10 Autonomy, Divinity, and the Common Good

Selflessness as a Source of Freedom in Thomas Hill Green and Mary Augusta Ward

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To the extent that it is remembered today, Mary Ward's 1888 novel *Robert Elsmere* is famous for two reasons. First, it was arguably the best-selling novel of the 19th century, with more than a million copies sold.[1] Second, it was one of the most overt novels of ideas in Victorian literature, and it intervened in one of the most vexed questions in Victorian intellectual culture—the possibility that Christian doctrine might be false, and that religious skepticism might be justified.[2] A significant portion of the novel, in fact, involves intellectual exchanges between the protagonist Robert and various philosophers, who are literally introduced as characters and modeled on real Victorian intellectuals.

The most straightforward example of this modeling is the character Mr. Grey, who is a straightforward representation of the British Idealist philosopher T.H. Green. Indeed, Green's thought looms large over the book: not only does Ward put actual quotations from Green's work in Grey's mouth, the novel is in fact dedicated to Green. Understandably, then, critics have tended to see the philosophy in the novel as essentially unoriginal, with Ward's thought primarily being a popularization of Green's—as one writer puts it, she is an element in the broader "Greenian Moment" (Leighton 2004).

In this chapter, however, I would like to question the default assumption that the philosophy in *Elsmere* and elsewhere in Ward's fiction is unoriginal. Admittedly, this kind of argument involves reading Ward somewhat against the grain: Her fiction highlights much more strongly her sympathy towards and general agreement with Green's views than it does any disagreement. Still, at least, we do a disservice to her work as a reader of Green in accepting such a dismissal: Even at their most unoriginal, her novels serve as a creative interpretation of Green's thought, a coherent and interesting attempt to make sense of the key themes of his work and the way they connected. And, more substantively, I will suggest Ward questions Green's view about the necessary conditions for personal autonomy. Her representation of fundamental disagreements that defy resolution, even when both parties to the

disagreement love each other and want to resolve the situation, suggests a deep skepticism about a key condition for full freedom for Green—a shared recognition of the common good.

But part of the reason these representations suggest skepticism stems less from obvious disagreements with Green's thought and more from the implications of the form Ward chose. As we will see, incarnating philosophical views in individual characters while using other characters to embody disagreements and objections and then letting the interaction between characters symbolize the dispute between them is not really a neutral way to interpret a philosophical position. Yet it is an inevitable result of the fact that the texts in question are novels, and more specifically novels with marriage plots. So the question about Ward's originality or lack thereof is also a question about the relationship between philosophy and literature, and whether the emplotment of a view can ever leave the view unchanged. Put another way, Ward's most significant disagreement with Green might have been the basic decision to write fiction instead of philosophy in the first place.

That claim, however, will have to wait a bit. Let us begin instead with a more straightforward question: What was T. H. Green doing in a novel in the first place?

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Thomas Hill Green (1836–1882) was perhaps the most famous of the British Idealists, whose influence rose rapidly in the third quarter of the 19th century and then declined just as rapidly at the beginning of the 20th. His fame, however, stemmed less from his writing—most of which was published posthumously—and more from his teaching at Oxford. As a result of Green's work, as one intellectual historian has put it, "from aristocratic Oxford [. . .] there came a stream of serious young men dedicated to reform in politics, social work, and the civil service" (Richter 1956: 444) Green's teaching inspired his students to pursue public service because he offered a creative way to think about the relationship between individual freedom and the general welfare: Rather than seeing the two as inevitably in tension, he argued that an individual could only achieve full self-realization and therefore autonomy through the pursuit of the common good. Drawing his inspiration from Hegel, Green thus argued that the state and the individual need not be in tension: Indeed, ideally, they were mutually reflective. One lecture in particular—the "Different Senses of 'Freedom' as Applied to Will and the Moral Progress of Man"—illustrates Green's thinking on this issue clearly and concisely.[3]

The essay starts with an objection to Kant. Green writes:

> Moral bondage with Kant, as with Plato and the Stoics, is bondage to the flesh. The heteronomy of the will is its submission to the impulse of pleasure-seeking, as that of which man is not in respect of his reason the

author, but which belongs to him as a merely natural being. A state of bondage to law, as such, he does not contemplate.

(Green 1906: 311)

In other words, for Kant heteronomy is entirely the result of action upon the basis of desires and inclinations: The notion that one might be heteronomous in acting on the law—that is, that acting purely on the basis of a moral law might additionally be a kind of heteronomy or "bondage"—is not a possibility Kant entertains. But since action purely on the basis of the moral law is presumably rare, this produces a state, Green argues, in which autonomy is rarely and only briefly genuinely realized: The main effect of the "consciousness of the possibility of freedom" is to make the agent aware of "the heteronomy of his will" (311).[4] In other words, the primary result of our ability to act freely turns out to be an awareness of how often we fail to do it.

Green then turns to Hegel, with whom he has greater sympathy. In Green's explanation, Hegel offers the key insight that recognizes the possibility of motives "of a more concrete kind than the interest in fulfillment of a universally binding law because universally binding, but which yet are the product of a reason": namely, the idea that an individual realizes the possibility of his abstract freedom through the concrete institutions and customs of the state (312). Such institutions and customs will be more specific and detailed than the Kantian notion of the moral law as such, but since they are the product of collective human reason, they nevertheless reflect the effects of the human ability to act on the basis of something other than inclination. Thus, Hegel points the way towards solving the problem of the tension between bondage to the flesh and bondage to the law: The key is to develop an identity that aligns instinctively with the institutions and customs of the state. Then, one will naturally (so to speak) act on the basis of reason and thus autonomously.

Green puts what one might call a perfectionist spin on this basically Hegelian picture. He is less inclined to talk about the capacity for practical deliberation—that is, the actual process of deciding what to do—and more inclined to speak of the capacity to make one's life realize an ideal. "Real freedom," he claims on the first page of the essay, comes from "seeking the satisfaction of himself in objects in which he believes it *should* be found, and seeking it in them *because* he believes it should be found in them" (308). It does not matter, Green implies, what beliefs agents have about what they should be pursuing: what matters is that in pursuing them because they believe they should be pursuing them, such agents manifest the capacity to act autonomously, and thus achieve the "peace or blessedness" that comes with finding one's "object" (309). This fits naturally with Hegel's theory of the state: "The individual's consciousness of the absolutely desirable, of something that should be, of an ideal to be realized in his life, finds a content or object which has been constituted or brought into being by that

consciousness itself working through generations of men" (312). In other words, I give myself specific and concrete projects on the basis of the needs of my state and civil society. But since those needs are the product of generations of people trying to create the world they believe should exist, it's really just my own ability to act on the basis of what I think should happen reflected back at me. My "consciousness of the absolutely desirable" is given content by "that consciousness itself." As Maria Dimova-Cookson (2003) persuasively glosses this idea, the link between selflessness and social welfare here is that the moral good for me is defined by my pursuit of ordinary goods for other people (516).

But to portray autonomy this way is to reject one very common view about what freedom involves. Instead of seeing autonomy as the ability to sit back and consider which motives to act on, the product of a self that stands over and above any particular motive, autonomy lies in acting on those motives that align with one's beliefs about what the world should be like. That's because these motives reflect the influence of the distinct human capacity to realize an ideal. So, in acting on them an agent realizes herself. Thus, Green rejects the line of thought that portrays autonomy as the result of choice, which he thinks is an artifact of using political and interpersonal conceptions of freedom to define subjective freedom (319). The salient psychological feature is not whether an agent has freely chosen the actions to perform, but whether the motives she acts on are self-realizing. In Green's words, "the reality of freedom [. . .] depends on the character of the objects willed" (321).

The trouble is that our capacity to act in "self-seeking" ways is the source of both our ability to realize an ideal in our actions and our capacity to act in ways that prevent us from doing so. This might seem paradoxical: "Man is subject to a law of his being," Green writes, "which prevents him from finding satisfaction in the objects in which under the pressure of his desires it is his natural desire to seek it" (327). Because we are physical and animal creatures, our will and reason do not automatically coincide (as they would for God), and so there is a tension: We tend to pursue the ends we most desire, but such ends do not necessarily satisfy us, since they do not inherently respond to our capacity to realize an ideal. Thus the "self-realizing principle" requires support: We must educate ourselves so that our "natural impulses"—never strictly "natural," of course—align with our "higher interests" (327). Such a person will be free not merely because her natural impulses are "thwarted by the law," but because "these very impulses have been drawn into its service" (328).

But since the model depends on education, and therefore the institutions of civil society and "conventional morality," the reconciliation achieved within oneself is only fully possible when accompanied by a reconciliation with the world outside oneself (331). Green has no illusions that this will happen smoothly: since our first view tends to be that conventional morality is merely something expected of us and not an expression of practical

reason, our first definite self-assertion is likely to be a "revolt" against conventional morality. Moral growth, of both the person and society, may stop here. But ideally, the agent eventually comes to recognize "the spirit underlying the letter of the obligations laid on him by society" (331). This "reconciliation of reason with itself" produces the genuinely autonomous person, who takes up the willed ideals reflected in social conventions and identifies with them, making the pursuit of such selfless goals the means by which he achieves self-satisfaction.

Let me highlight one feature of this account that will be important later. For Green, in this lecture anyway, the reconciliation of reason within oneself and with the outside world for any particular individual only involves other people incidentally—that is, insofar as they are a part of the community whose collective attitudes form the public embodiment of the capacity to pursue an ideal. That another person might matter for other reasons in the achievement of autonomy—particularly, whether they might so matter in moments where their opinions do not share in the public embodiment—is not a view Green considers seriously. As we will see, Ward is skeptical on precisely this point.

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Mary Ward, who often published under and went by her married name "Mrs Humphry Ward," was without question born into the purple of late-Victorian intellectual culture. She was the granddaughter of Thomas Arnold, a famous head of Rugby School, and the niece of the poet and critic Matthew Arnold. Her sister married Thomas Huxley's son and had two sons herself, one of whom (Aldous) became a novelist like his aunt. Ward was the author of more than twenty novels and a great deal of non-fiction, including a body of World War I journalism. Yet even more than for her writings, she is remembered today for her work on the question of the woman's right to vote: Troublingly for many of her readers then and now, she was opposed to it, and became one of the public faces of the anti-suffragette movement.[5]

But that debate was still two decades in the future when she was writing *Robert Elsmere*. At the beginning of the 1890s, her thinking was centered on the question of how to regard religion in general and Christianity in particular. And Green's compromise—that Christian doctrine was not literally true, but Christianity was an essential element in the progress of the human capacity to realize an ideal—appealed strongly to Ward. This account of Christianity in the role of history is one of the main themes of the novel.

As a young man, Robert Elsmere goes to Oxford to become a clergyman in the Anglican Church. In short order, he marries the deeply evangelical Catherine Leyburn and takes a position as the rector of "Murewell." Unfortunately for Robert's religious beliefs, the Squire of Murewell is the skeptical and deeply learned Roger Wendover. In the face of Wendover's criticisms, and in particular his deeply informed historicist analysis of the miracles in

the Gospels, Elsmere finds himself unable to defend his views, and becomes deeply depressed and uncertain. At this point of crisis, he returns to Oxford to see his old tutor Mr. Grey—the figure of T. H. Green. Grey, tellingly, does not try to persuade Elsmere of the literal truth of the Bible; he uses a subtler strategy:

> "I know very well the man of the world scoffs, but to him who has once been a Christian of the old sort, the parting with the Christian mythology is the rending asunder of bones and marrow. It means parting with half the confidence, half the joy, of life! But take heart," and the tone grew still more solemn, still more penetrating. "It is the education of God! Do not imagine it will put you farther from Him! He is in criticism, in science, in doubt, so long as the doubt is a pure and honest doubt, as yours is. He is in all life, in all thought. The thought of man, as it has shaped itself in institutions, in philosophies, in science, in patient critical work, or in the life of charity, is the one continuous revelation of God! Look for Him in it all; see how, little by little, the Divine indwelling force, using as its tools—but *merely* as its tools!—man's physical appetites and conditions, has built up conscience and the moral life; think how every faculty of the mind has been trained in turn to take its part in the great work of faith upon the visible world!"
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> (Ward 1888: 356)

The Greenian resonance of Grey's speech is, hopefully, clear. Robert's questioning of the truth of Christianity is not really a rejection of the religion, Grey argues, but instead a further development of it. The development of history is altogether "the continuous revelation of God": More specifically, the divine force in each of us has, slowly but surely, contributed to the development of "conscience and the moral life." Thus, while Robert's doubts about the Bible may in fact be correct, he need not worry that they are a violation of God's plan or see them as necessarily a threat to his belief in God. Instead, they represent precisely the realization of God's will, insofar as they indicate the progress of moral conventions towards an ever-greater realization of selflessness. And Ward takes pains to make sure her reader does not miss the point:

> It seemed to Robert, gazing at him with fixed eyes, that the man's whole presence, at once so homely and so majestic, was charged with benediction. [. . .] The fiery soul beside him had kindled anew the dropping life of his own. So the torch of God passes on its way, hand reaching out to hand.
>
> (356)

The extra-diegetic moment this passage traces, as the narrator moves from describing the scene into direct assertion in the final line of the passage, demonstrates the emphasis Ward wants to place on this point.

And Robert's reaction to this crisis, which takes place about halfway through the novel, shows that he mastered Grey's lesson. Although he leaves the Church of England and moves to London, he eventually becomes the founder of a new church and perhaps of a new religion. Somewhat confusingly, this religion is still centered on Jesus Christ—it is entitled the "New Brotherhood of Christ"—but it is based on Christ in a nontraditional sense. As Robert explains in a lengthy sermon to a skeptical but soon converted audience, "in the moral world you cannot pull down except by gentleness— you cannot revolutionize except by sympathy. Jesus only superseded Judaism by absorbing and recreating all that was best in it. [. . .] You think—because it is becoming plain to the modern eye that the ignorant love of his first followers wreathed his life in legend, that there you can escape from Jesus of Nazareth? [. . .] Folly!" (495). In other words, Jesus embodies a vitally important stage in the development of the moral consciousness of humanity, and it is a stage that cannot be superseded until we have understood and encompassed the moral value of Christianity within a broader whole that improves upon it. Merely ignoring or dismissing Christianity, as the skeptics in Robert's audience are inclined, will not do.

The subsequent success of the New Brotherhood of Christ, which we are told in the last paragraph of the novel "still exists, and grows," and which in fact aligns with Ward's own biographical involvement with a still-existing social reform center, confirms the novel's basic assertion of the correctness of Green's account of the history of religion and the moral life.[6] And in keeping with Green's thought, Ward pairs this trajectory in Robert's life with an account of autonomy and heteronomy, so that Robert's recognition of the nature of the moral rationality underlying social convention functions as a freeing transformation of his relationship to society—one that contrast favorably with the heteronomy of the other characters. Let me describe this set of contrasts now.

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Like many 19th-century novels, *Robert Elsmere* pairs the action of its main marriage plot—Robert's relationship with Catherine, to which I will return in a moment—with a similar marriage plot in the stories of the minor characters. In this case, Ward couples the story of Robert and Catherine's relationship with the story of Catherine's sister Rose. Rose's story is in some ways more familiar: it's a love triangle. At moments in love with two men—the Oxford tutor Edward Langham and the rich heir Hugh Flaxman, both of whom are also at various moments in love with her—Rose has a brief moment where she believes she and Langham are committed to each other, only for both to realize that they do not match. Their story ends with Langham's return to his solitary life at Oxford and Rose's engagement to Flaxman.

What is important to note about Rose's story as a commentary on the main plot is that it is ultimately her own heteronomy that causes her

confused attraction to Langham and delays the successful realization of a relationship with Flaxman. Ward describes Roses at one point as acting "for the sake of that opposition her soul loved, her poor prickly soul, full under all her gaiety and indifference of the most desperate doubt and soreness" (430). The point, of course, is that Rose often fails to act autonomously precisely by insisting on acting freely. Rose is certainly stubborn, yet that stubbornness reflects less a genuine self-aware act of assertion and more an instinctive demand for respect for her own choice—choices motivated not by a pursuit of an ideal, but instead a simple opposition to whatever advice she has been given.

This tension in Rose's self is the driving force behind the events of the Langham subplot. He rejects her early in the novel, and this rejection is a central cause of Rose's desire to make him love her: as she thinks to herself after the final end of the relationship, "his resistance had increased the charm" (464). Yet when they encounter each other again in the same social circle London, Rose is torn—from Langham's perspective, at any rate—between a desire to win his interest and to torment him. Describing Langham's experience, Ward writes: "He saw that she thought badly of him. [. . .] And all the same he came, and she asked him!" (427). Indeed, Langham begins to suspect that he is being deliberately manipulated: "It began to seem to him that she was specially bent often on tormenting *him* by these caprices of hers" (431).

But after Langham asserts himself and they reconcile, it becomes clear to him that something much less deliberate was driving her actions. Langham—in a sobering moment for academic readers of the novel!—believes that his long-solitary life has rendered him incapable of the kind of selflessness that is necessary for a genuinely loving relationship with someone else. "My habits are the tyrants of years," he tells her: "I have lived alone, for myself, in myself, till sometimes there seems to be hardly anything left in me to love or be loved" (447). Yet Rose experiences this message in a way rather different than Langham intends: she sees, in his belief that their relationship would fail, a condemnation of her own capacity for selflessness: "Had she been other than she is—more loving, less self-absorbed, loftier in motive—he could not have loved her so, have left her so" (454). Thus his rejection of her becomes a moral awakening. He recognizes her own moral failure, in that her own affection for him is more of an instinctive reaction than a re-flection of her genuine beliefs about what she should do. But she also comes to recognize this fact about herself—indeed, recognizes it in part because he recognizes it: "A painful humility—a boundless pity—the rise of some moral wave within her. [. . .] These were some of the impressions which passed from her to him" (459). Thus, she begins the transition to genuine autonomy—a freedom that lies not in the insistence of choice above all, with its juvenile insistence on opposition, but a deeper self-determination.

It is worth briefly comparing Rose and *Elsmere* to Ward's 1894 novel *Marcella*, where a story similar to Rose's becomes the main plot of the

novel. At the beginning of the novel, Marcella attracts the attention of the rich nobleman Aldous Raeburn; she accepts his proposal and becomes engaged to him not because she loves him—the narrative is quite clear on this point—but because she thinks she can use his money and political position to support the Socialist causes she believes in (which include, not incidentally, the abolition of the aristocracy). However, her beliefs about social welfare are thoroughly imbricated with egoism. In a passage that fades into free indirect discourse (that is, sentences that merge the thought of the character with that of the narrator), Ward writes:

> As the eyes of servants towards the hand of their mistress—the old words occurred to her as she thought of herself stepping in and out of the cottages. Then she was ashamed of herself and rejected the image with vehemence. Dependence was the curse of the poor. Her whole aim, of course, should be to teach them to stand on their own feet, to know themselves as men. But naturally they would be grateful, they would let themselves be led. Intelligence and enthusiasm give power, and ought to give it—power for good.
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> (Ward 1894: 101)[7]

The point here, of course, is that Marcella is drawn to the idea that she will be elevated and praised for her social welfare—or, more cynically, that the artificial hierarchy created by economic inequality will reappear as a more genuine hierarchy based on genuine moral inequality. The moral opacity is reinforced by a sly detail on Ward's part—Marcella appoints herself the mission of comforting the troubled wife of a poor man, even to the extent of eventually becoming her roommate in London after the husband's arrest, but the poor woman is in fact irritated by Marcella's constant interference and dislikes her company.[8] Unsurprisingly, this view on her marriage does not lead to the growth of a healthy relationship, and her engagement to Raeburn soon ends.

But as with Rose, the moral self-awareness that comes with the end of the relationship is the birth of a greater moral consciousness. Marcella moves to London and becomes a nurse to the poor, and moves past the egoistic shallowness caught up in her previous commitment to social welfare. This greater social awareness, however, is of a piece with the development of the capacity to love and a recognition of the history of selflessness implicit in religion. Ward writes:

> Nobody could live in hospital—nobody could go among the poor [. . .] without understanding that it is still here in the world—this "grace" that "sustaineth"—however variously interpreted, still living and working, as it worked of old, among the little Galilean towns, in Jerusalem, in Corinth [. . .] it meant the motive power of life—something subduing, transforming, delivering.
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> (387)

Marcella's move to caring genuinely for social welfare, then, produces four corresponding movements that, properly speaking, each cause each other: it is at once a move past egoism into selflessness, the development of the ability to act with genuine autonomy, the achievement of a capacity to love, and a cognitive recognition of the moral truths inherent in Christian practice.

The novel completes this trajectory with Marcella becoming engaged to Aldous again. But this time, Marcella's moral transformation has fundamentally altered their relationship:

> Yet that passionate sympathy with the poor—that hatred of oppression? Even these seemed to her to-night the blind, spasmodic efforts of a mind that all through saw nothing—mistook its own violences and self-wills for eternal right, and was but traitor to what should have been its own first loyalties, in seeking to save and reform. Was true love now to deliver her from that sympathy, to deaden in her that hatred? Her whole soul cried out in denial. By daily life in natural relations with the poor, by a fruitful contact with fact, by the clash of opinion in London, by the influence of a noble friendship, by the education of awakening passion—what had once been mere tawdry and violent hearsay had passed into a true devotion, a true thirst for social good. She had ceased to take a system cut and dried from the Venturists, or any one else; she had ceased to think of whole classes of civilised society with abhorrence and contempt; and there had dawned in her that temper which is in truth implied in all the more majestic conceptions of the State.
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> (537–38)

We have here—unlike the end of Rose's narrative in *Robert Elsmere*—a full dramatization of the kind of reconciliation with reason Green seems to have imagined as necessary for full autonomy. First, Marcella's motivations have passed into her character. She previously simply thought she should care about the poor, in a haphazard and ill-informed way, but now she has passed from "violent hearsay" to "true devotion," an internalization of the motives involved. Corresponding to this internalization is a recognition of the underlying rationality of the conventions of British society—the "majestic conceptions of the state." But both stem from her newfound ability to love Aldous: far from coming into tension with her love for him, in fact she will be able to sympathize with the poor and hate oppression all the more for her relationship with him.

This is to say that *Marcella* quite clearly reflects a version of Green's theory of autonomy. And it is reasonable to suggest that this is the same trajectory Rose Leyburn is on. But it is striking that this is not how *Robert Elsmere* as a whole ends: In fact, the ending of *Elsmere* is much more tragic, with the successive deaths of Mr. Grey, Squire Wendover, and, finally, Robert himself. And far from ending with a happy marriage, *Elsmere* ends with

Catherine alone and misunderstood in London. What I want to consider now is what reservations about Green's theory that fact suggests.

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It is notable first of all that very few of the protagonists are actually reconciled to Robert's project of the New Brotherhood. The atheistic Squire Wendover, for instance, mocks Robert for founding a new religion, which he sees as just another "vulgar anaesthetic," and insists on dying with his "eyes open" (586; 590). More importantly, Catherine never gives up her Evangelicalism or her hope that Robert will return to full-fledged belief in Christianity. Thus the claim that Robert represents some sort of reconciliation between the individual will and social conventions begins to look somewhat odd: Given that Wendover and Catherine are clearly meant to stand in for certain philosophical positions, it seems troubling that neither finds their reasons acknowledged and included in Elsmere's supposedly evolved position in such a way that they could agree with it. The only place where that reconciliation actually occurs, in other words, appears to be in Robert's own view of himself and his project.

This is in significant contrast to other, more minor characters. When Robert sets up the New Brotherhood in a building in London, he does so with the help of Murray Edwards, a Unitarian minister; a Comtist named Wardlaw; and an open atheist and radical named Lestrange.[9] These men, it becomes clear, function primarily in the plot to demonstrate the incorporation of the positions they symbolize with Robert's new project. Lestrange is representative: having begun by pressing Robert in his sermon, he ends up by becoming a passionate leader of the project. "In reality there was no man who worked harder at the New Brotherhood," Ward tells us, "than Lestrange. He worked under perpetual protest from the frondeur within him, but something stung him on till a habit had been formed which promises to be the joy and salvation of his later life. Was it the haunting memory of that thin figure?" (596). It is particularly telling that Ward insists Lestrange will be happy—as Green suggested, mere action on the basis of reason is inadequate. For full autonomy, one must incorporate duty into one's identity in such a way that it becomes natural; if Lestrange is not there yet—he is still working under internal perpetual protest—nevertheless, it is clear he will eventually believe in the work with his whole self. So the question is then this: If these men can be all reconciled with the project, why not Catherine or Wendover? What is it about them that makes the tension unsolvable?

What I want to suggest is that the necessity of inhabiting these subjectivities fully made it less clear to Ward how their concerns, beliefs, and reasons could be incorporated and subsumed. The easy reconciliation with the minor characters, in other words, is made possible precisely because they are minor characters. The difference between Lestrange's skepticism,

which can be incorporated, and Squire Wendover's skepticism—which cannot—has less to do with the philosophical motivations each has and more to do with the extent to which their lived reality is incorporated into the novel. Once she moved past merely labeling dissident views to actually inhabiting them, Ward found it much less clear how to plausibly reconcile the oppositions involved.

This is particularly clear in the case of Catherine. One of the remarkable features of the novel is how it marks the way Robert's religious transformation coincides with his neglect of her. Indeed, this becomes clear immediately after the novel's climax: when Robert returns home from his transformative meeting with Mr. Grey, Catherine is bitter and angry: Why, she asks, did Robert not tell her what he was going through first? (363). And of course she is right—in fact, Mr Grey has also asked Robert why he has not told his wife about his struggles—and not just because he loves her. After all, as an Anglican clergyman, his religious belief is part of his professional responsibility, and he is in essence quitting his job.

The subsequent conversations, in which Catherine tries to bring Robert back to Christian belief, shows a vivid contrast of the two competing perspectives. On the one hand, Ward presents Elsmere as heroically committed to the truth while still loving his wife: "Another moment and Robert would have lost the only clue which remained to him through the midst of this bewildering world. He would have yielded again [. . .] and have jeopardized love for truth, he would now have murdered [. . .] truth for love. But he did neither" (365). Notably, Ward presents Catherine's requests and arguments as obstacles to which Elsmere must not yield, not partial moral truths that he must acknowledge. On the other hand, Ward is careful to present Catherine's motivations as more than mere convention. In a striking moment, Catherine explains that she is worried in part for their daughter, and worried about what it will be like to try to raise a child in a marriage with such religious difference: "I thought of bringing up the child—how all that was vital to me would be a superstition to you. [. . .] I was agonised by the thought that I was not my own—I and my child were *Christ's*" (373). Indeed, Catherine's courage seems to tell her quite clearly what she needs to do: "Other men and women had died, had given up all for His sake. Is there no one now strong enough to suffer torment, to kill even love itself rather than deny him?" (373). In other words, the ideal Catherine has imagined for herself is hardly reconcilable with what Robert is saying: Perhaps he may think that he has found a version of her religious belief that preserves the genuinely valuable ideals it contains, but that is certainly not how she sees it.

The scene ends with a reconciliation of sorts: Catherine reminds herself that she does love him, and promises that she will live next to him in tolerant but respectful disagreement. However, Ward soon makes it clear that the marriage is severely damaged and the reconciliation one in name only. Importantly, one of the stresses on the relationship is Robert's insistence that she understand him and his work: "He was incessantly possessed with

his old idea that if she *would* allow herself some very ordinary intercourse with his world, her mood would become less strained [. . .] and she might ultimately be able to sympathize with certain sides at any rate of his work" (509). To this end, he invites Wardlaw—the atheist radical—to dinner. The dinner backfires of course, but it does so in an interesting way: when Wardlaw asks Catherine why she does not come to hear Robert preach at the New Brotherhood, she proudly explains that she is "a Churchwoman" and has Sunday school at the same time (511). In other words, the dinner makes public a set of disagreements the couple has been trying to hide as a necessary component of their reconciliation. But, of course, a reconciliation dependent on hiding the points in tension is hardly a meaningful one.

There is a second scene in which Robert and Catherine recommit to each other: The inciting event is that Robert almost falls into an affair on the one hand, while a friend of Robert's finally explains to Catherine what the New Brotherhood has in fact been doing. This reconciliation bears many of the trappings of the scene at the end of *Marcella*. First of all, Catherine brings herself to say that "God has not one language, but many," and that she was mistaken in condemning Robert's version of faith "as no faith" (530). And again, the narrator waxes philosophical in a distinctively Greenian fashion: "Paradise is here, visible and tangible, whenever self is lost in loving, whenever the narrow limits of personality are beaten down by the inrush of the Divine Spirit" (531). In other words, what appears to have happened is precisely the same recognition of the greater rationality in social conventions: Catherine loves Robert, and in moving past herself comes also to recognize the ideals he embodies. But the novel undercuts this possibility almost immediately. She goes to hear Robert preach, but the narrator explains that she is still very much hoping for him to return to her version of Christianity: "Deep in her mystical sense of time lay the belief in a final restoration, in an all-atoning moment, perhaps at the very end of life, in which the blind would see" (532). Even having admitted openly the possibility that God might speak multiple languages, Catherine has not really given up believing that the language she speaks with God is the right one.

This same process is played out again on Robert's deathbed: Catherine begs him to recognize Christ's divinity again, and he again refuses—in fact requesting her not to take advantage of his weakness. Again, Ward is pulled to the language of obstacles over shared deliberation: "They had had their last struggle, and once more he had conquered!" (600). In fact, it even continues after Robert's death: the last two paragraphs of the novel tell the reader that Catherine has continued Robert's projects but does so without believing in them: "Many were grateful to her; some loved her; none understood her. She lived for one hope only; and the years passed all too slowly" (604). The somber note of Catherine's end is striking, and it gives the lie to the many seeming reconciliations she had with Robert. While they may have come to various superficial forms of agreement, in fact the deeper tension created by their religious difference was never really healed. If we take

Catherine to symbolize the passionate form of Christianity she so clearly believes in, then the conclusion is a sobering one: Robert's attempt to develop a new form of religious belief that preserved the moral truths in Christianity fails when it comes to those who take those moral truths most seriously. And this leaves the troubling implication that Robert's belief that he really recognized the wisdom of his own cultural conventions was in fact at least slightly self-deception.

* * *

Let me stress in closing that to make this suggestion is clearly to read *Robert Elsmere* against the grain. After all, the novel is dedicated to Green, quotes him approvingly at various moments, and, as we have seen, in fact asserts in the narrator's voice that Catherine and Robert are reconciled in a way Green would recognize. But in the actual depiction of the sort of moral disagreements that are a presumably necessary part of the recognition of the moral truths in conventions and institutions, Ward shows a degree of skepticism the overt mentions of Green do not. Robert and Catherine do not succeed in having shared moral deliberation or reflection; what Ward depicts are in fact emotionally intense power struggles. And victories in these struggles are always temporary: Neither character durably convinces the other of anything. This is all the more striking given that Robert and Catherine love each other, and both recommit several times to valuing each other properly.

I think in some ways this is an inevitable outcome of the basic decision Ward made in the first place: namely, to depict the process of growth and reconciliation Green imagines at an abstract level as a lived exchange between two people in the story of a marriage. The incarnating of social conventions in a particular person—in this case, Catherine's representation of a traditional Christianity—crystallizes the difficulty of understanding, incorporating, and subsuming them in a way that is less immediately apparent when one speaks generally of this process. Catherine wants her husband to go to heaven, and no amount of him explaining his beliefs about moral philosophy has much of an impact on that desire. The fact that her moral beliefs are not susceptible to reason, or indeed really to alteration at all, implies a high degree of skepticism about the kind of reconciliation between the self and society Green claimed was a condition of autonomy. And it seems we might very well ask where exactly that skepticism comes from in Ward's thought, which I hope to have suggested is worth taking seriously.

Notes

1 See Melvin Richter, "T.H. Green and His Audience: Liberalism as a Surrogate Faith," 452–453.
2 Ward's own interest in these questions is effectively represented in her lecture "Unitarians and the Future," delivered in 1894.

3 The essay is famous for its role in developing the distinction between negative and positive freedom, which Green is sometimes thought to have originated, and which has inspired a significant body of literature in the history of liberalism. See Avital Simhony's "Beyond Negative and Positive Freedom: T. H. Green's View of Freedom" for a good example of this scholarship.

4 For a longer discussion of Green's objections to Kant, see David O. Brink (2003), *Perfectionism and the Common Good*, chapter XXVI.

5 See Beth Sutton-Ramspeck, "Shot Out of the Canon: Mary Ward and the Claims of Conflicting Feminists."

6 A brief history of the Mary Ward Center is available at the organization's website, www.marywardcentre.ac.uk/history.

7 The term "free indirect discourse" is Dorrit Cohn's: see her *Transparent Minds*.

8 As Ward writes, Marcella "never suspected that her presence was often a burden and constraint, not only to the sulky sister-in-law but to the wife herself" (300).

9 Named after its founder Auguste Comte, "Comtism" was a 19th-century intellectual movement that aspired to preserve the moral values of religion in a secular humanism.

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