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‘God, man, and nature’: Neo-Aristotelian naturalism in T.H. Green’s faith and philosophy¹

‘...it is hard to alter opinions that are the result of many years meditation and are part and parcel of one’s conception of God, man, and nature’²

1. Introduction

As he has done for so many people, Peter Nicholson has profoundly influenced my intellectual development, my understanding of the British idealists and my sense of academic professionalism. One of the first books that I read as an undergraduate was a famous collection called *Political Thought from Plato to NATO*, edited by Brian Redhead. The second, remarkable chapter of that book was entitled ‘Aristotle: Ideals and realities’ and Peter was its author.³ Subsequently I took a Master’s degree and a doctorate with Peter at the University of York. When it came to finding a topic for my Master’s dissertation that brought together the approaches of my two then-great philosophical heroes, John Stuart Mill and G.W.F. Hegel, Peter suggested reading Green’s *Principles of Political Obligation*.

¹ Thanks to Jim Connelly, Chris Fear, Bill Mander, Peter Nicholson and two anonymous referees for their comments on the draft article. The usual disclaimer applies.

² T.H.Green, Letter to Professor Legge, 29 April [1878], in T.H.Green, *Works*, 5 volumes, ed. R.L. Nettleship and P.P.Nicholson (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1997), vol.5, pp.466-67.

³ P.P.Nicholson, ‘Aristotle: Ideals and realities’, in B.Redhead, ed., *Political Thought from Plato to NATO* (London: Ariel, 1984), pp.30-44.

Under his guidance, I developed a fascination for British idealism and the New Liberalism which continues to this day.⁴

Whether or not Peter intended it, his advice that I begin my doctorate by reading Green's religious works encouraged me to see strong personalist and, increasingly, constructivist themes within Green's wider philosophy and particularly in his *Prolegomena to Ethics*. It has always seemed ironic to me therefore that my own interpretation of Green's thought has been accused of seeking to discount the religious influences on Green's philosophy. W.J. Mander has argued that I present 'a thoroughgoing domestication of the divine' which 'seems to push Green further in the naturalistic direction than he ever intended.'⁵ Similarly, in his final book, *The God of Metaphysics*, Timothy Sprigge wrote that 'Colin Tyler manages to be sympathetic with the metaphysics by giving it a very reductionist interpretation.'⁶ Mander makes the same accusation.⁷ Maria Dimova-Cookson has argued, 'The conclusion of this argument... makes Green's ideas acceptable but less poignant.'⁸

Leaving aside the question of my own position, establishing Green's naturalism and the philosophical redundancy of his religious beliefs is profoundly important when understanding his philosophy and, by extension, when understanding British idealism as a philosophical movement. This article is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it focuses particularly on Mander's seminal history of the British idealists as well as his other detailed

⁴ The dissertation appears in updated form as C.Tyler, 'Thomas Hill Green', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), ed. E.N.Zalta <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/green/>>, sections 2-8.

⁵ W.J.Mander, *British Idealism: A history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.145.

⁶ T.L.S.Sprigge, *The God of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.268n19.

⁷ W.J.Mander, 'In Defence of the Eternal Consciousness', in W.J.Mander and M.Dimova-Cookson, eds., *T.H. Green: Ethics, metaphysics and political philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), p.206.

⁸ M.Dimova-Cookson, 'The Eternal Consciousness: What roles it can and cannot play. A reply to Colin Tyler', *Bradley Studies*, 9:2 (Autumn 2003), p.139.

analysis of the nature and significance of the eternal consciousness in Green's philosophy.⁹ Secondly, it emphasises Green's development of a constructivist, personalised, perspectival account of philosophical knowledge that radically undermines the readings developed by Mander, Sprigge and Dimova-Cookson. Thirdly, it extends the perspectival reading of Green's thought by considering the relationship between his religious writings and his philosophy, thereby highlighting significant yet underappreciated facets of his position. To begin to do this, section two analyses the interrelated concepts of God and man in Green's religious writings as they have been discussed by Nicholson, Mander and myself. Section three analyses the philosophical themes within Green's religious thought. Section four highlights Green's rejection of all forms of 'materialist naturalism' and his reliance on a form of neo-Aristotelian naturalism, before rejecting the potential objection that the resulting refinement of Green's philosophy is reductionist.

2. Three views of the eternal consciousness

Mander concentrates his 2011 analysis on five pages from my doctoral thesis (published in 1997) which discuss the relationship between the individual's capacity for knowledge and Green's complex characterisation of the eternal consciousness. There, I argued that all that is required for Green to achieve his philosophical need to explain the relative coherence of determinate individual knowledge is that (i) 'ultimately each human mind has the same underlying structure' and that rather than relying on the supernatural action of an eternal consciousness (ii) 'the coherence of our knowledge is better understood as the result of our instinctive drive to understand the world as unified rather than as evidence of the gradual

⁹ Mander, *British Idealism* and 'Defence'.

reproduction of the 'divine' consciousness in man.'¹⁰ To indicate the constructive nature of this instinctive drive, I immediately noted: 'As Green puts it, 'we only find unity in the world because we have an idea that it is there, an idea which we direct our powers to realise.'"¹¹

My full analysis of the dynamics of the continuing process of actualising potentials through the 'spiritual principle' is developed in my *Metaphysics of Self-realisation and Freedom*, which was published in 2010 the year before the publication of Mander's impressive and frequently-cited book *British Idealism*.¹² It will be helpful to provide a very brief summary of that full analysis, the new elements of which were informed by Peter Nicholson's 2006 interpretation.¹³ As Ritchie, Nicholson, Mander and I note, logically Green begins his philosophical analysis not from God's existence but from the fact that human beings believe that they possess knowledge (objectively true beliefs) regarding events in the world and about values. Green argues that the fundamental role of metaphysics is to analyse one's most firmly-held beliefs so as to discover what must logically hold for these beliefs themselves to be true. This requires, firstly, the discovery of the fundamental presuppositions of one's most firmly-held beliefs. D.G. Ritchie calls this operation 'Critical Metaphysics', in which Green seeks to discover 'the *a priori* conceptions and principles which are involved in ordinary knowledge and in the procedure of scientific investigation and proof', including the 'axioms [of thought]' 'without ... [which] all knowledge would be

¹⁰ C.Tyler, *Thomas Hill Green (1836-82) and the Philosophical Foundations of Politics: An internal critique* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1997), pp.30-31.

¹¹ Tyler, *Foundations*, p.31, quoting T.H.Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, ed. A.C. Bradley (Oxford Clarendon, 1883) (hereafter, 'PE [section number]'), section 149.

¹² C.Tyler, *Metaphysics of Self-realisation and Freedom* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010); Mander, *British Idealism*.

¹³ P.Nicholson, 'Green's 'Eternal Consciousness'', in Dimova-Cookson and Mander, eds., *Green*, pp.140-59. 'New' in the sense that they appeared for the first time in Tyler, *Metaphysics*.

impossible'.¹⁴ The 'concepts' and 'principles' which result from this continuing process of critical metaphysics should then be recombined to form a coherent and complete system which demonstrates 'its adequacy to the explanation and arrangement of the whole Universe as it becomes known to us', through a process which Ritchie calls 'Speculative Metaphysics'.¹⁵ Again following Green, Ritchie notes that '*this* [speculative] metaphysics must always be attempted anew by each thinker.'¹⁶

Scholars disagree regarding the next stage of this process. Nicholson holds that, as Ritchie argues, when conducted in this way and bearing in mind Green's other key philosophical claims, Green's philosophical analysis justifies only a 'minimal conception of the eternal consciousness'.¹⁷ He continues:

'the essential point, I think, is that Green's argument only logically justifies his holding a formal conception of the eternal consciousness as "the spiritual principle, neither in time nor in space, immaterial and immovable, eternally one with itself" (PE sec.54). Apart from the demonstration of those formal characteristics, and of the necessity of self-distinguishing consciousness as the condition of human knowledge, perception, and moral life, the conception of the eternal consciousness provided by philosophy is a blank'¹⁸

¹⁴ D.G.Ritchie, *Darwin and Hegel with other philosophical studies* (London and New York: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893), p.14.

¹⁵ Ritchie, *Darwin*, p.14.

¹⁶ Ritchie, *Darwin*, p.14.

¹⁷ Nicholson, 'Eternal Consciousness', p.149; compare Ritchie, *Darwin*, pp.15-16.

¹⁸ Nicholson, 'Eternal Consciousness', p.149.

No more than this minimal interpretation is needed, Nicholson argues, because this reading fulfils Green's primary philosophical purpose by establishing that scientific attacks on the core religious beliefs of thoughtful Christians cannot establish that individual consciousness is merely the result of physical processes. The individual remains a self-determining agent in their own worlds of experience and practice. Nevertheless, Nicholson recognises that Green and his fellow thoughtful Christians could not have been satisfied with a purely abstract conception of God's essence and will, which is all that this minimal interpretation can justify.¹⁹ Nicholson argues that as the eternal consciousness has been specified as fully as it can be, one should not look to it for the determinate expression of human knowledge and interests, which Green conceives to be 'a more complete fulfilment of the capabilities of human nature'.²⁰ Hence Nicholson highlights Green's requirement that one should look to the morality, practices and institutions that prevail in one's community. By making this move, Green follows Aristotle. Importantly however, Green's appeal to conventional moral and social structure is not as apparently uncritical as that which one finds in Aristotle. Green is clear that conventional ethics, practices and institutions are partial and distorted expressions of the practical moral ideal. Hence, the conscientious citizen 'strives always to see how it could be taken further, refined, extended.'²¹ Yet, this operation relies on the individual's exercise of their own critical facilities in concert with those of their fellow citizens, and not on the surreptitious action of the eternal consciousness.

Mander does not discuss Nicholson's interpretation. Yet, he does acknowledge that for Green, as human beings can have only a limited 'grasp of ultimate reality', 'talk about the eternal consciousness [is] possible, but only of the thinnest and most metaphorical

¹⁹ Nicholson, 'Eternal Consciousness', pp.151-52.

²⁰ PE 337.

²¹ Nicholson, 'Eternal Consciousness', p.151.

kind.’²² Nevertheless, there are important points of divergence between Nicholson and Mander. For example, contrary to Mander and most other scholars, Nicholson highlights Green’s rejection of Hegel’s conflation of the eternal consciousness with the consciousnesses of individuals: ‘Green is emphatic that human thought (even when raised to its highest level, in dialectical philosophy) and the thought which the eternal consciousness are utterly different, and must not be confused.’²³ By contrast, Mander asserts that ‘we should not so swiftly think impossible or absurd any conception of the self as belonging to some larger super-organism.’²⁴

Yet, possibility does not mean probability and not-being-absurd is a very undemanding standard when judging plausibility. For these reasons, my use of an explicitly refined version of Green’s theory of the eternal consciousness seeks to show that his philosophy can achieve its primary goals without invoking the idea of a super-organism. This is a process of refining if one considers it from the perspective of Green’s philosophical project. (It would be a reductive process from the religious perspective which he argues philosophy should supersede.) It consists solely in disregarding the residuum of religious thought that, as argued below, remains in the *Prolegomena*. It consists in disregarding the claim that the eternal consciousness exists separately from the individual’s consciousness. The remainder of my refined reading is simply what is left of his theory once that element has been bracketed.

²² Mander, ‘Defence’, p.190.

²³ Nicholson, ‘Eternal Consciousness’, p.150. Nicholson highlights T.H.Green, ‘J. Caird: ‘Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion’’, in Green, *Works*, vol.3, pp.142-46.

²⁴ Mander, ‘Defence’, p.206. He entertains this position on the basis of his analysis of the dispute between Bosanquet and Pringle-Pattison regarding the relative status of finite centres and the Absolute (W.J.Mander, ‘Life and Finite Individuality: The Bosanquet/Pringle-Pattison Debate’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 13:1 (2005), 111-30). For an alternative analysis, see C.Tyler, *Idealist Political Philosophy: Pluralism and conflict in absolute idealist thought* (London Continuum, 2006), pp.149-52.

The need to analyse Green's texts once again is given greater impetus by significant shortcomings in some interpretations of his use of terms such as 'reproduction', 'participation', 'realization', 'rendering' and even 'the eternal consciousness' itself – a phrase which is ubiquitous in the literature even though it appears only in eight sections of the *Prolegomena* and nowhere else in his writings.²⁵ At the same time, it is important to insist that a minimalist reading of the type developed by Nicholson and Mander does not explain Green's repeatedly-stated aspiration to establish how individuals' higher capacities do not merely develop out of their selves but how they 'realise' each of those selves. These facts motivate my refinement of Green's eternal consciousness (which he calls more usually, 'the spiritual principle') and the individual in ways that differ from Nicholson, Mander and other scholars. The refinement emphasises the constructive philosophical process at the heart of the manifestation of the eternal consciousness, a process undertaken by individuals and to which Green refers when he notes that 'we only find unity in the world because we have an idea that it is there, an idea which we direct our powers to realise.'²⁶ This *nisus* can be characterised as a form of quasi-Stendhalian crystallisation: 'a mental process which draws from everything that happens new proofs of the perfection of the loved one.'²⁷ Despite the tendency to insist on a sharp distinction between Green's religious thought and his philosophy, this theory is rooted firmly in his highly unorthodox Christian faith, as begins to become clear in the next section.

²⁵ Mander, 'Defence', pp.193-94. The phrase 'eternal consciousness' occurs only at PE 67, 72-74, 82, 83, 95, 115. See Tyler, *Metaphysics*, pp.70-72, 77-79, and C.Tyler, *Civil Society, Capitalism and the State* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2012), pp.11-14.

²⁶ PE 149.

²⁷ Stendhal, *Love*, trans. G.Sale and S.Sale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p.45. See Tyler, *Metaphysics*, pp.38, 52, 83-84, 93, 107, 146-48, 183-86.

3. Green's faith

Even as a young man, Green was renowned both for his religious sincerity and his independence of belief.²⁸ C.S. Parker, who knew Green as an undergraduate, encapsulated the relationship between Green's ethics and religious beliefs very well in the reminiscence that he wrote for Nettleship's memoir: 'On the moral side his early training had given him a high and holy ideal, with a deep sense of man's inability to realise it otherwise than through a Divine indwelling Spirit. Thus philosophy was to him no cold and Passive speculation, but a cherished creed, a help to noblest life.'²⁹ Green's writings make it abundantly clear that in no way is he an orthodox Christian. A former school-friend recounted that, while at Rugby, Green was known for 'going out even then on Sunday afternoons in the fields by himself, and not ashamed, when he was laughed at about it, to silence us by saying with a smile, that he could worship God best in the green fields by himself.'³⁰ Famously, in his religious writings Green explicitly denies the unique divinity of Jesus, the authority of miracles, the spiritual authority of the Church, and claims to evidence based on Scripture and the senses.³¹ Moreover, he writes very little about subjects that one would normally expect in Christian treatises. For example, nowhere does he explore the nature and significance of the afterlife and sin, although he did support the National Church Reform Union.³² Rather, his positive distinctively religious concerns are primarily with the divinity within human beings

²⁸ Compare Tyler, *Metaphysics*, pp.6-7.

²⁹ C.S.Parker, 'Recollection 7', 26 September 1888, in C.Tyler, ed., 'Recollections regarding T.H. Green', *Collingwood and British Idealism*, 14:2 (2008), p.59 (Parker's capitalisation).

³⁰ Nettleship, 'Memoir', in Green, *Works*, vol.3, p.xvi, quoting an unnamed school-friend of Green.

³¹ See, for example, T.H.Green, 'Essay on Christian Dogma' (hereafter, 'ECG'), in Green, *Works*, vol.3, pp.161-85 *passim*.

³² T.H.Green, 'Reform of the National Church', 7 December 1881, in Green, *Works*, vol.5, pp.376-9.

and particularly the nature of atonement, as well as the centrality of personal faith and conscience in the individual's moral life.³³

Given the profound significance that Green attaches to religious beliefs, clearly it is potentially fatal to the constructivist, personal, perspectival interpretation when Mander objects that my interpretation of Green's philosophical system denies God the central role that Green accords Him in his theory of human individuality.

'Colin Tyler... sees such thoughts as signifying a thoroughgoing domestication of the divine and argues that Green's eternal consciousness is not some ontological over-being, but rather just an immanent potential within each of us. Each of us has, or better *is*, an eternal consciousness which progressively manifests itself through our temporal lives.'³⁴

Elsewhere, Mander is highly dismissive of this type of interpretation. The idea that Green conceives the eternal consciousness to be '[no] more than 'the best of us'; 'the good we might become'' 'has little to recommend it', Mander writes.³⁵ 'Its construal of Green's numerous statements of the already completed nature of divine knowledge is hardly a natural one.'³⁶

In response, it is difficult to find anyone who reads Green as Mander claims. The fundamental problem is that his criticism conflates two clearly very different aims of textual

³³ Green, Letter to Legge, pp.466-67.

³⁴ Mander, *British Idealism*, p.145.

³⁵ Mander, *British Idealism*, pp.144-45, quoting PE 187.

³⁶ Mander, 'Defence', p.194.

analysis. The first seeks to recover the meaning which a philosopher intends his text to convey, while the second seeks to uncover those parts of that meaning which are required to maintain the integrity of the author's philosophical system. With this distinction in mind, it is important to note that at no point have I ever claimed that Green himself denies the existence of a Christian God, nor have I ever denied that he believes that his philosophy relies upon the action of an eternal consciousness on or within individuals' consciousnesses.³⁷ Moreover, I have never argued that the eternal consciousness was 'a specifically [sc. exclusively] cognitive potential.'³⁸ I have always argued explicitly that Green believed the eternal consciousness to be more than the individual's rational and eudaimonic potentials. Rather, my claim is and has always been that, despite his own convictions, Green's metaphysics can fulfil the fundamental philosophical role that he gave to it even after it has been shorn of the religious 'excrescences' that his faith led him to associate with it.³⁹

No one disputes that Green sees religious doctrine as deficient when compared to well-founded philosophical thought. Nevertheless, he argues, religious beliefs provide many of philosophy's raw materials. Hence, and as is widely recognised (not least by Mander), Green's philosophy is an attempt to discover what he calls in his *Essay on Christian Dogma* 'an essence within the essence of christianity' and to express that inner essence philosophically. Green argues that to express this inner essence philosophically, the outer essence ('the essence of christianity') must be 'assimilated by the reason as an idea' rather

³⁷ See Tyler, *Metaphysics*, pp.71-72. Arguably, Green could not accept a quasi-Bradleyian or Bosanquetian Absolute which is constituted by and exists in the interaction of finite human minds (Tyler, *Metaphysics*, pp.74-75).

³⁸ Mander, 'Defence', p.194.

³⁹ The phrase 'unfortunate excrescences' comes from Sprigge's summary of Dimova-Cookson and myself (Sprigge, *God of Metaphysics*, p.258).

than retaining its dogmatic character as 'intuition' even if the latter is 'intuition become abstract'.⁴⁰ (This recalls the earlier discussion of his Critical and Speculative Metaphysics.)

It is worth pursuing this point further than many scholars of Green's religious thought have done. Green identifies three stages to this process. Initially, the maturing religious believer associates the divinity of Christ with Jesus as a being who occupied a uniquely elevated spiritual position – that is, as the only-begotten Son of God. Next, gradually the believer comes to identify the salient characteristics possessed by the individual named Jesus, and intuits these characteristics as abstract qualities that might be possessed by other individuals. Thirdly, the believer conceives these characteristics ('general attributes') not through his use of intuition but rather through his reason.⁴¹ To the extent that he achieves this third stage, the believer moves from religion to philosophy. Rather than relying on 'imagination' and a belief in the veracity of an aggregate of claims regarding the divine, the philosopher comes to understand these claims conceptually and in a systematic relationship to one another. Yet, the philosopher retains his sense of the authority of these claims through the action of his conscience. In this sense, philosophy is not a narrowly rationalistic process; rather, it combines both reason (analytic and synthetic thought) and moral judgment. As will become clear below, this conception of philosophy feeds directly into the area of Green's philosophy under discussion here. Specifically, it leads him to conceive the eternal consciousness in its temporal manifestations as a partially actualised principle which is not merely cognitive, but also and crucially affective and conative. In the context of Green's intellectual heritage, in its temporal manifestations it is constituted by both our rational Kantian capacities and, as becomes clearer below, our

⁴⁰ ECD, p.182.

⁴¹ ECD, pp.182-83.

eudaimonic neo-Aristotelian capacities, which Green encapsulates in the notion of ‘a more complete fulfilment of the capabilities of human nature’.⁴²

It can be seen from the preceding analysis that a continuing search for what is of ‘permanent value’ in Green’s mature philosophy accords with his own aspiration in his analysis of the philosophical implications of religion.⁴³ Indeed, not only does the approach gain explicit and repeated support from Green’s own writings, but the philosophically-superfluous status of his conception of God is implicit even within his religious texts. The first stage in justifying this even more controversial claim is to consider the opening lines of ‘The Word is Nigh Thee.’

‘...if there can be an essence within the essence of christianity, it is the thought embodied in the text I have read; the thought of God, not as “far off” but “nigh,” not as a master but as a father, not as a terrible outward power, forcing us we know not whither, but as one of whom we may say that we are reason of his reason and spirit of his spirit; who lives in our moral life, and for whom we live in living for the brethren, even as in so living we live freely, because in obedience to a spirit which is our self; in communion with whom we triumph over death, and have assurance of eternal life.’⁴⁴

This assertion of God’s immanence within each individual constitutes the initial step in the establishment of the contention that Green’s core philosophical claims do not necessarily

⁴² PE 337.

⁴³ Tyler, *Metaphysics*, chapter two.

⁴⁴ T.H.Green, ‘Fragment of an Address on the Text ‘The Word is Nigh Thee.’ (Rom. X.8; Deut. xxx.14.)’ (hereafter, ‘WNT’), in his *Works*, vol.3, p.221.

presuppose God's existence. Certainly, to many people Green's paternal metaphor implies a radical separation of God and the individual just as a father is a separate being from his child. As we have seen, when Green goes on to describe the individual as 'the vehicle of an eternally complete consciousness', some scholars have argued that Green sees the former as a passive vessel under God's control, and that consequently the individual is of merely derivative value relative to God.⁴⁵ However, such an interpretation misses aspects of Green's argument. Crucially, it misunderstands Green's claim that 'we are reason of his reason and spirit of his spirit' and, as such, that God is 'a spirit which is our self'.⁴⁶ Green recognises that the claim is very easily misunderstood. The remainder of the 'The Word is Nigh Thee' introduces further key claims, states in a condensed form the correct relationship between God and the individual, and, finally, dismisses a misunderstanding of the implications of that condensed statement. What follows focuses on the first two of these three tasks.

The key claim that Green emphasises is that reality (a.k.a., actuality) and possibility (a.k.a., potentiality) are determined by one's perspective. He argues that: 'Only so far as my present condition is thought of as reality, does that which I seek to become appear a mere possibility. From another point of view the present condition is the possibility, to which the correlative reality is the more perfect man resulting.'⁴⁷ The significance of perspective depends, Green argues, on the significance of neo-Aristotelian teleological explanations. Hence, he continues: 'To anyone who understands a process of development, the result being developed is the reality, and it is in its ability to become this [result] that the subject

⁴⁵ Green, PE 67; see *ibid.*, 302.

⁴⁶ WNT, p.221.

⁴⁷ WNT, p.224.

undergoing development has its true nature.⁴⁸ From a teleological perspective, the present state of the individual's self 'is not' 'real' and the telos towards which it is developing 'is' 'real'.⁴⁹ From this perspective, 'God is the final cause of the moral life' in that he is 'the ideal self which no one, as a moral agent, is, but which everyone, as such an agent, is however blindly seeking to become'.⁵⁰ In other words, God is 'real' and 'exists' in the sense that he is the idea of perfect knowledge and morality and the individual's current, imperfect (or 'incomplete') moral character is merely a 'possibility' of God.⁵¹

Green invokes this teleological perspective to conceptualise the individual's capacity for agency and his 'difference' from God. Both of these uses weaken the claim that he believes the individual is a means to God's divine self-realisation. Specifically, Green insists that, from his teleological perspective, the individual exists as a person because he possesses qualities which enable him to exercise his own agency within his own moral life. More than this, it is precisely because the individual possesses this capacity for self-directed agency that he is 'identical' to God: 'That in virtue of which I am I, and can in consequence so set before myself the realisation of my own possibilities as to be a moral agent, is that in virtue of which I am one with God.'⁵² Pivotal here is Green's conception of identity. He argues that God and the individual are 'identical' in the same sense that the acorn and its final cause (the oak) are identical. That is, God and the individual are different entities (both in time and level of development), yet they share a 'unity of principle or law' in the sense that they form part of one process of change, 'though they be as different as the oak from

⁴⁸ WNT, pp.224-25.

⁴⁹ WNT, p.225. Mander acknowledges this argument in the *Prolegomena* (Mander, 'Defence', p.204).

⁵⁰ WNT, p.225.

⁵¹ WNT, pp.224-25.

⁵² WNT, p.226.

the acorn or the complete animal from the embryo'.⁵³ Green applies this point to the individual-God relationship in 'The Word is Nigh Thee' in the following way.

'Our formula then is that God is identical with the self of every man in the sense of being the realisation of its determinate possibilities, the completion of that which, as merely in it, is incomplete and therefore unreal; that in being conscious of himself man is conscious of God, and thus knows what he himself really is.'⁵⁴

In short, the 'word is nigh thee' in the sense that while God and the individual are separate beings just as the idea of the oak and the acorn in your hand are separate beings, they are also 'identical' in that they share a 'principle of unity or law'. This shared principle shows itself as a motivating force within the individual, which leads to his constantly striving to live up to his idea of God. This movement is achieved to the extent that religious beliefs (which are intuited or conceived in figurative form) are transformed into rationally-articulated and systematically interrelated philosophical propositions.⁵⁵ This identity of God and the individual is made increasingly manifest as these philosophical propositions gain a firmer hold over the individual's consciousness and habitual practices. As Green writes in the *Prolegomena*: 'With this consciousness, directed in the right path, *i.e.* the path in which it tends to become what according to the immanent divine law of its being it has in it to be –

⁵³ WNT, p.225.

⁵⁴ WNT, p.227.

⁵⁵ ECD, p.182.

and it is as so directed that we call it “practical reason” – rests the initiative of all virtuous habit and action.’⁵⁶

Given the authority which he accords to philosophical reflection, perhaps it is unsurprising that, in addition to biblical and Aristotelian sources, in ‘The Word is Nigh Thee’ Green indicates the Kantian basis of his theory of the individual’s cognitive development towards the perfection found in the ideal of the divine consciousness.⁵⁷ He develops this line of thought in several religious texts. For example, in his ‘Essay on Christian Dogma’, he adopts Kant’s framework whereby ethical judgments derive their authority from a combination of rational thought and reverence for the moral law. Unlike Kant however, Green places great emphasis on the fact that as one moves from religion to philosophy, one comes to appreciate that ‘from being supposed to be known only so far as it exists, [perfection] must be understood also to exist only so far as it is known.’⁵⁸

This latter fact highlights once again the perspectival character of the transition from religious to philosophical knowledge. Green gives the example of the changing understanding of the meaning of the resurrection of Christ. The apostles conceived of the events following the crucifixion in Judaic terms and so understood the events as requiring at least some ‘carnal’ aspects; that is, as necessarily entailing the resurrection of a physical body.⁵⁹ St Paul, on the other hand, partly moved beyond that Judaic understanding in the sense that he understood the resurrection in terms of the ‘gentile (at least Alexandrian) philosophy’.⁶⁰ More specifically, Paul had a clearer sense of the spiritual significance of

⁵⁶ PE, 178.

⁵⁷ WNT, p.228.

⁵⁸ ECD, p.183.

⁵⁹ ECD, p.183.

⁶⁰ ECD, p.183.

Jesus' life and resurrection: 'in his risen form he [Jesus of Nazareth] is an object solely to the spiritual intuition'.⁶¹ Nevertheless, Paul retained a need to understand Jesus as the only Son of God. This is not the end of the process however.

'To the modern philosopher', Green continues, 'the idea itself is the reality. To him Christ is the necessary determination of the eternal subject, the objectification by this subject of himself in the world of nature and humanity.'⁶² The modern philosopher retains Paul's 'idea of God's "alterity," [that is,] the divine unity of the natural as well as the moral world'. Yet, the modern philosopher supplements this Pauline conception with 'a gradual determination of the idea of God as an object to himself. This idea becomes more concrete as the intuition becomes more abstract. God has died and been buried, and risen again, and realised himself in all the particularities of a moral life.'⁶³ In other words, the modern philosopher understands the resurrection of Christ as a spiritual death to sin in the lives of any human being and the rebirth in the life of us all as moral agents living in particular communities, with particular challenges and duties. As Green develops this idea, he claims that we are resurrected Christs to the extent that we are particular conscientious agents interrelating on a daily basis with relatively stable and definite networks of conscientious agents.

Summarising. Green understands God and the individual to be identical not in the sense that the latter is a merely passive tool which the former uses to realise itself in the temporal world (the individual is not the equivalent of the 'hands' of the eternal consciousness). Rather, he holds that they are 'identical' in the sense that they share a

⁶¹ ECD, p.183.

⁶² ECD, p.183.

⁶³ ECD, pp.183-84.

‘principle of unity or law’, whereby the individual strives to realise in his own life the qualities that he understands to be implied in the idea of God. Once again in Aristotelian terms, God is the final cause of the individual’s being, yet He is also its efficient cause in the sense that the idea of a perfect God draws the imperfect individual to realise that idea within themselves. Green expresses this point in his critical analysis of Aristotle’s conception of the prime mover.

‘The divine reason, says Aristotle, moves the world as an object of “intellectual desire.” Now, as such desire implies a complete reciprocity between the subject and the object of it, this properly conveys the idea that God is in the world, “desiring” his own realisation, and that this desire underlies its process of development. This idea, however, if it once appears, is in no way carried out by Aristotle... The whole moral life is, in fact, a process in which, though it be sometimes like a stream that seems to run backward, man, as an unrealised self, is constantly fusing the skirts of the alien matter that surrounds him, and fashioning the world of his desires to a universe adequate to himself.’⁶⁴

God is an ideal which attracts us as individuals because it represents the best that we feel we can become. As noted earlier, in relation to the process of crystallisation at work in Green’s philosophy, our always-incomplete and inchoate idea of God draws us forward in a manner closely akin to Green’s reading of Aristotle’s theory of the prime mover: it is ‘a source of motion, but immovable himself.’⁶⁵ Green insists upon this link between Aristotle’s

⁶⁴ T.H.Green, ‘The Philosophy of Aristotle’ (hereafter, ‘PA,’), in his *Works*, vol.3, pp.85-86.

⁶⁵ PA, p.85.

prime mover and his own conception of the relationship between God and the individual. True Christian faith drives the individual to realise God within himself: it is 'a permanent course of unhasting activity.'⁶⁶ In this way the individual moves towards 'a more complete fulfilment of the capabilities of human nature'.⁶⁷

4. Green's neo-Aristotelian naturalism

Despite his acknowledgement of Green's intellectual debts to Aristotle, Mander rejects any interpretation of 'the eternal consciousness' or 'spiritual principle' which portrays it as being (quoting Green) nothing 'more than "the best of us"; "the good we might become"'.⁶⁸ He argues that those who conclude from such passages ('the best of us', 'the good we might become') that Green reduces God to the highest capacities of human beings appear 'to push Green further in the naturalistic direction than he ever intended.' He attributes such an 'excessively naturalistic reading' of Green to me. Unfortunately, Mander does not tell us what he means by 'the naturalistic direction'.⁶⁹ Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro highlight the term's elusiveness.

'Naturalism – very roughly – may be defined as the philosophy that *everything that exists is a part of nature and there is no reality beyond or outside of nature*. While this is a serviceable overall definition, it is clearly not very informative or precise... The really interesting philosophical debates arise when it comes to specifying what might be called *the*

⁶⁶ PA, p.91.

⁶⁷ PE 337.

⁶⁸ Mander, *British Idealism*, pp.144-45, quoting PE 187.

⁶⁹ Mander, *British Idealism*, p.145.

nature of nature, identifying what is being positively affirmed as part of nature or what is natural and is definitely excluded.’⁷⁰

Mander does not explain which of the vast array of possible conceptions of ‘nature’ he presupposes here. Nevertheless, he does highlight one particular conception in other analyses of the British idealists. This is the standard position in contemporary analytic philosophical whereby one restricts ‘nature’ narrowly to the realm of material entities. For ‘empirical naturalism’ or ‘materialistic naturalism’ (as Mander calls it interchangeably), the appropriate methods for analysing ‘nature’ are those employed by mainstream contemporary scientists.⁷¹ Thus conceived, naturalism denies the existence – or at least the explanatory power – of theories making reference to any immaterial entity. The normative manifestation of this view is utilitarianism. Consequently, as Green puts it in the opening pages of the *Prolegomena*, for empirical naturalists

‘Ethics... becomes to all intents and purposes a science of health, and the true moralist will be the physiologist who, making the human physique his speciality, takes a sufficiently wide view of his subject’ by analysing ‘the influence of historical and political factors, or of what it is now the fashion to call the “social medium,” in giving a specific character to those susceptibilities of pleasure and pain on which, according to the theory supposed, the phenomena of human action depend.’⁷²

⁷⁰ S.Goetz and C.Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), p.6.

⁷¹ Mander, *British Idealism*, p.215.

⁷² PE 2.

On this reading of empirical naturalism, the individual is little more than an animal, driven by the desire for pleasure and an aversion to pain. Yet, Green was emphatic, as he wrote in his three-part *Mind* article 'Can There Be a Natural Science of Man?' (1882), that 'experience, in the sense of a consciousness of events as a related series... is not developed by a natural process out of other forms of natural existence.'⁷³ His original readers did not have to wait until to the publication of this article (which was later incorporated into the *Prolegomena*) to see that he rejects this form of 'the naturalistic view of human action'.⁷⁴ Famously, it was a central message of his very first professional publications, 'The Philosophy of Aristotle' (1866) and 'Popular Philosophy in its Relation to Life' (1868).⁷⁵ Human life could not be reduced to the mere confluence of physical processes, and human consciousness was not merely the construction resulting from a stream of unfiltered sensations from a mind-independent world. There was no way to explain convincingly how such a stream could lead either to the relatively organised world that we experience, or to the world of meanings and moral significances in which we act. This structure and meaning that we observe in our respective consciousnesses can be plausibly explained only if the mind applies to the constituents of that stream *a priori* categories and relations as well as their more complex socially-constructed derivatives. Yet, one should be very careful here, as he observes many times in the *Prolegomena*. For example:

⁷³ PE 67.

⁷⁴ PE 107.

⁷⁵ Green, *Works*, vol.3, pp.46-91, 92-125. This is reflected in the rudiments to these pieces (which were drafted initially as part of the same manuscript) in T.H.Green, 'Rudiments of 'The Philosophy of Aristotle' and Related Texts', in C.Tyler, ed., *Unpublished Manuscripts in British Idealism: Political Philosophy, Theology and Social Theory*, 2 vols. (Bristol & New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), vol.1, pp.1-13.

‘However dependent therefore the social interest, as we know it, may be upon feelings of animal origin, such as sexual feelings, or feelings of want in the offspring which only the parent can supply, it is not a product of those feelings, not evolving from them... To ignore the distinctive character which our sympathies thus derive, and must have derived in any being in whom we can reasonably affiliate ourselves, from the action of a self-objectifying consciousness, is as misleading an abstraction from the reality of human nature as it would be, on the other hand, to separate that consciousness from those sympathies and interests, without which the formal idea in a man of a possible better state of himself would have no actual feeling.’⁷⁶

Consciousness fundamentally transforms our physical drives, sublimating them so that they become conceptually-complex and morally-salient features of the individual’s worlds of experience and practice.⁷⁷ It is in this sense that Green rejects ‘empirical’ or ‘materialist’ naturalism. Nevertheless, just as emphatically, Green endorses a very different form of naturalism: namely, a neo-Aristotelian variety. This conception of naturalism accords with David Brink’s analysis of T.H. Irwin’s conception of Aristotelian naturalism, for which highlights six key features.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ PE 200.

⁷⁷ Tyler, *Metaphysics*, chapters 5 and 6.

⁷⁸ I reserve the label ‘Aristotelian naturalism’ exclusively for Aristotle’s original formulation, whereas Brink, Irwin and others do not. See T.H.Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007–9).

'1. *Teleology*. Ethics and practical reason are teleological in the sense that they are properly regulated by a final good.

'2. *Eudaimonism*. The appropriate final good for each agent is her own eudaimonia or happiness.

'3. *Naturalism*. The correct conception of the final good should reflect our nature.

'4. *Rationalism*. Human nature is a life of reason in which one responds appropriately to objective goods and reasons, and ethical requirements are requirements of reason.

'5. *Virtues*. The virtues, including the moral virtues, express this rational nature.

'6. *Common Good*. The moral virtues involve a concern for a good that is common between the agent and others.'⁷⁹

Both Irwin and Brink read Green as an Aristotelian naturalist thus conceived.⁸⁰ As noted above, humans are driven by what Aristotle called *entelechy*, or an 'essential nisus towards self-unification and individuality', in Bosanquet's words, which he refers to elsewhere as a 'nisus... to adjustment, to seeing things as harmonious'.⁸¹ As Ritchie notes, neither Green nor Kant 'deny that Man is a part of Nature, and that human actions are natural events'.⁸² What both deny however is that 'Man can be understood if he be considered as *merely* a

⁷⁹ David O. Brink, 'Aristotelian Naturalism and the History of Ethics', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 52:4 (2014), p.819.

⁸⁰ Brink, 'Aristotelian', pp.822-23; Irwin, *Development*, vol.3, pp.581-84, 589-91, 596, 599, 602, 605-10, 613-18.

⁸¹ B.Bosanquet, *The Principle of Individuality and Value: The Gifford lectures for 1911 delivered in Edinburgh University* (London: MacMillan, 1912), pp.351, xx. He also refers to it as 'the nisus towards a cosmos' (p.ix), '[the painter or poet's] nisus towards a whole' (p. xx), 'the nisus of thought to individuality' (p.54), 'nisus towards the whole' (p.98), 'a nisus towards totality' (p.192) and 'the nisus towards unity' (p.219). See also B.Bosanquet, *The Value and Destiny of the Individual: The Gifford lectures for 1912 delivered in Edinburgh University* (London: MacMillan, 1913), pp.2-9, 104, 106, 123, 251.

⁸² D.G.Ritchie, *The Principles of State Interference: Four essays on the political philosophy of Mr. Herbert Spencer, J.S. Mill and T.H. Green*, third edition (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1902), p.133.

part of Nature and his actions *merely* as natural events.’ F.H. Bradley’s undergraduate notes record Green arguing that

‘In the *Physics* [of Aristotle] you get the theory of nature as an unconscious artist...

‘ Perfection is actualization; the phenomenon should actualize the thought that planned it; the fact should correspond with the thought. The Highest Actualization is the highest consciousness of thought which is conscious of itself. Thus in the individual the physical form must be actualized (health, strength) till it come[s] up to what Nature meant. But further, Nature meant me to be a reasonable animal, and so I must work out my thought, till I know the universe, and at last identify myself with God and solve the problems of his Thought.’⁸³

Even though this very famous form of naturalism is shunned by most contemporary analytic philosophers, in a modified form it is central to Green’s theory of human development including the eternal consciousness. Green adapts this form of naturalism, incorporating it into this conception of ‘the human spirit’ (synonymously, ‘human nature’).⁸⁴ Hence, it is by participating in social institutions that the individual attains ‘a more complete fulfilment of the capabilities of human nature’.⁸⁵

⁸³ T.H.Green, ‘Lectures on Moral and Political Philosophy [c.1867]’, in F.H.Bradley, *Collected Works*, ed. C.Keene and W.J.Mander, 12 vols. (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1999), vol.1, p.95. A slightly different transcription appears in T.H.Green, ‘Lectures on Moral and Political Philosophy’, in his *Works*, vol.5, p.140.

⁸⁴ ‘Human spirit’: PE 77, 149, 172, 176, 183-91 passim, 352-54, 363, 375-77, 382; ‘human nature’: 148, 200, 247, 302, 337; see also 290n1.

⁸⁵ PE 337.

'If... [a man] were governed by the conviction that the recognised virtues and excellences are ends in themselves, because in them the human spirit in some measure fulfils its divine vocation, attains something of the perfection which it lies in it to attain, he would find in reflection on them an indication of the ends to be kept in view, where the rule of being virtuous according to some established type of virtue is insufficient, as well as a constant direction to estimate at its highest claim on his personal devotion to the further perfecting of man.'⁸⁶

Indeed, the *Prolegomena* ends with this idea: 'Our point has been to show, in the instance given, that such a criterion [for assessing "conventional morality"] is afforded by the theory of ultimate good as a perfection of the human spirit resting on the will to be perfect'.⁸⁷

Both my interpretation and refinement of Green's argument have neo-Aristotelian naturalism at their heart. This makes it peculiar when Mander argues that Green 'uses [the eternal consciousness] to explain the path of history, and especially the growth of ideas, both cultural and individual, whose gradual revelation it is.' Mander continues, 'But the eternal consciousness can only bear this explanatory burden if it is taken as something actual; a mere potential cannot cause or explain anything.'⁸⁸ This is an odd objection. Partly, it is ambiguous, as Mander's phrasing might imply Green saw the 'path of history' as predetermined, an interpretative claim for which there is no compelling evidence. Yet, mainly this objection is odd because, as Mander's own summary of my argument makes

⁸⁶ PE 363.

⁸⁷ PE 382.

⁸⁸ Mander, 'Defence', p.194.

clear, at no point do I characterise the eternal consciousness as ‘a mere potential’. As Mander quotes me, the ‘eternal consciousness’ ‘is “the potential which is progressively actualized by the act of experiencing”’.⁸⁹

Green’s neo-Aristotelian naturalism also makes it difficult to maintain the separations which Nicholson introduces between the eternal consciousness, divinity, human action, and social institutions. In fact, it places Green very close to Aristotle. As Nicholson observes of Aristotle’s theory of the ideal polis: ‘The key words... are “nature” and “natural”’. Aristotle believed that all living things, including human beings, are to be understood in terms of their natures. The nature of a thing, what it really is, is what it becomes when its growth is completed... Human beings too are to be seen in terms of the potential they can develop, the end towards which they are moving.’⁹⁰ For example, when explaining his conception of a system of ‘natural rights’, Green is careful to characterise such a system as “natural” because necessary to the end which it is the vocation of human society to realise.’⁹¹ Hence, ‘the consideration of what rights are “natural” (in the only legitimate sense)... presuppose[s] a conception of the moral vocation of man.’⁹² This is a very different conception of ‘naturalism’ from current mainstream philosophical use, because it is teleological.

5. Conclusion

⁸⁹ Mander, ‘Defence’, p.194, quoting Tyler, *Foundations*, p.33.

⁹⁰ Nicholson, ‘Aristotle’, p.37.

⁹¹ T.H.Green, ‘Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation’, in T.H.Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and other writings*, ed. P.Harris and J.Morrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) (hereafter ‘PPO [section number]’), section 9.

⁹² PPO 20.

This article has both defended a constructivist, personalised, perspectival interpretation of Green's position and has refined that position. It has established that I have always emphasised Green's insistence that (a) eternal consciousness was also God and that (b) it manifests itself in all of us, thereby (c) allowing us to realise a divine part of our human nature.⁹³ It has emphasised also that not only does Green put neo-Aristotelian naturalism at the heart of his religious and philosophical thought, but also that he uses it to conceptualise the manner in which 'an animal organism, which has its history in time, gradually becomes a vehicle of an eternally complete consciousness.'⁹⁴ The controversial claim is that (a), (b) and (c) have no substantive impact on the soundness or otherwise of Green's strictly philosophical task in the first two books of *Prolegomena to Ethics*: namely, to establish that human action is necessarily self-determined and that the will seeks to realise the individual's highest capacities.⁹⁵ It is for this reason that Maria Dimova-Cookson argues that such refining 'makes Green's ideas acceptable but less poignant' and it is why Timothy Sprigge described it as 'sympathetic with the metaphysics' but offering 'a very reductionist interpretation' of the eternal consciousness.⁹⁶ Similarly, Nicholson has noted that Green would never have accepted such an atheistic reinterpretation of his position.⁹⁷ Nicholson is correct.

⁹³ 'Green believes that God exists in two senses. Firstly, He exists separately from human existence... Yet, secondly God is also found within each individual – that is, within his conscience, or, more generally, his consciousness.' (Tyler, *Foundations*, p.28.) Repeated in an extended form in Tyler, *Metaphysics*, p.71.

⁹⁴ PE 67.

⁹⁵ 'the eternal consciousness when understood as God, is a thoroughly dispensable aspect of the theory.' (Tyler, *Foundations*, p.33; see also *ibid.*, pp.26-33). See also Tyler, *Metaphysics*, pp.42-43, 71-85.

⁹⁶ Dimova-Cookson, 'Eternal Consciousness', p.139. Sprigge, *God of Metaphysics*, p.268n19.

⁹⁷ Tyler, *Metaphysics*, p.83; see further *ibid.*, pp.83-84.

Is such refinement ‘reductionist’? In its most colloquial form, a reductionist reading is one that does not merely analyse a theory or concept into its most fundamental elements, but does so at the cost of removing some of those fundamental elements. In other words, it is simplistic rather than merely simplifying. That seems to be what Sprigge and Mander have in mind. Clearly, deciding whether a new theory is a simplistic version of an older version requires one to judge which elements of the older theory are fundamental and which are not. This issue is profoundly important, since it is central to the question of whether the new theory ‘replaces’ the old theory, or whether it absorbs it (as Ruse writes, ‘where the older is shown to be a deductive consequence of the new’).⁹⁸ It has been argued here that Green’s occasional and vague references to God as an agent existing independently of the individual’s consciousness play no substantive role in establishing his primary philosophical goals: to establish that humans possess free will; to explain how individuals can possess relatively rationally-ordered consciousnesses; and to show how individuals can realise their highest capacities.⁹⁹ This refinement is not reductionist in any significant sense then because it can achieve those key tasks, unlike the minimalist interpretations developed by Nicholson and Mander. Certainly, Green would have found it difficult to accept this conclusion, because ‘it is hard to alter opinions that are the result of many years meditation and are part and parcel of one’s conception of God, man, and nature’.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ M.Ruse, ‘reductionism’, in T.Honderich, ed., *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp.750-51.

⁹⁹ Green’s references to an independently-existing God: PE 187 and DSF 21. On the ambiguities, see Tyler, *Metaphysics*, pp.71-72.

¹⁰⁰ Green, Letter to Legge, pp.466-67.