richter observes, is that what to Green ‘were indisputable postulates of reason now appear to be the result of wishful thinking.’<sup>1</sup> What was true and good in Green’s philosophy were exactly what Green thought were true and good when he began and what he wished to be true and good. As Richter continues, serves, Green’s optimism regarding the convergence of the individual and social good through moral duty was more of a theological than a philosophical doctrine and arose naturally from the fact that theology and philosophy were never quite distinguished by Green, ‘whose thought undeniably was a political theology.’<sup>2</sup> It was, surely, a matter of faith more than reason to be able to assume that rational self-consciousness is the real essence of man; that realising their rational selves is the highest ideal of individual men; that all men in all societies (and ultimately all humanity) share in one common goal to realise reason as their overarching common good; and that human history tends towards this outcome. Evidently these propositions largely follow the system of Hegel, and what Green did was to take up and make the Hegelian system his own because it spoke to him, providing him with a congenial metaphysics upon which to ground a Christian faith at a time when the kind of Biblical-historical accounts of religious truth dominant within Britain in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century were increasingly being called into question by German scholarship. Green was, in the words of Skorupski, ‘a morality-intoxicated’ man, and wished to justify intellectually his genuine care for the good of his fellow humans and found that, while the Bible and its stories of the life of Jesus were simply too historically contingent to serve as such an unquestionable foundation, the German Idealism of Kant and Hegel could provide just that. From this point on his project was not criticism or scepticism, but re-statement and popularisation. His success in this is shown by the fact that he achieved such influence despite not publishing, in his own lifetime, a single book. But whether his English Hegelianism was in any sense ‘liberal’ might be doubted. Although Green claimed that moral virtue could only apply to individuals, there was precious space left for the individual in his grand conception of the common good. ‘What’, asks Skorupski, ‘are we to do when we’re *not* serving each other? ... Is there not something positively perverse in making these aspirations the focal ideal of *liberalism*?’<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richter, *Politics of Conscience*, p. 253.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup> Skorupski, ‘Green and the Idealist Conception of a Person’s Good’, pp. 73-4.

