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Green's Ethics

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## MIND

A QUARTERLY REVIEW

OF

PSYCHOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY.

## I.—GREEN'S ETHICS.

By Professor HENRY SIDGWICK.

GREEN'S *Prolegomena to Ethics* is a highly interesting and impressive book; and no one who makes the study of morality a matter of serious concern—to whatever school he may belong—can read it without instruction and edification. At the same time I do not find myself able to obtain from it a clear and consistent conception of the author's ethical system, even in outline. It may be said that the book does not profess to give such a system; its title indicates that it consists merely of "Prolegomena" to a future or possible systematic exposition of ethics; and the calamity which prevented its completion has left it imperfect in the very part in which the plan of such a systematic treatise might have been expected to be at least foreshadowed. I admit the force of these considerations; and therefore I do not put forward the following arguments as a formal criticism of what has perhaps not been formally attempted: I merely think it worth while to state the reasons why—though fully appreciating both the philosophical importance of this work and its remarkable literary qualities—I am unable to put together into a coherent whole the different expressions of Green's ethical view which I find in it.

Green's doctrine as to the basis of morality, in the most

comprehensive account which he gives of it, is stated to be a "Theory of the Good as Human Perfection". The Perfection which is thus taken to be the ultimate end of rational conduct is otherwise described as the "realisation," "development" or "completion" of human "faculties" or "capabilities". If we ask further to what part of man's apparently composite nature these "faculties" or "capabilities" belong, we are told that they are "capabilities of the spirit which is in man" to which, again, a "divine" or "heaven-born" nature is attributed. The realisation of these capabilities is, in fact, a "self-realisation of the divine principle in man"; that is, of the "one divine mind" which "gradually reproduces itself in the human soul". "God," we are elsewhere told, "is a being with whom the human spirit is identical, in the sense that He *is* all which the human spirit is capable of becoming" (p. 198). Hence the conception of the Divine Spirit presents to the man who is morally aspiring an "ideal of personal holiness" with which he contrasts his own personal unworthiness.

If, however, we are to obtain from these notions anything more than a vague emotional thrill, which, however salutary it may be, cannot carry with it any ethical instruction, we must go on to ask how this relation of man to God is philosophically known, and what definite and reasoned content can be given to this notion of a Divine Spirit. It would appear from the order of Green's treatise, and the proportions of its parts, that an answer to these questions was intended to be given in Book i., on the "Metaphysics of Knowledge". Here we are certainly introduced to a "spiritual principle in nature" corresponding to the spiritual principle implied in all human knowledge or experience. It is argued (pp. 30, 32) that to constitute the "single, all-inclusive, unalterable system of relations," which we find in nature, properly understood, something beyond nature is needed: "something which renders all relations possible," and supplies the "unity of the manifold" which is involved in the existence of these relations. "A plurality of things cannot of themselves unite in one relation, nor can a single thing of itself bring itself into a multitude of relations . . . there must therefore be something other than the manifold things themselves which combines them." Such a "combining agency" in each one's experience is his own intelligence, his intelligent self which unites the objects of his experience while distinguishing itself from them. Hence if we suppose nature to be real "otherwise than merely as for us," we must "recognise as the condition of this reality

the action of some unifying principle analogous to that of our understanding". Indeed, Green passes—I do not precisely understand how—from the affirmation of *analogous action* to the affirmation of *identical quality*, and says that nature in its reality implies not only an all-uniting agency which is not natural, but a thinking self-distinguishing consciousness like our own. We further find that this principle of synthesis or unity is "eternal," in the sense that it is not in time, and "complete," in the sense that its combining agency extends to all conceivable objects; and that our own empirical knowledge can only be explained as an imperfect reproduction in us of this eternally complete consciousness.

I am obliged to summarise very briefly the results of an elaborate and complicated argument; but I am not now concerned with the argument itself, merely with the ethical bearing and value of its results; and I venture to think that the above meagre statement gives substantially all the characteristics which Green explicitly attributes to the "spiritual principle" disclosed to us in Book i.—and all, I submit, that can possibly be known about it by the lines of reasoning there developed. And I am confirmed in this view by the passage in Book iii., ch. 2 (p. 189), in which the "conclusions so far arrived at are summarised"; since there also the "one divine mind" which "gradually reproduces itself in the human soul" is not represented with any other "constant characteristics" beyond those of being a unifying, self-distinguishing, self-objectifying consciousness. "If," says the author expressly, "we mean by personality anything else than the quality in a subject of being consciously an object to itself, we are not justified in saying that it necessarily belongs to God." But how, I would ask—with all reverence for the deep religious emotion of our author,—can we possibly get an "ideal of holiness," of an "infinitely and perfectly good will," out of this conception of a combining, self-distinguishing and self-objectifying agency? What perfection can the human spirit aim at, so far as it is merely conceived as the reproduction of such an agency, except the increase of knowledge, extensively or intensively? the presence to the combining intelligence of a more extensive manifold of combined objects, or the presence of them as more effectively combined? I need not say that nothing can be more unlike this conception than Green's moral ideal; in which, indeed, as I shall presently argue, knowledge rather occupies a too subordinate place.

It may be said perhaps that though the Divine Mind cannot

be *known* to us as more than a combining intelligence, the source of the systematic unity of nature, we may and ought to *believe* it to be more ; and that Green must be supposed to mean this when he describes the "attitude of man towards an infinite spirit" as "not the attitude of knowledge" but only of "awe and aspiration" (p. 329). But the reason he gives for excluding the attitude of knowledge is a reason which, so far as it is valid at all, applies precisely to that conception of the spiritual principle which is given in Book i. : "knowledge," he says, "is of matters of fact or relations, and the infinite spirit is neither fact nor relation"; and since the net result of the "Metaphysics of Knowledge" is at any rate to establish the necessary existence of an eternally complete thinking consciousness which is "neither fact nor relation," but yet "needed to constitute" facts and relations, it seems to me merely an eccentric subtlety of metaphysical terminology to say that we have no "knowledge" of such an eternal mind. We have at any rate, if we have followed assentingly a hundred pages of close argument, a reasoned conviction with regard to it ; and my point is that Green seems unaware of the barrenness of this conviction for his ethical purposes, and nowhere offers us a suggestion of any other reasoning by which his philosophical conception of the Divine Mind might be turned into one capable of furnishing us with an adequate ethical ideal. I, at least, can find no grounds in the argument of Book i. for attributing to the spiritual principle any such characteristic as the term "holiness" expresses : I cannot even find adequate reasons for attributing to it anything analogous to Will. It is merely, so far as I understand, an eternal intellect out of time, to which all time and its contents are eternally and (we may say) indifferently present : being equally implied in the conception of *any* succession, it is not shown to carry with it the conception of progress towards an end in the series of motions or changes of which the process of the world in time consists. And even if we grant that such a progress is implied in the development of the eternal consciousness in *us*, it is, as I have already said, still a purely intellectual progress, a growth of that which knows in knowledge alone.

I have so far proceeded on the assumption that the "human perfection" which we are trying to define is the perfection of that spiritual principle which is said to be in a manner identical with God, being an imperfect reproduction of the eternal divine consciousness. But, the classically instructed reader of the *Prolegomena*, remembering the ethical psychology of Aristotle, and noting the large share of

influence which the study of Aristotle has obviously had on Green's speculation, may perhaps surmise that our ideal of human perfection—so far as it is practical and (in a narrow sense) ethical, and not scientific or merely intellectual—belongs rather to the human soul as a function of an animal organism, modified by being made a vehicle of the eternal consciousness, and not to that eternal consciousness itself, as making the animal organism the vehicle. And this surmise would certainly find considerable support in the analysis and exposition of the psychological elements of moral action—desire, intellect, volition—which Green has given in Book ii. The author, indeed, is specially concerned to maintain the real unity between the effort of the self-conscious soul in learning to know, and its effort “in the way of giving to or obtaining for objects, which various susceptibilities of the self-conscious soul suggest to it, a reality among matters of fact” (p. 138). But he recognises that its efforts of this latter kind, to a large extent, “originate in animal wants or the susceptibility to animal pleasure, in the sense that without such want or susceptibility they could not be” (p. 129); and though he denies that the desires most important in the moral life of civilised man—such as love, envy, ambition—are directly dependent on animal susceptibilities, I do not understand him to deny that they may be traced ultimately to animal feelings, as modified by the supervention of self-consciousness carrying with it a consciousness of the individuality of other persons. Certainly animals feel love, envy, jealousy; and no reason is suggested why a reproduction of the eternal consciousness should have these emotions, independently of the conditions of the animal organism to which it is subject. Admitting Green's account of the manner in which the self-conscious self reacts upon the desires thus organised, so that they become something different from what they would be in a merely animal soul: admitting that it presents to itself objects of desire, distinct from itself and from each other, and that in seeking the realisation of any particular object it is always seeking its own satisfaction; I should still have inferred that it is only because it has “supervened upon the appetitive life” of an animal organism that the self-conscious self has such desires for the realisation of objects at all. And since the essential characteristic of moral action, as explained in Book ii., consists in the presence of this self-distinguishing and self-seeking consciousness, identifying itself with different particular desires—or rather usually with a complex resultant of several distinguishable desires;

I should have expected that man's pursuit of perfection would be traced to some combination of natural desires modified by self-consciousness.

But the account of the moral ideal, which the author proceeds to give in Book iii., does not correspond to this expectation: the impulse of the spirit to seek "moral good" is rather represented as being in profound contrast and antagonism to the impulses of the animal soul. We are told that though self-satisfaction is continually *sought* by moral agents in the realisation of the objects of particular desires—due to the conditions under which the self-conscious subject exists in the human organism—it cannot be really found there. "The conditions of the animal soul, 'servile to every skiey influence,' no sooner sated than wanting, are such that the self-determining subject cannot be conscious of them as conditions to which it is subject . . . without seeking some satisfaction of itself that shall be independent of these conditions." Accordingly though "good" is defined as "that which satisfies some desire," "moral good" or the "true good" is defined as "an end in which the effort of a moral agent may really find *rest*" (p. 179)—or, as Green elsewhere expresses it, "an abiding satisfaction of an abiding self" (p. 250).

That is, this appears to be Green's view on the whole, though there is a certain ambiguity or hesitation in his language. In some passages he rather confuses the reader by apparently using "good" to denote the object in which self-satisfaction is sought, whether or not it is really found in it. Thus he speaks (p. 99) of a moral agent presenting to himself a certain idea of himself as an "idea of which the realisation *forms*"—not *seems*—"for the time his good". So again, p. 166—"The man who calmly faces a life of suffering in the fulfilment of what he conceives to be his mission could not bear to do otherwise. So to live is his good"; where the context shows that such a man is not therefore conceived to find satisfaction in so living. But supposing we understand "good" in such passages to mean 'apparent' or 'anticipated' good, another difficulty remains. Green holds, of course, that particular desires are continually being satisfied; and since he speaks of the moral agent as "identifying itself" with such desires (or their objects) and even speaks of a "particular *self-satisfaction*" to be gained in attaining one of these objects (p. 108), I do not see how he can consistently deny that the good even of a moral agent is *temporarily* gained in such "particular self-satisfactions". Still, the passages in which such denial is explicitly or im-

PLICITLY made are too numerous and unmistakeable to leave any doubt that they express a doctrine deliberately held. Such a doctrine indeed is indispensable as a basis to the intermittent controversy with Hedonism which Green carries on throughout the treatise; since, so far as I can see, his only substantial objection to the Hedonistic end relates to its transient quality: it is not a "permanent" or "abiding" good. He still indeed clings to the paradox maintained by him on previous occasions of controversy<sup>1</sup> that "a greatest sum of pleasures" is "intrinsically unmeaning"; but a Hedonist, I think, need not seriously concern himself with the refutation of this paradox, since in another passage Green explains that he does not intend to "deny that there may be in fact such a thing as desire for a sum or contemplated series of pleasures, or that a man may be so affected by it as to judge that some particular desire should not be gratified"; and I need hardly say that he does not intend to deny that certain courses of action "tend to make life more pleasant on the whole," or that "an overbalance of pain on the whole would result to those capable of being affected by it" from certain other courses of action—in fact he expressly affirms both these propositions in the very words that I have used. In these propositions it is implied that pleasure and pain, as distinguished from their conditions, can be subjected—in some degree at least—to quantitative measurement; and therefore, when in another passage Green lays down that "pleasure (in distinction from the facts conditioning it) is not an object of the understanding," the Hedonist need not be troubled at the strange statement; for he will perceive that it is to be understood in some subtle metaphysical sense with which he is not concerned.<sup>2</sup> In short, the one anti-hedonistic argument on which our author now appears seriously to rely is that pleasures are of "perishing nature" and "do not admit of being accumulated in enjoyment"<sup>3</sup> that, there-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. MIND, VI., 267-9; and the Introduction to Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*, § 7.

<sup>2</sup> I must confess that I cannot even conjecture in what sense Green lays down this proposition; since it appears to me that in this very discussion he conducts long arguments which are only intelligible if the distinction between pleasure and the facts conditioning it is thoroughly grasped and steadily contemplated by the understanding. And I may add that this distinction is carried to a degree of subtlety far beyond that which the Hedonist requires, or would be disposed to adopt; for Green insists on his distinguishing "pleasure" from the "satisfaction" involved in the conscious realisation of a desired object.

<sup>3</sup> In some passages I incline to think that Green's argument proceeds on the tacit—and surely quite unwarrantable—assumption that an "end," in



fore they are not in any sense permanent or "abiding," so that no amount of them can give real satisfaction to a moral agent, and constitute his true good. The pleasure-seeker, like the "animal soul," is "no sooner sated than wanting," the satisfaction of any particular desire is no sooner attained than a desire, similar or different, emerges again; and therefore true self-satisfaction is not attained; the effort of the moral agent does not "find rest".

Now, I have given this argument—which Green urges with a very impressive earnestness of conviction—my best consideration; and I am obliged to conclude that there must be very fundamental differences in the constitution of moral agents, if I may be allowed to count myself one. For if I understand what Green means by "rest," I can only say that I desire it as little as I expect it, in this life or in any other. The happiness that I have enjoyed has been conditioned by the perpetual presence—or rather the continually fresh emergence—of desire; and whether this condition is to be referred to the "animal soul" or not, I have no aversion to it and do not aspire to be independent of it. I recognise this dislike of desire and this contempt for transient satisfactions which Green expresses as characteristic of the conscious experience of certain meditative minds; but I can confidently deny that these feelings are necessary or universal, and I have no adequate ground for regarding them as even common among human beings generally. I admit that men frequently, under the influence of strong desire, are liable to the illusion that the agreeable "repose of a mind satisfied" will be at least a comparatively permanent consequence of attaining the desired object, and are temporarily disappointed when they find that this is not the case; but neither the expectation nor the disappointment is inevitable or universal: indeed, they seem to me rather experiences of the immature mind, which riper reflection on the relation of desire to life tends to suppress. The man who has philosophised himself into so serious a quarrel with the conditions of human existence that he cannot be satisfied with the prospect of never-ending bliss, because its parts have to be

the ethical use of the term, ought to mean something to which we gradually get nearer and nearer—some sort of goal or consummation. But all that I, and (I conceive) most ethical writers, mean by the term is an object of rational aim—whether attained in successive parts or not—which is not sought as a means to the attainment of any ulterior object, but for itself. And so long as any one's prospective balance of pleasure over pain admits of being made greater or less by immediate action in one way or another—which Green does not deny—there seems no reason why 'Maximum Happiness' should not provide a serviceable criterion of good.

enjoyed successively, and under the condition of being successively desired—such a man, I venture to think, is not a typical *φρόνιμος*.

I have digressed somewhat from the main line of my discussion, because I could hardly avoid noticing the anti-hedonistic controversy which occupies so large a space in the *Prolegomena*: but as my primary object is not to criticise Green's view from the outside, but rather to exhibit the difficulties of framing a clear and consistent notion of it, I will assume for the present that the true good of man must be a "permanent" or "abiding" good, and therefore cannot be pleasure. What then is it? and what ground have we for supposing it attainable by man? It does not appear that the path of moral progress, even as pursued with the most stoical contempt for attendant pleasures and pains, is one in which the effort of the moral agent finds "rest," at least in this earthly sphere. Green, at any rate, does not maintain this: he says of the "man who calmly faces a life of suffering in the fulfilment of what he conceives to be his mission," that "if he could attain the consciousness of having accomplished his work, . . . he would find satisfaction in the consciousness," but adds that "*probably just in proportion to the elevation of his character he is unable to do so*" (p. 166): it would seem therefore that he no less than the voluptuary is always pursuing and never attaining.

Perhaps it may be said that if the "abiding good" is not *found* by the man who is seeking perfection, it is at any rate approached by him; the moral aspirant who is daily growing less imperfect may not experience the satisfaction of attainment, but at any rate he is getting towards it.<sup>1</sup> But (1) what can this avail him if he never actually attains? and (2) even granting that the consciousness of approximation is the best substitute available to him for the consciousness of attainment in this earthly life, I cannot conceive in what sense this can be regarded as an "abiding satisfaction," unless there is a reasonable prospect of the continuance of his personal existence after death,—and I do not see that Green's reasonings give him any justification for such an expectation. We are told, indeed, that "a capacity consisting in a self-conscious personality cannot be supposed to pass away. It partakes of the nature of the eternal." But granting this, still everything depends on the extent and manner in which this participation is conceived: however

<sup>1</sup> P. 256. "But of particular forms of life we may say that they are better, because in them there is . . . a nearer approach to the end in which alone man can find satisfaction for himself."

true it may be that the human spirit is in a sense identical with the Divine Being, it is undeniably different from it as a self-conscious individual; and the question whether its participation in the nature of the eternal involves immortality of its distinct individual self is one which Green does not seem to me to have definitely faced. In the passage (pp. 193-5) in which he comes nearest to discussing it, the question that primarily seems to interest him is not whether the individual John or Thomas has reason to expect continued existence as an individual after death, but whether we have reason to expect that the life of the spirit will always be realised in *some* individual persons. What he is concerned to maintain is, that "the human spirit cannot develop itself according to its idea except in self-conscious subjects . . . the spiritual progress of mankind is an unmeaning phrase, unless it means a progress of which feeling, thinking, and willing subjects are the agents and sustainers". Considering the "promise which the spirit gives of itself, both in its actual occasional achievement and in the aspirations of which we are individually conscious"; we may, he thinks, "justify the suppositions that the personal life, which historically or on earth is held under conditions which thwart its development, is continued in a society, with which we have no means of communication through the senses, but which shares in and carries further every measure of perfection attained by men under the conditions of life that we know. Or we may content ourselves with saying that the personal self-conscious being, which comes from God, is for ever continued in God. Or we may pronounce the problem suggested by the constant spectacle of unfulfilled human promise to be simply insoluble."

Now doubtless the consideration of these alternatives, the weighing of the *pros* and *cons* for each of them, is an interesting and elevating speculation; but I fail to perceive that any one of them meets the difficulty with which I am now dealing. If

"The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,  
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky"

present us only with an insoluble problem, I do not see how the philosopher is to fulfil the task he has undertaken of showing the effort after an "abiding self-satisfaction" to be rational. Nor, again, do I see how this is achieved by adopting the second alternative, and supposing that the personal self-conscious being, now designated as John or Thomas, is to be "for ever continued in God". For God, or the eternal consciousness—according to the definition

given in Book i.—is necessarily conceived as unalterable: it is eternally in reality all that the human spirit is in possibility, and there are no conceivable perfections that could be added to it; and the process of man's moral effort is surely futile if it is to end in nothing but the existence of that which exists already.<sup>1</sup> It may be said that objections of this kind may be brought against every philosophical theology, unless it diverges widely from religious common-sense: a plain man cannot but conceive the world-process, divinely ordered, as designed to bring about some good not yet realised which must be good from a divine or universal point of view, and yet he cannot conceive the Divine existence as at any time defective or wanting in any respect. I admit the force of the rejoinder; only, unlike Green, I should draw from it the inference that we ought not to use these theological notions, while yet unpurged of such palpable inconsistencies, as the basis of a philosophy of practice.

If, however, we leave on one side these theological difficulties, can we find the "abiding self-satisfaction" which a moral agent is supposed to seek, in the first of the alternatives above suggested—in the conception, that is, of a society of persons who somewhere, somehow, in the indefinite future, are to carry further that movement towards perfection which is so seriously impeded among the human beings whom we know? We might perhaps accept the solution—it being granted that the human spirit can be abidingly satisfied with movement instead of rest, progress instead of perfection—if a "better state of humanity" could be taken as a convertible term for the "better state of myself" at which, as a moral agent, I necessarily aim. In several passages Green seems to pass backwards and forwards between these two notions as if they might be used indifferently in his reasonings; but I cannot see how his moral psychology justifies this procedure. He has laid it down that "in all desire, or at any rate in all that amounts to will, it is self-satisfaction which the self-conscious agent necessarily seeks . . . a certain possible state of himself which in the gratification of the desire he seeks to reach" (pp. 177, 182): and since he has also explained how the most characteristic human desires depend on the conscious

<sup>1</sup> It may perhaps be said that I ought not to apply such a conception as "already existing" to a Being whose existence is expressly stated to be out of time. And, though I cannot profess to be able to reason about such a Being without tacitly conceiving it in some relation to time, I should not have ventured to use the phrase in the text if Green had not set me the example; *e.g.*, in speaking (p. 181) of a "best state of man already present to some divine consciousness".

distinction between the desirer's own individuality and that of other persons, I presume that we must maintain this distinction in interpreting the account above given of "all desire"; and therefore that the "better state of myself" which I necessarily seek cannot be the better state of any other person as such. But if so, we must know exactly how the one comes to be identified or indissolubly connected with the other under the comprehensive notion of the "bettering of man" or "humanity"; by what logical process we pass from the form of unqualified egoism under which the true end of the moral agent is represented to us on one page, to the unmediated universalism which we find suddenly substituted for it on another. I admit, of course, that the Divine Spirit, so far as it can be rightly conceived to aim at the realisation or reproduction of itself in men, must be conceived as aiming at its realisation in "persons," not in "this person," in humanity, not in me; but this only brings out more forcibly the difference that has to be bridged over between the aim of my one indivisible conscious self at its own satisfaction, and this aim of the Divine Spirit at a satisfaction or realisation which may just as well be attained in anyone else as in me. The mere fact that I am aware of myself as a self-distinguishing consciousness and attribute a similar consciousness to other men, does not necessarily make me regard their good as my own; some rational transition is still needed between the recognition of them as ends to themselves, and the recognition of them as ends to myself.

Can this transition be obtained by dwelling on the essential sociality of men, the universal or normal implication, through sympathy, of each one's interest or good with the interests of some others—according to the plain man's conception of 'interest' no less than the philosopher's? In some parts of his discussion (*e.g.*, in Book iii., ch. 3) Green seems to rely to some extent on this line of reasoning, with which the looser optimism of eighteenth-century moralists appears to have been often entirely satisfied; but I think that an exact consideration of it will show its inadequacy to establish the required conclusion. For granting all that is claimed, it only proves that I cannot realise good for myself without promoting the good of others in some degree; it does not show that my own good is in any sense identical with the good of others who are to live after me, so that it will "abide" in another form when my individual existence has terminated. And even if we give up the characteristic of "permanence" and merely consider whether my good during life can be identified with the good of humanity at large, I

still fail to see how this identification can be justified by anything that we know of the essential sociality of ordinary human beings. The "better state of himself" as conceived even by a voluptuary, who aims at dining well, is a social state: his dinner must be a convivial dinner if it is to be good; but it does not follow that he contemplates the waiters who hand round the dishes as ends-in-themselves or has any interest in future good dinners of which he will not partake. This is a coarse illustration; but the proposition that it illustrates seems to me equally, if less palpably, true of all the ordinary exercises and functions of cultivated social existence: the mere fact that I am a social being, that my life is meager and starved if I do not enlarge it by sympathy, and live the life of the community of which I am a member, does not necessarily constitute the good of humanity my good: it brings me a certain way towards this, but it has not necessarily any force or tendency to carry me the rest of the way. Granting that "to any one actuated by it the idea of perfection for himself will involve the idea of a perfection for all other beings, *so far as* he finds the thought of their being perfect necessary to his own satisfaction," it remains true that to most persons the dissatisfaction caused by the idea of the imperfection of other beings, not connected with them by some special bond of sympathy, is at any rate an evil very faintly perceptible; and the question why in this case they should sacrifice any material part of their own good or perfection to avoid it remains unanswered.

I shall be told, perhaps, that the true good of man is so constituted that no competition can possibly arise between the good of one individual and the good of any other. And, doubtless, Green often affirms with sufficient distinctness that "the idea of a true good does not admit of the distinction between good for self and good for others". I think, however, that he does not steadily keep before his mind the gulf that he has placed between himself and common-sense by the adoption of this important proposition; and that, in consequence, he wastes his energies in trying to establish the untenable paradox that civil society is "founded on the idea" of a common good of this kind. He admits, indeed, that "we are very far, in our ordinary estimates of good, whether for ourselves or for others, from keeping such a standard before us . . . the conviction of the community of good for all men has little positive influence over our practical judgments"; good being, in fact, "sought in objects which admit of being competed for". But he does not seem to see that the acceptance of this proposed

standard would radically alter the common notions of virtue, even the notions to which he himself adheres most unquestioningly in his delineation of the moral ideal. Consider, for example, his description of the ideally just man, who is "so over-curious, as it seems to the ordinary man of the world, in inquiring, as to any action that may suggest itself to him, whether the benefit which he might gain by it for himself or for some one in whom he is interested would be gained at the expense of anyone else"; and so determined not to "promote his own wellbeing or that of one whom he loves or likes, from whom he has received service or expects it, at the cost of impeding in any way the wellbeing of one who is nothing to him as a man, or whom he involuntarily dislikes" (p. 244). Surely all this scrupulous investigation, all this resolute impartiality, implies that, in the opinion of Green's ideally just man, it is at least possible that he and his friends may be benefited at the expense of others, that the promotion of one's own wellbeing may really involve the cost of impeding the wellbeing of others: in short, that good really consists—at least to some extent—in "objects that admit of being competed for". How, after writing this description of an ideally just man, Green could go on to say that "the distinction of good for self and good for others has never entered into that idea of a true good upon which moral judgments are founded," I cannot imagine. That the distinction ought to be banished from our moral judgments is an intelligible proposition—though I think a moralist who makes it is rather bound to reconstruct our notions of justice and injustice, and show us the form they will take when the distinction is eliminated—but the statement that it has "never entered in" I contemplate with simple amazement.

So again, the "habitual self-denial," the "self-sacrificing will" which form an essential element of Green's moral ideal, seem to me notions with regard to which Kant's question *Quid juris?* is very obviously raised by Green's theory of the true good; and the question one that never finds an answer. If all self-conscious agents are always aiming each at his own good or self-satisfaction, and the most virtuous man only differs from the most vicious in that he seeks it with a truer insight into its nature, how can he—in the strictness of philosophical discourse—be said to "deny" or "sacrifice" himself in so seeking it? What he denies is not "himself"—according to Green's psychology as expounded in Book ii.—but those "impulses," "influences," or "tendencies" due to his animal soul with which

he does *not* identify himself,<sup>1</sup> "by which he is consciously affected but which are not he"; and which Green, indeed, with a certain eccentricity of terminology, is reluctant even to call "his desires". I trust the reader will not think that I am disputing about words; the question, I take it, is not of language but of the correctness of a certain psychological analysis; I seem to discern, in Green's account of moral action, pagan or neo-pagan forms of ethical thought combined with Christian or post-Christian forms without any proper philosophical reconciliation.

It may be said, however, that these objections are purely formal, or at least that they do not affect the substance of our author's own doctrine: let us leave them, therefore, and try if, when we examine in detail the content of Green's conception of a "true good" for the individual, we find it really so constituted that it cannot possibly come into competition with the true good of any other individual. It is difficult to see how this can be maintained with reference to the wide ideal of human perfection which is put forward in many passages of the treatise. The "realisation of human capabilities" at which we ought to aim is repeatedly stated to include "art and science" as well as "specifically moral virtues": we must suppose "all that is now inchoate in the way of art and knowledge" to have reached completion in it (p. 309): the development of arts and sciences is "a necessary constituent" of any life which "the educated citizen of Christendom" presents to himself as one in which he can find satisfaction (p. 415). But if I am right in thinking the development of artistic faculty and taste a part of my true good, I surely cannot be wrong in regarding the latter as including "objects that admit of being competed for," so long as the material conditions of our spiritual existence remain at all like what they are at present: indeed I should have thought that a writer like Green, who steadily refuses to take a hedonistic view of ordinary human aims and efforts, must regard the "realisation of scientific and artistic capacities," taken in a wide sense, as constituting the main motive of the keen struggle for material wealth which educated and refined persons generally feel themselves bound to keep up, for their children even more than for themselves. The thoughtful trader knows that wealth will enable him to provide himself and those he loves with books, pictures, prolonged education, varied travel, opportunities of intellectual society: and, knowing this, he allows himself to adopt methods of dealing which sometimes, perhaps, are hardly compatible with Green's ideal of justice. Simi-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. especially Bk. ii. ch. 2, p. 151.



larly the hardest choice which Christian self-denial imposes is the preference of the work apparently most socially useful to the work apparently most conducive to the agent's own scientific and æsthetic development.<sup>1</sup>

It may be replied that Art and Science are good, but Virtue better; that the self-devotion which leads a man to postpone to duty the fullest possible realisation of his scientific or artistic faculties is an exercise in which a fuller development of his nature as a whole is attained. I cannot conceive any empirical criterion of "fulness of development" by which this could be made to appear even probable as a universal proposition: but if we grant it to be true, in all cases in which the occasion for such a sacrifice may be presented, it can only be because the superiority in importance of the "specifically moral virtues," as compared with

All other skills and gifts to culture dear,

is held to be so great that the alternatives may be regarded as practically incommensurable. But if this be so, it seems to me that the promotion of the specifically moral virtues—considering the amount that remains to be done in this direction—ought in consistency to occupy so large a share of the practical philanthropist's attention that Green's inclusion of Art and Science will turn out to have hardly any real significance. In short Green seems to me to have unconsciously tried to get the advantages of two distinct and incompatible conceptions of human good: the one liberally comprehensive, but palpably admitting competition, the other non-competitive but stoically or puritanically narrow.

If, again, we concentrate our attention on the narrower conception of "specifically moral virtue," we find a similar difficulty in combining, as Green wishes us to do, formal and material criteria of virtuous action: nor do I think that matters are improved by the trenchant and dogmatic solution of the difficulty which Green here offers. Sometimes the formal criterion is put forward in language which would satisfy the most orthodox Kantian: "the only good," we are told, "which is really common to all who pursue it is that which consists in the universal will to be good" (p.

<sup>1</sup> I think Green unconsciously evades the difficulty which this choice presents, on his theory, when he speaks (pp. 292-3) of "the conscientious man sacrificing *personal pleasure* in satisfaction of the claims of human brotherhood . . . the good citizen has no leisure to think of developing his own faculties of *enjoyment*". Of course his good man, being anti-hedonistic, has no theoretical difficulty in sacrificing his own pleasure or enjoyment—or indeed that of anyone else: but we may still ask whether and why and how far he is called upon to sacrifice the realisation of his scientific and artistic capabilities.

262): the good will is "the one unconditional good . . . the end by reference to which we estimate the effects of an action" (p. 316). On the other hand, it is explained that the "good will" must not be understood to be "a will possessed by some abstract idea of goodness or moral law," which would "amount to a paralysis of the will for all effectual application to great objects of human interest". We conclude therefore that a will is not good, as with Kant, merely through its motive being pure regard for duty, but through its leading to good effects; and accordingly Green expressly says that a man "cannot have been good unless he has done what is good in result" (p. 332). It immediately occurs to us that, if this be true, in order to be good a man must have more than a mere will to be good; his zeal must be according to knowledge; he must have the power of foreseeing what actions will lead to good results. "A dominant interest in the perfection of mankind" will avail him little, if he erroneously supposes that it may be best promoted by a free use of dynamite. And besides mere knowledge there are various other qualities, caution, presence of mind, instinctive sympathy and tact, &c., the want of which, as is commonly thought, may seriously impair the good effects of the most well-intentioned acts. How then can we say that a good will is the "one unconditional good"? Green meets this difficulty by dogmatically enunciating that "there is no real reason to doubt that the good or evil in the motive of an action is exactly measured by the good or evil in its consequences as rightly estimated" (p. 320). "With the whole spiritual history of the action before us on the one side, with the whole sum and series of its effects before us on the other, we should presumably see that just so far as a good will . . . has had more or less to do with bringing the action about, there is more or less good . . . in its effects."

Nothing that can be called evidence is offered on behalf of this startling presumption, and I cannot conjecture on what grounds Green considered himself justified in thus dogmatically affirming it: especially when I find him saying later on that it is "*obvious* that the exact measure in which my conduct has fallen short of . . . perfection," in any particular action, "cannot be speculatively ascertained, till we can see all moral effects in their causes". If it is obviously impossible to ascertain how far the effects of any action are good, how can I possibly tell that they are certain to be exactly as good as the agent's motives were? The perplexity is made greater when Green goes on to admit

expressly (p. 334) that evil consequences of actions may have been due to a "want of the requisite knowledge and ability to foresee" (pp. 333, 4); without expressly maintaining or even implying that such ignorance and want of foresight are always traceable to want of good will. The perplexity reaches its height when we consider wherein the goodness of these good effects consists and how it is to be known. It must ultimately lie, as Green repeatedly tells us, in the tendency of the immediate consequences of actions to promote good character, that "perfection of mankind of which the essence is a good will on the part of all persons". It is true that this promotion can be only indirect, since "every one must make his character for himself. All that one man can do to make another better is to remove obstacles and supply conditions favourable to the formation of a good character". Still it remains true that the promotion of a good character in others and ourselves must, according to Green, be the sole ultimate end and standard of the goodness of the effects of our actions. On the other hand, Green explains in another passage (pp. 318, 19) that "we are on very uncertain ground" when we try, in judging the actions of contemporaries, to "ascertain the state of character on the part of the agents which the actions represent": and hence concludes that it is wiser "to confine ourselves to measuring the value of actions by their effects without reference to the character of the agents". But, as we have seen, these effects can only be effects on the character of other persons; and since, I presume, our judgments as to effects on character must ultimately be inferred from observations of conduct, there would seem to be precisely the same kind of difficulty in measuring the value of actions by their effects as there is in trying to ascertain the character of the agent; only that in the former case the unknown quantity comes in at a later stage of the calculation.

I cannot but think that these and other fundamental difficulties of method would have pressed themselves more strongly on Green's attention, and would therefore have obtained from him at least a consistent solution, if he had ever felt strongly the practical importance of improving men's knowledge or reasoned conviction as to what they ought to do. But—in face of the vehement jar and conflict of principles and methods continually exhibited by contemporary schools and sects of social reformers, whose sincerity and earnestness cannot be doubted—he remains firmly persuaded that practically the tendency of actions to produce a perfection of human society will be "within the ken of any dispassionate and considerate man"; and hence, though he

recognises that it is the function of philosophy to supply men with a "*rationale* of the various duties" prescribed to them, I cannot perceive that the enthusiasm for human wellbeing which the whole treatise breathes has actually impelled him to furnish such a *rationale*, or even to provide his readers with an outline of a coherent method by which a system of duties could be philosophically worked out. There is much instructive description and discussion, in the concluding Book of the treatise, of the general attitude which a moral man should adopt in dealing with practical problems, much subtle analysis and distinction of different elements presented for his consideration; but if the reader expects to be guided to a cogently reasoned solution of any such problems—proceeding from unambiguous ethical premisses to definite practical conclusions—the expectation will hardly be fulfilled.

This, at least, is the conclusion at which I have arrived, after a careful perusal of the treatise: but I expect that it will be widely disputed. Considering the growing prevalence of the manner of thought of which Green was a leading representative, the great influence exercised by himself personally, the amount of close and powerful reasoning which his book contains, and the singularly elevated and inspiring ethical mood which pervades it from first to last—it is hardly possible that such a work should not meet with many readers to whom it will give, as a whole, more intellectual satisfaction than I have been able to find in it. Indeed, had I thought otherwise, it would have seemed to me more suitable—as it would certainly have been more consonant with my own feelings—to treat this posthumous book in a less polemical manner; to dwell more upon its literary merits, and upon those aspects or elements of its doctrine with which I am in cordial sympathy. But, regarding the treatise as one about which our ethical discussion is likely for some time to turn, I have thought it best to urge the fundamental difficulties that I find in its teachings as frankly and fully as I should have done if the author had been living to reply. There are many, I doubt not, ready—if they should think it needful—to come (as Plato says) "to the aid of the orphaned doctrine, the father of which had he lived would have struck many a good stroke in its behalf": or let me rather say—since he never wrote for victory—that he would have set himself to remove such difficulties as he thought worthy of consideration in the candid, earnest, careful, exhaustive style of controversy which was peculiarly his own. That this source of further instruction is now for ever closed to us, no one can regret more sincerely than the writer of this article.