

GREEN'S OBJECTIVITY: A STANCE FOR TODAY?

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As I understand him, Thomas Green is anxious to have us stop talking about our "having values." For Green would have us realize first, that this is "newspeak" and secondly, and more importantly, that what we often call "values," "are present or absent quite objectively in the structure of our social lives." I believe Green wants us to take up this stance towards the world because he thinks that talk of having values subsumes under it the idea that we can teach children to have values, an idea that leads to the further dangerous "idea of shaping the 'values that people have.'" And who would doubt that in the name of reforming "slovenly educational discourse" Green's proposed revision to our talk in light of his analysis of the nature of values is welcome. Remember how slovenly our educational discourse can be! William Kilpatrick records the much lauded response of a Toronto high school boy in a values clarification class when he wrote of moral values: "Whatever gets you through the night, it's alright. The essence of civilization is not moral codes but individualism.... The only way to know when your values are getting sounder is when they please you more."¹ The nonjudgmentalist attitude towards values evinced both by the boy and his approving teacher in this purported educational episode is presumably what results from what Green calls "the evacuation of value from the world." But does the re-establishing of values require the rigorous objectivity of stance towards the world which Green's views seem to connote?

That Green might be accused of some inconsistency in the objectivity of his values stance comes as a result of scrutinizing some of Green's discussion of "the indices of values." For there he writes of our ability to "attach value to values" and of the world changing, thereby inviting the suggestions that we determine the rank order of values and that we might shape the ways in which the world changes. Embedded in these readings of Green is a subjectivity of stance to be discovered when the particular bases on which we each value values or each wish to change the world are discovered. To avoid this charge of possible inconsistency, then, I think Green's views must be construed as derived from a predominantly objective stance towards the world, a stance tempered by the possibility that there are values that are expressed in our preferences about what to value and how to change the world. The question that Green must answer, however, is whence come these values that express individual or even collective preference if they cannot come from our interpretation of the values we have. Are the values which govern our preferences also part of our social life or do they eventuate from some other source? If there are values other than those derived from social life then Green has not identified them.

That some values might have sources other than this structure of social life might be realized when we recall that so much of the social revolution now underway in today's America is powered by recent interpretations of various feminist perspectives, lesbian and gay perspectives, the perspectives of the handicapped, the aged, the veteran and so on. These interpretations can be thought of as contemporary examples of the Nietzschean view that

everything that exists, *no matter what its origin* [my emphasis], is periodically reinterpreted by those in power in terms of fresh intentions; that all processes in the organic world are processes of outstripping and overcoming, and that, in turn all outstripping and overcoming means reinterpretation.²

And these exercises of re-interpretation have as their bases, values not derivable from the present social structure but rather derivable from ideals or aspirations or simple hopes adumbrated in ideologies, religions, or visions of worthwhile ways of life, values that presently do not exist. Indeed, is not the very force of these reinterpretations to install new values into the fabric of social life? Why? Because those who share these perspectives want the society to come to accept that the values that give meaning to their lives are now worthy of society's affirmation. And success in this enterprise would amount to all of society living in the same womb but with different views! It will not do to argue as Green does, that "to say that the domain of a certain value has enlarged is to say that the social structures of that value have been extended to institutions where they have not been found," without acknowledging that typically individuals effect that extension as a result of their preferred set of values. Institutions do not simply evolve as we would wish them to without our efforts, efforts that stem from the subjectively legitimated value stances of those particular individuals.

Incidentally, while Green may be correct to trace some of the origin of the view he abominates to the economics movements of the nineteenth century, it is Nietzsche's view, lately noted, that seems best to capture the idea that individuals have values which form the bases of their interpretation of the world they find themselves in. Perhaps this can best be realized when we remember Nietzsche's insistence that "all evaluation is made from a definite perspective: that of the preservation of the individual, a community, a race, a state, a church, a faith, a culture,"³ all of which seem to be constituted in part at least by the values they adopt. Unlike Nietzsche, Green, following R.M. Hare⁴ perhaps, wants to argue that values are part of a "way of life" and, unlike moral judgments, are not themselves subject to adoption on the basis of personal evaluation. It is as if values were to be discovered by us in the construct that is social life. Is the choice that we must make, then, either the radical subjective individualism of Nietzsche or the predominantly objective stance offered by Green? I think not, but constraints of space permit me only to allude to a third way.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. has recently written that:

Our values are not matters of whim and happenstance. History has given them to us. They are anchored in our national experience, in our national documents, in our national heroes, in our folkways, traditions and standards. People with a different history will have differing values. But we believe that our own are better for us. They work for us; and for that reason we live and die by them.⁵

This view of values is certainly relativist in character and its adoption certainly implies the outcome of a pluralist society. The view's validity depends upon an underlying pragmatic approach to life but that pragmatism is not, for Schlesinger, simply individualist in character. For Schlesinger talks of our values being what we believe in because they work for us, implying thereby a consensus as the basis for the existence of our values. But Schlesinger is careful not to mandate a single universal consensus about what constitutes our values, as we might expect Green's view of values to eventuate in. Rather, values are to emerge from our debate with each other as we share what we are prepared to live and die by. Schlesinger expects there will be different groups of us because the debate which will generate different consensi will be informed by differing traditions of value discourse. Of course the major problems facing these different groups will be how to accommodate each other without breaking the bonds of cohesion that make them willing debaters in the first place. The creation of overlapping consensi will be necessary. But, for now, what is important in this view for us is that the values it promotes, while never fixed or final as Green's values appear to be, do not lead to the evasion of controversy, so that each is left isolated in her or his Nietzschean individualism expressed in his or her particular values. Instead, those affirming these values will promote controversy hoping thereby to create an ever widening, more inclusive consensus about which values to have.

¹ William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnnie Can't Tell Right from Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 22, 125.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Anchor Books, 1956), 209.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 149.

⁴ R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 69. "Thus a complete justification of a decision would consist of a complete account of its effects, together with a complete account of the principles which it observed, and the effects of observing those principles for, of course, it is the effects (what obeying them actually consists in) which gives content to the principles too. Thus, if pressed to justify a decision completely, we have to give a complete specification of the way of life of which it is a part."

⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), 137.

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