

Thomas Hill Green Biography

Thomas Hill Green

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Biography

The English philosopher Thomas Hill Green (1836-1882) founded the school of more or less Hegelian idealists that dominated English philosophy in the late 19th century.

The son of a clergyman, Thomas Hill Green was born on April 7, 1836, in Birkin, Yorkshire. Distantly related to Oliver Cromwell, he resembled him in being sober, conscientious, and practical. In 1855 Green entered Balliol College, Oxford, where he studied under Benjamin Jowett, obtained a first-class honors degree in 1859, and was elected a fellow the following year. He soon concentrated his teaching work on philosophy and, after Jowett became master of the college in 1870, took on much of the responsibility for running the college. In 1865 and 1866 he served on a commission of inquiry into the outdated grammar schools of England. In 1878 he became professor of moral philosophy.

Green expressed himself plainly and often cumbrously and was not a superficially attractive teacher. But his originality, moral seriousness, and reforming zeal had a profound influence. He firmly rejected the native philosophical tradition: its empiricist theory of knowledge, in the massive introduction to his edition of David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*; its hedonistic ethics, in his posthumously published *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883). Against empiricism he argued that the mind is active in knowledge; against hedonism, that human action is free, not the causal outcome of natural desires, and that its end should be self-fulfillment, not pleasure. This conception of man's moral agency led him in *Principles of Political Obligation* (1883) to assign to the state the task of creating the conditions for individuals to pursue their moral perfection freely.

Green was an ardent advocate of temperance and an effective member of the Oxford town council. He was a partisan of the North in the American Civil War and was extremely hostile to the patriotic, imperialist mood inspired by Benjamin Disraeli. Green's disciples dedicated themselves to the education of a responsible, socially reforming elite and were soon active in all spheres of public life.