

# Introduction

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Thomas Hill Green was a nineteenth century thinker, who made an important contribution to the introduction of continental idealist philosophy in Britain. In this manner he helped to establish a school of thought known as the British Idealists, which was to become the dominant trend in British philosophy in the last three decades of that century. In this book I seek to reconstruct Green's theory of positive freedom as an integral part of his system of Idealist philosophy.

## A. The Thesis of the Book

One of the more remarkable features of Green's reputation as a philosopher was that, in spite of considerable literary output during his academic career, very little of this was published during his lifetime. Apart from a lengthy *Introduction* to a new edition of Hume, which he prepared with T.H. Grose, his publications did not amount to more than a small number of essays and reviews.<sup>1</sup> It was not until after his early death in 1882 that any of his other works were published, including

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[1] Green's publications during his lifetime were: a contribution for the 'Old Mortality' essay reading society entitled 'The Force of Circumstances,' which was included in a volume *Undergraduate Papers*, Oxford, 1858; a winning essay for the Chancellor's Prize in 1862 on 'An Estimate of the Value and Influence of Works of Fiction in Modern Times'; two articles for the *North British Review*: on 'The Philosophy of Aristotle,' in September 1866, and on 'Popular Philosophy in its Relation to Life,' which appeared in March 1868; the two introductions to Hume's *Treatise and Essays* referred to above, in 1874; a series of articles in the *Contemporary Review* concerning the work of H. Spencer and G.H. Lewes, in 1877-1881 (four articles were originally planned but the publication of the last article, which was later published in Green's collected *Works*, was abandoned because of the death of Lewes, and a rejoinder to criticism of the original series appeared in 1881); two privately published Lay Sermons; four book reviews in the late 1870s for *Academy*, a periodical issued by his former pupil Appleton; a public lecture for the Liberal Association in Leicester on *Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract*, published by Slatter & Rose, Oxford, in 1881; and an

those with which he acquired a place in the history of British philosophy. First of all came his influential treatise on moral philosophy, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, which was based on his professorial lectures in 1880-1882.<sup>2</sup> Of all his posthumous publications, *Prolegomena* was without doubt the book which corresponded best to the type of work Green himself would have published, had he lived longer. According to his own account,<sup>3</sup> the manuscript was complete but for some twenty or thirty pages, and it required only minor editorial amendments by his former pupil A.C. Bradley before it was printed. All of Green's other posthumously published writings were included in the edition of his *Works*, edited by another pupil, R.L. Nettleship, who also wrote a short *Memoir* of Green.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the writings already published during his lifetime Nettleship selected two lecture courses from Green's tutorial period: one on Kant's *Critique* complemented with notes on Kant's moral philosophy and another on Mill's *Logic*, as well as Green's professorial lectures on 'The Principles of Political Obligation and the Social Virtues,' delivered over three terms in 1879-1880.<sup>5</sup>

The reputation as a philosopher which Green acquired through his publications was chiefly in the field of ethical and political philosophy: his ethical theory was fully worked up in his influential and authoritative *Prolegomena*, while he made his name as a political philosopher with the lectures on Political Obligation already mentioned, which were initially published in the collected *Works*, but afterwards issued under separate cover. However, if we do not restrict ourselves to Green's published writings it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Green viewed his philosophical task primarily as metaphysical. It is evident from his manuscripts that Green

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extract of the forthcoming *Prolegomena* on the metaphysical foundations of his moral philosophy, in *Mind* in 1882.

- [2] *Prolegomena to Ethics*, Oxford, 1883. The latest edition of this text was edited and introduced by David O. Brink, Oxford, 2003. See also by the same author *Perfectionism and the Common Good: Themes in the Philosophy of T.H. Green*, Oxford, 2003.
- [3] Ms letter to Messrs. Longmans dd. 14 March 1882.
- [4] *The Works of Thomas Hill Green*, ed. R.L. Nettleship, 3 vols, London, 1885-8; the modern edition is *Collected Works of T.H. Green*, ed. Peter Nicholson, reissued with two new volumes (making five in total): vol. iv is *Prolegomena to Ethics*, vol. v contains selections from Green's undergraduate essays and speeches and some of the formerly unpublished manuscripts. Bristol, 1997.
- [5] This was the original title of Green's lectures according to the Balliol timetable for the academic year 1879-80.

saw an idealist position in metaphysics as a necessary starting point for his philosophy, indeed for any sound philosophy. Now, it may be argued that this is an interpretation that can also readily be grasped from his published work, notably his critical exposition on Locke and Hume and his first positive statement of his doctrine in *Prolegomena*.<sup>6</sup> But, in the published Green, his metaphysical doctrine was stated only in concise form, and suffers from a good deal of unresolved puzzles. His unpublished philosophical papers, on which this study draws, contain ample evidence of the powerful connection Green construed between his first principles and other realms of his philosophy, including moral and political theory.

The thesis I want to defend here is that the far-reaching and beneficial influence of Green's political doctrine, on public policy as well as in the field of political theory, was founded on a misinterpretation of his philosophical stand, since the metaphysical basis on which Green argued for his political position was largely neglected. But, as my interest in Green is primarily in his social philosophy, his metaphysics is only of importance to me in so far as it has implications for his moral and political philosophy. I shall restrict myself, in dealing with Green's system of first principles, to Green's concept of the self, which may be seen as one of the least satisfactory parts of the metaphysics set out in the introductory books of the *Prolegomena*. Green treats this subject very summarily and inadequately in the course of his discussion of the relationship between, on the one hand, the eternal consciousness, an entity the activity of which according to Green must be presupposed in order to explain the very possibility of a world of experience, and, on the other hand, the finite mind or each individual conscious subject. A reading of Green's unpublished manuscripts, however, shows that his thinking on this matter was much more concrete, and his ideas much more explicit than can be gathered from the published *Works*.

This study comprises five chapters. The first discusses Green's philosophical development and examines an important influence that went into the formation of his philosophical opinions. Chapter Two considers Green's metaphysics and describes how some of the most obvious omissions from the concise version of his metaphysical doctrine, as it is found in

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[6] As did David O. Brink in a personal communication at the Green conference held in September 2002 at Harris Manchester College, Oxford.

his published works, may be remedied by reference to Green's unpublished material. In particular, it will be demonstrated that Green's thinking on the nature of the eternal consciousness and its relationship to the individual self was much more concrete than might be expected on the basis of the exposition in the *Prolegomena*. Chapter Three goes on to assess the implications for Green's moral and political theory which can be drawn from this conception of the self and the related concepts examined and then develops his theory of positive freedom in the light of the metaphysical principles discussed. Chapter Four argues that Green's criticism of utilitarian social theory equally flows from metaphysical considerations and describes his view of the political relevance of his own theory. It is suggested that it is appropriate to consider Green's social philosophy as an attempt to give a consistent theoretical rendering of the socialist leanings in the later work of John Stuart Mill. In this way, Green can be viewed as the first theorist of the modern welfare state, and it is this last claim which the fifth chapter investigates before finally drawing a parallel between Green's dispute with the utilitarians and a more recent discussion in political theory about the two meanings of the concept of freedom.

### **B. Green and the Quest for a Philosophy of Life**

In order to situate Green's reverting to idealist metaphysics in a context yet wider, I will begin by pointing out which other functions Green intended his idealist metaphysics to perform. No doubt, the best introduction to this argument may be found in his essay on 'Popular Philosophy in its Relation to Life,' which more clearly than any other of his publications shows that he analysed the problems of his times in terms of the lack of what he refers to as a 'philosophy of life'.<sup>7</sup> In this essay Green is primarily concerned with the adverse practical effects resulting from the lack of an adequate philosophy. The 'popular philosophy' which he sought to refute in his early essay was not only wrong in its ethical prescription, but also in its whole method and metaphysical outlook. Its detrimental effects were to be found not only in relation to moral conduct, but also in the field of politics, religion and epistemology. This

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[7] Originally published in *The North British Review*, March 1868, reprinted in *Works*, iii, pp. 92-124.

state of affairs in British philosophy was to be remedied by a 'philosophy of life,' like Hegel's. In the absence of a more adequate theory, the functions which he ascribed to such a philosophy of life were partially fulfilled by contemplative poetry, evangelical religion, and Rousseau's conception of freedom and rights.<sup>8</sup>

As will appear from the second chapter of this book, this way of presenting the problem of current British philosophy runs along essentially the same lines as the argument of the introduction to his *Prolegomena*.<sup>9</sup> In this latter text he also referred to contemplative poetry and religious faith as important forces fostering genuine moral beliefs in an age devoid of any sound ethical philosophy. In *Prolegomena*, however, the dominance of the various sciences had taken the place of the utilitarian 'popular philosophy' of his *North British Review* article. A detailed assessment of the causes of this unsatisfactory state of the British public mind is voiced in an unpublished earlier draft of Green's essay.

Common sense, religious feeling, & positive science — these three hold divided empire over the consciousness of our time. Each hostile to the rest, they yet make common cause against the enemy of whom, tho' he scarcely holds up his head in England, it is rumoured from Germany that his method is not strictly inductive, that he claims to know God thro' no higher revelation than his reason, & that, tho' he neither robs temples nor erects barricades, he in a way of his own turns the world upside down.

A consideration of the causes & history of this 3 fold hostility may give us a clearer view of the claims & office of that form of spiritual activity which provokes it.<sup>10</sup>

This earlier draft of Green's essay shows the central position Hegel occupied in the remedy Green recommended for the unsatisfactory connection of popular ethical philosophy and moral conduct which he found in Britain.

Before studying Green's positive doctrine of first principles in subsequent chapters, it will be helpful to situate this quest for a more adequate philosophy of life in a wider context by considering the various ways in which he sought to employ his idealist philosophy. Green's idealist metaphysics and his reverting back to Hegel served at least four separate purposes. In addition to ethics, to which subject his *Prolegomena* was con-

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[8] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

[9] *Prolegomena*, sect. 1.

[10] Ms. 4. White quarto size sheet of notepaper, folded in two.

finer, his idealist metaphysics were applied in the fields of politics, religion, and epistemology.

### *Idealism and Politics*

The first manner in which Green's use of idealist first principles may be rendered intelligible is by pointing out the political ends which he sought to support. At the beginning of his academic career, English society was going through a period of unprecedented change. The industrial revolution drastically altered the traditional pattern of society. Unregulated industrialization and the demographical changes which were prompted by it caused many social evils, which in turn triggered an ever increasing volume of factory legislation.

When Green started his academic career, political and social reforms were already being introduced. As yet these reforms lacked a consistent theory to defend them. Factory laws which were then being introduced in ever increasing range and numbers were passed in spite of the dominant *laissez faire* doctrine. While Green applauded all social legislation regarding the conditions of work and sanitation, as well as the political reform of 1867, he also saw that these improvements would remain vulnerable so long as there was no convincing political theory to support them.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, he considered it to be his philosophical task to demonstrate the archaic nature of classical liberal political theory so as to pave the way for a better theoretical rendering of these achievements.

The relevance of this political motive for an understanding of his search for an idealistic metaphysics becomes clear when we take into account that, according to Green, classical liberal political theory was inseparably connected with a certain system of metaphysical principles. In his opinion the essential flaw in the doctrine of *laissez faire* originated from an erroneous metaphysics, as was to be found in empiricist philosophy. For this reason, any sound political philosophy to replace classical liberalism had to proceed from a metaphysical criticism of its largely implicit assumption.

Therefore, as a first part of his philosophical task, Green set out to demonstrate the correlation between metaphysics and political theory. Once this intrinsic link was established he

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[11] A similar claim about the newly acquired democratic rights in post revolutionary Europe is made in his essay on 'Popular Philosophy'. *Works*, iii, p. 120.

could proceed to point out that the shortcomings of classical liberal political theory could only be remedied on the basis of a more adequate system of first principles.

### *Idealism and Religion*<sup>12</sup>

A second task Green set his idealist metaphysics relates to the field of religion. Throughout the nineteenth century the rapid development of the natural sciences had increased the tension between scientific insight and established religious dogmas. A new science like geology suggested a far older age of the world than the 6000 years which the church had always assumed. The controversy between science and church culminated in Darwin's evolutionary biology, the findings of which were published in his *Origin of Species* in 1859. It was in the heat of the controversy which this publication aroused that Green assumed his first academic position. The conflicting claims of science and religion posed no problem to Hegel's system of philosophy, however, and Green saw that an interpretation of the world in idealistic terms would allow for a reconciliation of the conflict which seemed to frustrate religious faith as much as the settlement of scientific beliefs.

It may be pointed out that Green's concern was not so much with science itself. It was rather intended to support one of the two parties in an internal conflict between two different movements within the church. In his times the religious culture of the Church of England was deeply divided between two movements, the High Churchmen and the Low Church or Broad Church movement. With regard to the conflict between the church and the sciences, the former party simply denied all scientific claims contrary to the doctrines of the Established Church and would have preferred to classify Darwin as a heretic in the same way as the conflict with Galileo had been resolved in an earlier stage of church history. The latter party, with which Green sympathised, felt it had to somehow come

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[12] The religious context of Green's philosophy is also made a central element in Andrew Vincent's interpretation of Green and of the reception of Idealism in Victorian Britain in general. See especially his 'The word is Nigh Thee: The Religious Context of Idealism,' pp. 6-18 in Andrew Vincent and Raymond Plant, *Philosophy, Politics and Citizenship: the Life and Thought of the British Idealists*, Oxford, 1984; 'T.H.Green and the Religion of Citizenship' in Vincent, ed., *The Philosophy of T.H. Green*, Aldershot, 1986; and 'T.H. Green: Citizenship as Political and Metaphysical,' pp. 27-54 in David Boucher and Andrew Vincent, *British Idealism and Political Theory*, Edinburgh, 2000.

to terms with the incontrovertible evidence of the natural sciences.

Apart from the controversy between natural science and church there was an equally severe but perhaps more technical conflict about the interpretation of the scriptures. Green's own tutor Benjamin Jowett, who was a fierce adherent of Broad Church principles, had made his own position in the church very precarious by his contributing to a volume called *Essays and Reviews*. In this publication, the teachings of the so-called Heidelberg Schule, a neo-Hegelian theological school founded by F.C. Baur, were unequivocally defended. When it was issued in 1861 it met with much criticism from the Established Church. The impact of the Heidelberg Schule on liberal churchmen was an instance in which Hegel's influence was not so much a reconciliatory force. In fact, it formed part of the controversy itself. For Green the technical views on the interpretation of the scriptures neatly fitted the comprehensive philosophical scheme which he constructed on the basis of his idealist first principles. Green's appreciation of Baur, which was of course closely linked with his esteem for Hegel, is clearly seen from his correspondence with his family while he was working on the project to translate Baur's *Geschichte der Christlichen Kirche*.<sup>13</sup>

### *Idealism and Knowledge*

A third constituent of the background of Green's reverting back to an Hegelian-inspired system of metaphysics is of a more theoretical nature and relates to what Green saw as the essential flaw in empiricist metaphysics itself. With his *Essay*, Locke had laid the foundation of a philosophical tradition which was to dominate British philosophy until well into the nineteenth century; but on Green's showing Locke and his successors in the empiricist tradition proceeded from an insufficiently theoretical basis to explain human experience. Carrying the premises of the *Essay* to their logical conclusion, Green

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[13] According to Green's correspondence with his family he first engaged on the Baur project while on a tour in Germany in the Long vacation of 1863. He first mentions the work in a letter dd. 21.9.1863: 'I hope to have finished the translation early next year, but I may be tempted to append some essays of my own,' he wrote on that occasion. As he did not get much encouragement for his translation when he got back to Oxford after the summer the project was eventually abandoned. Selections of Green's letters to his family were copied out by Nettleship in his notebook on the Green papers.

demonstrated that Locke's doctrine implied that 'nothing is real of which anything can be said' as he summed up the essentials of his criticism of Locke.<sup>14</sup> He firmly believed that on empiricist principles nothing but a contradictory account of what the mind does and experiences could be given.

### *Idealism and Morality*

A fourth point which may be introduced here to complete the inventory of functions which Green attributed to his idealist metaphysics concerns his ethical philosophy. Along with the rapid development of the natural sciences, there was a distinct tendency towards a type of ethical theory which approached the subject on the basis of the same method which had been so successfully employed in the natural sciences. Green wanted to demonstrate the impossibility of such a naturalistic ethics so as to create room for his own moral philosophy. He sought to refute the idea of a naturalistic ethics in two ways, by a direct as well as an indirect argument. First, in the introduction to his *Prolegomena*, he gave a short, but fundamental criticism of its aspirations to grasp the nature of moral conduct. The second argument was a more extended statement of his own system of first principles covering the first two books of *Prolegomena*. Green's strategy in this second refutation of naturalistic ethics was to consider the theory of human experience from which naturalistic ethics could be shown to proceed. Green's point was that his opponents tacitly assumed a philosophy of man which did not properly allow for man's capacity to form a theory explaining himself.

A criticism of current ethical theories similar to the first, direct argument against naturalistic ethics occurred in his essay on 'Popular Philosophy'. In this earlier publication Green directed the force of this argument against utilitarian ethics. Like scientific ethics, utilitarian premises did not allow for the establishment of moral norms, as opposed to actual conduct. Proceeding from the view of man as motivated by two basic drives only – desire for pleasure and aversion to pain – utilitarianism cannot properly come to prescribing norms other than those to which man *ex hypothesi* conforms.

'Popular philosophy' predated *Prolegomena* by fourteen years, and while Green employed the same argument later on

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[14] *Prolegomena*, sect. 20; cf. *Introductions* to Hume.

in *Prolegomena* when comparing his own ethical doctrine with its utilitarian counterpart, it is nevertheless clear that it was naturalistic ethics, rather than utilitarianism, which proved the more fundamental rival by the time Green came to compose *Prolegomena*.