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978-0-521-27810-2 - T. H. Green: Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation  
and Other Writings

Edited by Paul Harris and John Morrow

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## INTRODUCTION

## I

The writings collected in this volume represent the political *oeuvre* of a philosopher who exerted an important influence on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century life. Although lacking the somewhat austere glamour that surrounds John Stuart Mill, Green acquired a standing among political practitioners unmatched by any later British political philosopher, and a reputation among professional political philosophers which survived well into the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> This social and political impact was particularly evident in two areas. First, and most immediately, Green's form of politicised Christianity was important in encouraging members of the upper and middle classes to see disinterested social service as a particularly significant field for the exercise of Christian virtue. The most well documented example is Green's inspirational role in the Settlement Movement designed to provide young university graduates with opportunities for living among and improving the material, intellectual, and moral well-being of London's poor.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, Green's moral conception of politics – his idea of the common good and his positive conception of the state – became the common premises of those members of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Liberal Party who wished to justify new departures in state activity in order to secure what they regarded as the minimum social and economic conditions necessary for harmonious and just social existence. Although the precise nature of the relationship between Green's political theory and the 'New Liberalism' is a matter of some contention, there is little doubt that some of the most important of the New Liberals portrayed themselves as heirs to the tradition established by Green.<sup>3</sup>

Green's inspirational and ideological importance in this period is sufficient to justify an interest in his political writings by those concerned with English social and political history. But Green was more than a political writer; he was also a philosopher who occupies an important place in the history of political thought, in two major

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respects. In the first place, Green was the leading exponent of 'British' Idealism and of its political implications. This movement flourished in British universities for about fifty years from 1870, and was marked by a clear and quite conscious antipathy to the empiricism of Locke, Hume and the Utilitarians and by an attempt to awaken British philosophy to the thought of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. That reorientation marks the second aspect of Green's importance in the development of political thought, for out of it there emerged a distinctive political philosophy which was clearly related with Millite liberalism in outlook and programme, but possessed a theoretical focus which directed attention to the neglected but crucial question of the nature of the state and the subjects' relationship to it.

## II

Thomas Hill Green was born on 7 April 1836 in Birkin, Yorkshire.<sup>4</sup> He was educated at home by his father, the Rev. Valentine Green, until he went to Rugby School in 1850. Green entered Balliol College, Oxford, in 1855. His undergraduate experiences were crucial; his tutor, the redoubtable Benjamin Jowett, not only encouraged the previously indolent though able youth to gain a first-class degree, but he also introduced Green to a heady mixture of Greek and German philosophy which was to sustain him for the rest of his life. The importance of this period for Green is shown by the appearance in his undergraduate essays of the major themes of his mature philosophy.

Green remained at Oxford after taking his degree, first as a tutor and Fellow of Balliol (1860), then as Whyte's Professor of Moral Philosophy (1878) until his death in 1882 a few days short of his forty-sixth birthday. His influence was felt in many areas of the life of the University, the city, and the country. He was the first layman to be appointed a tutor, one of the first to make philosophical teaching and writing their sole profession, and was among those who were instrumental in reforming the philosophical curriculum to extend beyond Plato and Aristotle.<sup>5</sup> His influence on the undergraduates was considerable, both because of his inspiring qualities as a teacher, but also because of the qualities of his personality and his example. Although he wrote a great deal, the bulk of his writings, including virtually all his political works, were published posthumously; they enjoyed a circulation that would be the envy of many modern philosophers and a source of gratitude for their publishers.<sup>6</sup>

Green married in 1871, and became a householder in Oxford. He had been active in Liberal Party politics since the mid-1860s, and in

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1876 he was elected to the Oxford town council as the first don to serve as a representative of the citizens rather than of the University. His philosophy of citizenship was expressed in two major areas of public activity during his adult life. The first was education: he served as an assistant commissioner on the Taunton Commission on Secondary Education, 1865–6, was a member of the Oxford School Board, and played a major part in the foundation of the Oxford School for Boys. He was prominent in the university extension movement and (with Mrs Green) in the opening of university education to women at Oxford and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> The second was temperance: he was a vice-president of the United Kingdom Alliance, and held office in several temperance organisations in Oxford.<sup>8</sup>

## III

At the core of Green's social and political philosophy is a characteristically Idealist argument about the role of subject and object in knowledge, an argument that was specifically directed against the sceptical impasse produced by empiricist attempts to reduce the sensuous world and the minds which comprehend it to a series of primitive elements.<sup>9</sup> Things could only be known, Green argued, if they were relational, and could only be known by a subject who synthesised relationships. Moreover, if a claim about the world is true, it remains so whether or not it is known by any human consciousness. In order to explain this, Green postulated the existence of an 'eternal consciousness' which originally forged these relationships and possessed a knowledge of them which was independent of time and space. This eternal consciousness was the source and form of the consciousness whose progressive replication in individuals was the condition of their knowledge of the world and of right conduct.<sup>10</sup> The eternal consciousness was, in other words, increasingly objectified in the lives of individuals and was the essential condition of their lives as human beings. As such, it brought about the recognition of a 'better self' whose complete realisation was the goal of conduct; 'the objectification' of the eternal consciousness in 'the perfect art of living' was the true end of moral action.<sup>11</sup> But Green insisted that the pursuit of perfection did not merely require individuals to act in particular ways, but that they did so *in order to* perfect their characters.<sup>12</sup>

Green uses this epistemological argument as giving philosophical support to his religious views; his other names for the eternal consciousness are 'divine mind' and 'God'. His theology is based on the central importance of Christ incarnate, the union of God with man,

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and the reflection of God's purposes in human life and thought through the gradual unfolding of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> The basis of Christianity was not the historical authenticity of the account of the life of Christ contained in the gospels, but faith: 'we walk by faith, not by sight' (2 Cor. v:7) became Green's epitaph. Jesus thus became the symbolic representation of God's incarnation in the world of human affairs, and sin was a manifestation of an 'incompleteness' which was being continually eroded as humanity progressed along the path by which men came to realise God's consciousness in their minds and actions.

Richter has ascribed Green's influence among his Oxford contemporaries to his capacity to offer an escape from the spiritual uncertainties common in the second half of the nineteenth century. A prevailing 'crisis of conscience', induced in part by a growing disenchantment with the intellectual foundations of Christianity, in part by the apparent failure of Christian theology to grapple with the enormity of suffering and injustice, 'brought Green to perceive a great reservoir of energy and fervour [which] might be diverted to secular altruism from a crumbling faith focussed upon the next world'.<sup>14</sup> But although Richter identifies this 'energy and fervour' with evangelical Christianity, Green's form of 'immanentist incarnationalism'<sup>15</sup> eschewed the concern with the atonement central to evangelical theology. While the latter doctrine concentrated on the appeasement of God by the unique sacrifice of the sinless Christ for sinning mankind, Green maintained that crucifixion represented a "death unto sin", in which we ideally partake, while at the same time, by the new consciousness of God's mind towards us which it gives, . . . enables us gradually to actualise this ideal death unto sin as a new spiritual walk'.<sup>16</sup> This doctrine placed the emphasis squarely on men's efforts to embark upon the 'new spiritual walk', efforts which depended less on the detail and accuracy of the New Testament than on the willingness of men to reflect upon their own nature and to strive for their own perfection. The desire for reconciliation with God lay at the root of the search for perfection in both its practical and cognitive forms; it extended beyond the sphere of religion and ethics and embraced even those forms of scientific activity which seemed to question the very existence of the spiritual. 'The human spirit is one and indivisible, and the desire to know what nature is and means is as inseparable from it as the consciousness of God and the longing for reconciliation with him.'<sup>17</sup>

Green's theological views provide some of the clearest guides to the nature of his relationship with earlier German writers. His intellec-

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tual biography and writings provide much evidence that his immanentism and his conception of the universal potentialities of Christianity independent of the veracity of accounts of an historical Jesus owed a great deal to the work of such post-Hegelians as Baur and other members of the Tübingen school of biblical criticism.<sup>18</sup> There are also parallels between Green's theology and aspects of Hegel's philosophical conception of Christianity, particularly with respect to the institutional embodiment of an immanent God. Nevertheless, caution is needed in dealing with the relationship between Green and Germans other than Kant, partly because of the fragmentary nature of the evidence (particularly in the case of Hegel), but also because there are non-German contenders with equally plausible claims to have influenced Green in these directions.<sup>19</sup> S. T. Coleridge and F. D. Maurice were both early favourites of Green, and both expounded a form of Platonic immanentist incarnationalism that must have at least prepared the way for Green's sympathetic reception of German theology.<sup>20</sup> In any case, even if Green did succeed in capturing Hegel for unambiguously religious purposes, as the conventional wisdom suggests, then his work must not be seen merely as an anglicised version of Hegel's philosophy but as successfully overcoming the mid-century view that it had theologically suspect implications.<sup>21</sup>

## IV

Green's ethics are firmly within the tradition which upholds the primacy of self-realisation and, in this respect, his position has a great deal in common with that of J. S. Mill. Green spoke warmly of Mill's conception of human nature, but maintained that he provided a more satisfactory basis for such a position than the equivocating hedonism he attributed to Mill.<sup>22</sup> To act out of a desire for pleasure would, Green maintained, be to act for a natural, as opposed to a moral, object. Things are not desired because they produce pleasure, but because we regard them as good. The pleasure a thing produces 'depends on its goodness'; 'so far as it [pleasure] is a necessary incident of any good [it] presupposes desire and results from its satisfaction'.<sup>23</sup> Goodness itself rests upon a conception of the self which can be better, which more nearly approaches the perfection which is God's, than the existing self, and thus cannot be mere sensation or feeling. The potentialities of the self are not developed for the sake of any pleasure this may bring, or indeed for the sake of any morally significant goal except that of self-perfection, the perfection of the

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self through the conscious efforts of the individual concerned. 'The actions which *ought* to be done . . . are actions expressive of a good will . . .'<sup>24</sup>

But, Green argued, the conception of the self as the good to be realised and the pursuit of this good, can only take place within a social context:

Only through society is any one enabled to give that effect to the idea of himself as an object of his actions, to the idea of a possible better state of himself, without which the idea would remain like that of space to a man who had not the senses either of sight or touch.<sup>25</sup>

Thus without recognition by others and of others by him, a man could have no conception of himself or his perfection. But once this mutual recognition has occurred, the individual becomes aware that his perfection is intimately related to the perfection of those upon whom he is dependent for recognition as a person. The goals which individuals pursue in seeking perfection are shared with others, and are enriched by universal attainment. The good, Green argued, must be a *common* good, and it must be non-competitive in that its attainment by some does not limit but contributes to its attainment by everyone in that society.<sup>26</sup>

This idea of the common good is absolutely central to Green's theory. It provides the basis on which he discusses the social and political structures and conditions necessary to the realisation of human potentialities, and the extent to which political authority could be used to facilitate the pursuit of self-perfection. It thus has a crucial role in Green's attempts to specify the rights it is proper for individuals to claim and the duty of the state to uphold, and hence in his theory of the nature and limits of the moral obligation owed to political authority. But although the social and political context has an essential role in bringing about the moral development of the individuals within it, Green always insisted that the focal point of that development was the individual rather than the social group: 'our ultimate standard of worth is an ideal of personal worth'. Collectivities have no moral existence independent of the lives of the individuals of which they are constituted: 'To speak of any 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>27</sup>

Green argues that the essential social dimension to individual self-realisation means that the individual must regard social institutions and practices (political organisation, customs, mores, law) as collec-

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tive efforts after a common good. They are the result of the need to secure and maintain the conditions within which individuals can pursue their self-realisation in their own ways, and of the need to harmonise the ways in which they do so. As such, these institutions and practices need to be acknowledged by the individual as deserving his allegiance and consideration as essential to his own self-realisation – provided they continue to act as means to the common good and not as impediments to it.<sup>28</sup> Social institutions and practices cannot *make* men moral, for that requires a certain motive for acting rather than mere action itself; indeed, nor should they, for this very reason, curtail spheres of moral action by intruding a coercive apparatus in areas of life where the harm produced by wrong action is outweighed by moral benefits.<sup>29</sup> They do, however, have an indirect role in the ‘moralisation’ of the individual because they restrain people from acting from mere inclination, but they do so by appearing as an *external* authority which will impose sanctions in the event of non-compliance.<sup>30</sup> Green regards this imposition upon the individual’s ability to act as leading to the understanding that he does have interests in common with others, and to ‘a conception (under whatever name) of something that universally should be, of something absolutely desirable, of a single end or object of life’.<sup>31</sup> The individual may not have a very clear or articulated idea of this ‘end or object of life’, but he knows that there must be one, and that social institutions and conventional morality are at least means to it; hence he obeys out of conviction rather than conforms out of fear of sanctions. A few may achieve the next stage of reflective morality, ‘the growth of a personal interest in the realisation of an idea of what should be, in doing what is believed to contribute to the absolutely desirable, or to human perfection, because it is believed to do so’.<sup>32</sup> This person obeys out of a sense of self-imposed duty towards the moral ideal; he is now truly free and autonomous since reason determines the will directly, not externally as in mere conformity to conventional morality, but as the motive for self-originated and self-determined action.

There are elements in Green’s account of the progressive development of self-consciousness, of the dependence of consciousness on mutual recognition, and of the importance of social and political institutions, which are reminiscent of parts of Hegel’s arguments.<sup>33</sup> We should be aware, however, that these merely constitute parallels rather than established connections, and that on at least one crucial point, the centrality of personality, Green is far closer to Fichte than to Hegel.<sup>34</sup>

In stressing considerations of personal worth, and in seeing this as

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something that ultimately had to come from within individuals rather than being forced on them by others, Green was expressing a view which had close affinities with traditional liberal concerns with individual well-being and autonomy. The theological form of Green's statement, however, gave it a distinctive character which relates neither to Fichte nor to liberal social humanism. When Green wrote of individuals as objectifying an 'eternal consciousness', and of a 'divine unity' being realised in 'the perfect art of living', he implied that while the perfection of persons was the goal of political activity and the starting point of political philosophy, individuality was ultimately important for religious reasons. Green's consideration of individuals and their perfection was not the result of a concern with the defence of individuals as such, because his conception of well-being was structured by a metaphysical, and hence religious, notion of perfection rather than by a concern with the preservation of individual autonomy. The claim that individuals were morally significant, because it was in them that the divine mind unfolded, also appears in early nineteenth-century Platonists such as Coleridge and Maurice, and beyond them in the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century. These Platonic aspects of Green's thought distinguish his position clearly from that of the secular liberal social humanists.<sup>35</sup>

## V

Green's ethical theory gave rise to a conception of politics which was similar to, although not identical with, the form of liberalism associated with John Stuart Mill.<sup>36</sup> A concern with self-development, with the realisation of human potentialities, necessitated an approach to politics which placed a premium on the free action necessary for that development. The social, political and historical significance of Green's political philosophy has received considerable attention in the scholarly literature, but what is often overlooked is the extent to which Green's work marked an attempt to revive a form of formal political philosophy which dealt with the nature of the state and the rationale for obedience to it, and hence generated specific goals for state action. From the perspective of formal political philosophy, it is significant that the writers Green considered in the *Lectures* – Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza and Rousseau – all discussed (although in Green's view, could not adequately account for) the nature of the state and the grounds for obedience to it, and that the one nineteenth-century writer who attracted his critical attention, John Austin, had side-stepped these issues through the use of an essentially empty



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concept of sovereignty which had gained widespread acceptance in contemporary political theorising.<sup>37</sup> While accepting Austin's description of the sovereign as the possessor of supreme coercive power,<sup>38</sup> Green refused to treat it as exhaustive, and argued that the habitual obedience accorded the sovereign depended, to a significant extent, on a more or less conscious appreciation of the role the state played in facilitating and encouraging the pursuit of goals which were not peculiar to state-like entities but lay at the heart of all social interaction. It followed therefore that a description of the state in terms of its possession of supreme coercive capacities was inadequate *even as a description*. It also deprived statements about political obligation of any moral force, for this depended on the necessity for the state as an agent in the process of human perfection, a process which preceded the state (and could in fact be traced to the requirements of human consciousness) but was facilitated by it. Thus Green claimed that it made no sense to equate 'I am under an obligation to . . .' with 'I am forced to . . .'.<sup>39</sup> In his view, the question of obligation was crucial, since only if one understood the grounds of what both he and Austin acknowledged to be 'habitual obedience' could one arrive at a theory of the morally justifiable state in terms of the rationale for endowing a determinate person or persons with supreme coercive power.<sup>40</sup>

Green described Austin's account of sovereignty as 'abstract' because it ignored the rationale underlying the fact of habitual obedience by failing to treat the sovereign as part of a wider network of social institutions that lacked supreme coercive power. Sovereignty could only be understood in relation to the sum of institutions that made up the modern state because the basis of the sovereign's capacity to command was precisely the same as that upon which all social institutions rested. It was grounded on

a common desire for certain ends . . . to which the observance of law or established usage contributes, and in most cases implies no conscious reference on the part of those whom it influences to any coercive power at all.<sup>41</sup>

The citizen thus had a moral obligation to obey because the sovereign's decrees contributed to the welfare of the entire community and thus assisted the self-realisation of all.<sup>42</sup> An understanding of sovereignty was therefore only possible from a consideration of the true nature of the state.

The state could best be understood as the culmination of a process through which rights had been refined and extended to facilitate the fullest possible degree of self-development. Austin had regarded rights as created by the commands of the sovereign, and so thought

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that any obligation to recognise rights was quite independent of the nature of the right, or of the subject's perception of the value of the right. Green, by contrast, understood rights as historical phenomena that were embodied in an increasingly wide range of social institutions reflecting men's growing recognition of the conditions under which moral action was possible.<sup>43</sup> Institutions could only promote morality indirectly, by maintaining the conditions in which moral action was possible. They did so by maintaining rights, not as the 'arbitrary creatures of law' but as the result of 'a recognition by members of a society of powers in each other contributory to a common good'.<sup>44</sup> Rights rested on a 'consciousness of common interest on the part of members of a society'; hence, Green claimed, it made no sense to talk of 'natural rights' if by this was meant rights which existed independently of social attachment and recognition. Moreover, Green argued that there was a significant range of rights which 'do not come into being with the state, but arise out of social relations that may exist where the state is not . . .'.<sup>45</sup>

One of the important features of Green's theory of rights was that their recognition contributed to the moral development of *everyone* in that society. This was clearly so in the case of the person acknowledged as having the right, but it was no less true for those who recognised it. Thus when Green discussed a particular right such as that to property, he not only stressed the positive relationship between the possession of such a right and moral development, but he also criticised those who seemed unprepared to facilitate the universalisation of an effective form of possession, on the grounds that by failing to recognise adequately the claims of others, they exhibited a flawed moral character.<sup>46</sup>

Green's attempt to found a theory of rights on some other basis than the sovereign's power did not mean that coercion played no part in the maintenance of rights. It did mean, however, that Green minimised this particular facet of the sovereign's role. Indeed, the less the role of the sovereign's coercive powers in the affairs of a society, the more morally developed would be the character of that society and its citizens. Furthermore, Green's attempt to divorce the essence of rights from power meant that the use or threat of force in social life had to be justified in terms of the purposes that social life helped to foster. Thus from Green's point of view, Austin's command conception of rights was unsatisfactory because rights and duties were emptied of any specific content: a right was a right merely because the sovereign declared it to be so. Green argued, however, that rights could not be understood as merely representing the will of the