

Introduction

Although Thomas Hill Green (1836–1882) was classified as an idealist thinker, most commentators noticed that his idealism was quite atypical. Seth, following Balfour's footsteps, already realized the oddness of Green's dialectic.¹ According to Milne, the notion of the concrete universal, which the British idealists took over from Hegel, revealed a certain ambiguity in their work.² As a result of its ambiguous character, if Green's political philosophy has usually been investigated in the light of its relationship with idealism,³ continuity with the previous British tradition has not been denied.⁴ At the same time, those who, like Milne, Plamenatz and Mabbott, pointed out that there was a mingling of hedonism and idealism in Green, corroborated Collingwood's view of the autochthonous character of British idealism.⁵ Similarly, Monro argued that Green's conception of general will was not incompatible with a utilitarian

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- [1] A. Seth, *Hegelianism and Personality* (London, second edition 1893 [1887]), pp. 27–8 and A. J. Balfour, 'Green's Metaphysics of Knowledge', *Mind*, 9 (1884), pp. 73–92.
 - [2] A. J.M. Milne, *The Social Philosophy of English Idealism* (London, 1962), p. 15.
 - [3] See A.B. Ulam, *Philosophical Foundations of English Socialism* (Cambridge, 1951); J. Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (London, 1957); A. Quinton, 'Absolute Idealism', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 57 (1971), pp. 303–29; C. Camporesi, *L'uno e i molti: l'idealismo britannico dal 1830 al 1920* (Florence, 1980); P. Robbins, *The British Hegelians, 1875–1925* (London, 1982); P. Nicholson, *The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists: Selected Studies* (Cambridge, 1990).
 - [4] See D.G. Ritchie, *The Principles of State Interference: Four Essays on the Political Philosophy of Mr. Herbert Spencer, J.S. Mill, and T.H. Green* (London, 1891); A.D. Lindsay, 'T.H. Green and the Idealists' in F.J.C. Hearnshaw, ed., *The Social and Political Ideas of Some Representative Thinkers of the Victorian Age* (New York, 1933); F.P. Harris, *Neo-Idealist Political Theory: Its Continuity with the British Tradition* (New York, 1944).
 - [5] Milne, *The Social Philosophy of English Idealism*, pp. 103–4; J.P. Plamenatz, *Consent, Freedom and Political Obligation* (London, 1968), p. 73; J.D. Mabbott, *The State and the Citizen: An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (London, 1967), p. 41; R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (London, 1939), pp. 15–6.

compromise which resulted from a multiplicity of contrasting interests cementing themselves through tradition and custom.⁶ Alessandro Passerin d'Entrèves emphasised the inadequacy of an interpretation of Green's political philosophy which exaggerated its idealism.⁷ In this vein, Pringle-Pattison's judgement, dating back to the end of the nineteenth-century, appears to be quite insightful. He observed that:

It is a serious mistake to suppose that, in Green, for example, we have simply a revival of Kant, or a revival of Hegel, or a combination of the two. Materials certainly have been drawn from both these thinkers; but the result is a type of thought which has never existed before, and of which it is absurd, therefore, to speak as an importation from Germany.⁸

Almost everybody agreed that Green's relationship with German idealism, and particularly with Hegel, was a very controversial one.

Whilst those who favoured Green's inclination to justify State intervention affirmed that Kant's influence was more important than that of Hegel,⁹ critics like Berlin claimed that Green added a religious dimension which made Hegel's position much more dangerous as regards the problem of freedom.¹⁰ Richter had reduced Green's liberalism to a surrogate faith.¹¹ Richter realized that religion was a key element for understanding Green's connection with idealism, but he missed the point. Richter correctly stated that Green saw in

- [6] D.H. Monro, 'Green, Rousseau and the Culture Pattern', *Philosophy*, 26 (1951), p. 347.
- [7] A. Passerin d'Entrèves, 'Il problema dell'obbligazione politica nel pensiero inglese contemporaneo', *Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia del diritto*, 8 (1928), p. 29. Vittorio Frosini stated that Green owed much to Hume: *La ragione dello stato: Studi sul pensiero politico inglese contemporaneo* (Milan, 1976), pp. 23–4. In a similar way, Jellamo maintained that in Green's philosophy empiricism played an important role: *Interpretazione del bene comune: Saggio su Thomas H. Green* (Milan, 1993), p. 4.
- [8] Quoted in A.P.F. Sell, *Philosophical Idealism and Christian Belief* (Cardiff, 1995), p. 47. See also A. Jellamo, 'Da Mill a Green: osservazioni su liberty e freedom', *I problemi della pedagogia*, 41 (1995), p. 199.
- [9] See O. Bellini, 'La società civile secondo Thomas Hill Green', *Nuovi Studi Politici*, 6 (1976), pp. 114–8; C. Palazzolo, *Idealismo e liberalismo: La filosofia pratica di T.H. Green* (Carrara, 1983), pp. 103–5; G. Thomas, *The Moral Philosophy of T. H. Green* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 52–4, 286–7.
- [10] I. Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' in *Four Essays On Liberty* (Oxford, 1969), p. 50.
- [11] M. Richter, 'T.H. Green and His Audience: Liberalism as a Surrogate Faith', *Review of Politics*, 18 (1956), pp. 444–72.

"Philosophical Idealism, the fulfilment and correction of Puritanism."¹² However, Richter overlooked that the Puritan element was to be viewed as an instrument that could make a foreign philosophy which was considered abstract and authoritarian, more liberal and democratic. Consistently with this hypothesis, it seems as if Green sifted German idealism with a particular target in sight, because he was able to pick out what he needed to preserve and to reject what he did not.

Though some scholars showed themselves aware of the importance of the link between Green's idealism and protestant theology,¹³ the connection between the Puritan background of Green and his idealism has not been examined. At the same time, it was almost universally recognized that Puritanism was a theme which underpinned Green's political thought. His contemporaries noted this too. One fellow member of the Old Mortality Essay Society in the early 1860s reported that "T. H. Green preached Hegel, with the accent of a Puritan."¹⁴ Richter himself admitted that Puritanism played an important role in the formation of Green's ideas, and Frosini confirmed that Green owed much to Puritanism.¹⁵

The present study deals with the complex relationship between Puritanism and idealism in Green's thought. The book aims to prove that Green's main purpose was to promote the achievement of democracy in his own country, and that he used Puritanism in order to make German idealism consistent with English democracy. For Green, the anti-formalist attitude which characterized Puritanism stemmed from a quite concrete way of living and thinking which could be set in opposition to the abstractness of German idealism. It is worth remembering the judgement of John Addington Symonds on the nature of Green's Puritanism. Symonds, who was not only

[12] M. Richter, *The Politics of Conscience: T.H. Green and His Age* (London, 1964), p. 41; see also pp. 210-1.

[13] See, for instance, "'The Word is Nigh Thee': The Religious Context of Idealism" in A. Vincent and R. Plant, *Philosophy, Politics and Citizenship: The Life and Thought of the British Idealists* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 6-17; B.M.G. Reardon, 'T.H. Green as a Theologian' in A. Vincent, ed., *The Philosophy of T.H. Green* (Aldershot, 1986), pp. 36-47; A. Vincent, 'T.H. Green and the Religion of Citizenship' in *ibid.*, pp. 48-61.

[14] The Rev. W. Berkley, quoted in William Knight, *Memoir of John Nichol* (Glasgow, 1896), p. 150.

[15] Richter, *The Politics of Conscience*, pp. 40-1; V. Frosini, 'Sul problema dell'obbligazione politica nel pensiero di Green' in T.H. Green, *L'obbligazione politica*, trans. G. Buttà (Catania, 1973), pp. 63-4, 67-8.

one of Green's closest friends but also his brother-in-law, wrote that Green had taught him that the principles of democracy and socialism were active factors in modern politics which had to be accepted as actualities, and that they should not be taken up in any revolutionary or extreme way but grasped with "the spirit of a philosophical Puritan & a Christian who loved his fellow-men."¹⁶

In this sense, though Puritanism was viewed as similar to that typical English background from which empiricism also sprang, yet its main concern was that facts should not be accepted as the sole reality. On the other hand, in Green's eyes, idealism too, despite moving from a viewpoint antithetical to that of empiricism, flowed into a passive acceptance of facts. In Green's analysis, Puritanism was a useful tool which could remedy the defects both of empiricism and idealism. Empiricism needed to be freed from its tendency to be the prisoner of facts, while idealism needed to be emancipated from its inclination to sanctify facts. Facts formed the focus of Green's position, but both extreme views, empiricism and idealism, should be avoided and Puritanism was to contribute to this end. Accordingly, that anti-formalist view from which the saints drew their inspiration during the Commonwealth, could be very helpful.¹⁷ Because Puritanism attached more importance to substance than to forms, it could help preserve the best of both empiricism and idealism. Indeed, Green particularly appreciated the Puritan rejection of formality because it meant that institutions should not be treated as absolute: the invisible church always comes first.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Green was well aware that a revived Puritanism had to be of a very different kind from that of the seventeenth-century. According to him, the Independents or Congregationalists, the leading sect in the seventeenth cen-

[16] Recollections, in I. Biography, b) Recollection of Green, Green Papers; printed in Herbert M. Schueller and Robert L. Peters, ed., *The Letters of John Addington Symonds. Volume III: 1885-1893* (Detroit, 1969), p. 176.

[17] Green surely admired the Puritans whenever they fought for unity within formal diversity. "If unity were to be preserved - and it was generally agreed that anything less would be catastrophic - there were only two approaches: to insist on uniformity, by persuasion and coercion, or, alternatively, to minimise formal differences and stress unity of substance." J.C. Davis, 'Against Formality: One Aspect of the English Revolution', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, 3 (1993), p. 279.

[18] See Davis, 'Against Formality: One Aspect of the English Revolution', pp. 269-71.

tury revolution, could be remembered as champions of toleration and their example could inspire the policy of those who in the nineteenth century were still fighting for religious liberty. Yet the Independents had not managed to be tolerant in their own age. In the same way, the Levellers' ideas were intrinsically democratic but the Levellers themselves were bound by the conditions of their own times and did not always think or act democratically. Both the Independents and the Levellers were unable to put their ideals into practice, Green judged, because they lacked a proper philosophy. The Puritan philosophy was condemned to give rise to nondemocratic governments: it sanctioned the supremacy of both an elite and a dictator. In Green's view, therefore, the accomplishment of the Puritan revolution required that toleration and democracy be embodied in a new philosophy.

Already in his undergraduate essays, Green seemed to offer the teaching of Hume in a new form. Empiricism resulted in scepticism and, for Green, that could have caused the collapse of the young English democracy. Nonetheless, the common sense that lay at the basis of Hume's position had to be preserved. According to Green, it was a matter of marrying empiricism with the urge for improvement which came from a genuine religious belief. At the same time Green had to turn idealism into a vehicle of the Puritan anti-formalist attitude. I aim to prove that for Green, Puritanism could be regarded as an instrument which could avoid what he considered a risk: the excessive abstractness of German idealism. As Maurice Mandelbaum suggested in *Man, History and Reason*, Green found important those aspects of Fichte's philosophy showing the impossibility of conceiving a self independently of the empirical world.¹⁹ But, as Nettleship reported, Green read more of Fichte only in his later years.²⁰ On the other hand, Green knew that abstractness was indicative of an anti-democratic attitude. I intend to show how Green avoided that by turning to F. C. Baur. Green said that Baur was nearly the most

[19] M. Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (Baltimore & London, 1971), pp.221-3.

[20] R.L. Nettleship, *Memoir* in Nettleship, ed., *Works of Thomas Hill Green: Vol. III. Miscellanies and Memoir* (London, 1888), reprinted in *Collected Works of T.H. Green*, edited and introduced by P. Nicholson, 5 vols (Bristol, 1997), III, p. cxxv. In 1906 the *Memoir* was published separately (London, 1906; reprinted Bristol, 1993). All citations from Green's *Works* are drawn from Nicholson's edition.

instructive writer he ever met with.²¹ It was Baur who accused Hegel of having separated "matter" and "form": the idea was not prior to history, history was prior to the idea.

Green did not doubt that German idealism stemmed from the Lutheran Reformation, and he took it for granted that an idealism engendered by the Puritan revolution would be of a very different kind. Hegel deployed his position along lines laid down by Luther, so it had been adapted to a tradition which originated in another context. Almost from its beginning the Lutheran Reformation did not distinguish between church and state, seen as two faces of the same spiritual organism. Both Luther and Calvin claimed the primacy of the *Ecclesia Invisibilis*, but the former was unable to defend his viewpoint. Indeed Green was convinced that the reality of neither church nor state could correspond to the idea and that, despite its permeating strength, German thought was destined to reveal itself as a powerless tool. By contrast, the popular feeling out of which the Reformation arose in England was one of rebellion against any institutional interference in religion. The English Reformation was based on Calvin's doctrine, which was more akin than Luther's to a practical and commercial bent which nourished a sense of personal freedom and independence fully compatible with a republican spirit. That spirit would be fostered by the influence of the Puritan revolution.

Green's interpretation of the relationship between "matter" and "form" was thoroughly congruous with a political theology which, by bearing witness to a God who is in the world but not of it, aimed at reaffirming the pre-eminence of the invisible church. It followed that institutions, above all the state, cannot arrogate to themselves a right to prescribe right and wrong in such an abstract and absolute way as to set aside what is going on among ordinary people. Ordinary people are more willing to compromise and less inclined to unreasonable quarrels about speculations. Green knew that both Puritan philosophy and Hegelian idealism were prone to ignore the sufferings of ordinary people.

Nevertheless, like Tocqueville and J.S. Mill, Green was aware of the risk that the advent of a mass democracy might make it acceptable for individuals to be unscrupulous and bend the world to their own satisfaction. For that reason,

[21] Nettleship, *Memoir*, p. xxxvii.

unlike Victorian novelists, he believed that that sociability which flourishes from sharing the same destiny was not only an escape route from evil but also a constitutive element of a personality whose ripening (self-realization) was assured by a spiritual agent (the eternal consciousness).

I examine here Green's position with regard to the theme of exceptional individuality, arguing that he shared with J. S. Mill the viewpoint that the corruption of democracy could be alleviated by an individual able to resist the force of circumstances, whenever this force boosts egoism and lack of respect for others. Circumstances play an important role in the moulding of character, but they are not decisive. Green's support for democracy made him sharply critical of Carlyle's intention of reviving the Puritan past by resorting to the leadership of heroes. To Carlyle's hero, Green opposed his Puritan exceptional individuality, which in the seventeenth century revolution was exemplified above all by the saints: Cromwell and Vane. They were against any dogmatism, persuaded that the invisible church was more important than the institutional one. If Cromwell and Vane were right about dogmatism, Green judged that they were mistaken on another matter: they regarded themselves as uninfluenced by historical circumstances. It followed that Green's exceptional individuality, the philosopher-saint, despite preserving the anti-formalist attitude of the Puritans, would be based on a philosophy that was much more concrete and historical than Puritan philosophy. As an instance, the philosopher-saint, unlike the Puritan saints, did not reject every kind of dogma but only the tendency to see it in a definitive form. Only in this way could the Puritan liberal and democratic ideals be put into practice.

Green's Puritan democracy was deeply imbued with common sense. On Green's interpretation, democracy came from that peculiar religious sense first exported to America by the Pilgrim Fathers and strengthened by the Puritan revolution. Puritanism was so embedded in common sense that it was only through common sense that changes could be effected. For that reason, conscience was viewed as an organ by means of which both common sense and the Divine can reveal themselves; and the people were the medium between these two terms. No abstract plan would have interfered with the expression of common sense. On the other hand, to the extent political power distanced itself from common sense, the basis

of its authority would be weakened and, as a consequence, it would have to resort more and more to force rather than consent. At the same time, common sense was not destined to perpetuate itself in the same form but to grow and mature, and political power had to change according to this evolution.

This book aims to demonstrate that democracy, as Green knew it, should be understood only as the latest product of common sense and, for that reason, it could not be regarded as a final form either. Green was well aware of this, and this is probably why he was not particularly interested in the forms of democracy. My work shows how Green's conception of democracy, stemming from a common sense enlivened by a rational will which reflected the Puritan primacy of the spirit, implied at least three principles: a) conscience should not to be interfered with, because it bears witness to the expression of common sense and the Divine; b) every push coming from below should not only be encouraged, but considered a necessary element to develop common sense; c) the people is more likely to be able to express such common sense if it is associated.

Accordingly the structure of the book is as follows. Chapter I shows how Puritanism was a theme underpinning Green's position from its beginnings and influencing its whole development. I establish that the typical anti-formalist attitude which lies at the basis of Puritanism was the main factor which led Green to realize that both idealism and empiricism had to be amended. At the same time, I show how Puritanism grounded Green's effort to mediate between empiricism and idealism. By way of illustration, Green's judgment on India already bore witness to his conviction of the necessity to conciliate idealism and empiricism with an evident religious goal in view. Chapter II deepens the analysis of Green's reception of Puritanism. The chapter starts from Green's elaboration of the concept of exceptional individuality, and is intended to show how Green, through his concept of exceptional individuality, reacted against the risk that egoism was further encouraged by the advent of a mass society which, as novels attested, would have sanctioned the death of the aristocratic hero. Further, exceptional individuality is a Puritan theme bound to be revisited by Green in the light of his new philosophy. In this vein, the key objective of the chapter is to illustrate how Baur was Green's main philosophical point of reference, which led

him to a new interpretation of Puritanism. Thanks to Baur Green seemed to be persuaded of the possibility of accomplishing the Puritan revolution. Green's *Four Lectures on the English Revolution* can be regarded, therefore, as a sort of manifesto expounding his political project.

This is complemented by the study of the impact of Green's political project on reality, that is, by the detailed examination of his political activity contained in Chapter III. This chapter uses Green's political biography as a lens through which to view how Green's political ideas came from his new philosophy and how his political activity was influenced by it. In his public speeches Green did not seem to be very interested in arguing about the forms of democracy. I intend to prove here that Green's political activity was mainly concerned with avoiding the risk that conscience, as far as it is a vehicle both of common sense and the Divine, would be interfered with by political power, and to demonstrate that Green thought the progress of common sense would be checked by obstacles which hindered the growth of morality on the part of the most disadvantaged. From this perspective, the chapter identifies the Land and the Liquor Questions as two central problems which had to be tackled in order to avoid the risk that the Divine, which makes common sense ripen, would dry up. In addition, I establish that education was in Green's view the only means by which such a conceived common sense could grow and mature without interfering with conscience. This chapter also sets out to show how, for Green, people are more likely to express common sense if they are associated, and how those who rejected democracy were always bent on preventing them from associating.

Chapter IV compares Green's conception of political obligation with his philosophy, illustrating how in Green's position there is no interruption between philosophy and practice. J.S. Mill, despite admitting the lack of a general theory on state intervention, thought it was better to refrain from formulating such a theory. Hegel, on the other hand, stated that English backwardness came just from the fact that the English were unable to overcome the level of particularities. I argue that Green saw a third way – which I term the Puritan way – and that accordingly he thought it was possible to find an exit from the impasse which troubled English champions of democracy. This chapter claims that Green's conception of political obliga-

tion stemmed from a teleological view like Vane's rather than from Kantian formalism. Green's distinction between positive and negative freedom itself owes much to Vane. In the light of the third Puritan way thought up by Green, this chapter provides an examination of various questions concerning political obligation, and shows that many inconsistencies in Green's position usually identified by commentators are not inconsistencies at all. Green himself did not do enough to explain his unusual viewpoint. Indeed, because it aims to mediate between empiricism and idealism with a religious target in view, Green's political philosophy can be rightly regarded as unprecedented in the English philosophical tradition.