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THE TRIUMPH OF SPIRIT OVER LAW: FREE WILL VERSUS DETERMINISM IN *ADAM BEDE*

by William H. Klein

One of the primary intellectual influences that shaped George Eliot's thought was positivism, or rather the various influence of positivistic philosophers such as Comte, Mill, Spencer, Feuerbach and Lewes, who each in his own way subscribed to an empiricism dictating that knowledge of anything but actual phenomena is impossible, and thus rejected any metaphysical speculation concerning ultimate causes or origins. This is a broad definition of positivism, and perhaps generalizes at the expense of the fine points of the thinkers under discussion; however, George Eliot's ultimate rejection of the notion of a God whose existence cannot be empirically demonstrated was a result of the belief that "that which is beyond nature, if there is anything, is completely unknowable, and speculation about it and about the nature of things in themselves is fruitless."¹

The process of nature as the positivists and as Eliot understood it constitutes a system of physical laws that are universally constant and inexorable, whereby cosmic movement is manifest whether in the cycle of the seasons or the death of a fly. This system of natural or cosmic law is causative: each phenomenon is the result of the interaction of countless other phenomena receding infinitely into the past. The existence of a divine being is neither affirmed nor denied by such a system, but it is not verifiable because it is an ultimate cause. Yet the system does intrinsically reject the idea of a deity who orders the universe for the sake of humanity or who "responds to men's prayers, or compensates for injustice ... [This] is a waking dream of the human mind. There is no reprieve from death, and there is no forgiveness of sins; causes are invariably followed by their effects, and once a deed is done it is ineradicable."² In chapter xxvii of *Adam Bede* the narrator tells us:

'For if it be true that nature at certain moments seems charged with a presentment of one individual lot, must it not also be true that she seems unmindful, unconscious of another? For there is no hour that has not its births of gladness and despair, no morning brightness that does not bring new sickness to desolation as well as new forces to genius and love. There are so many of us and our lots are so different: what wonder that Nature's mood is often in harsh contrast with the great crisis of our lives?'³

Of the works of the positivist Ludwig Feuerbach, the most important to the development of Eliot's thought was Das Wesens des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity), her translation of which appeared in 1857. Three years earlier she had written to Sara Hennell: "With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree."⁴ Indeed, Eliot's rejection of an omniscient Father who doles out just punishment and reward found definition in Feuerbach's aphorism that "theology long ago became anthropology."⁵ For Feuerbach, God is merely the personification of human perfection that man has anthropomorphized and idealistically placed on the altar of his imagination:

'It is not I but religion that worships man, although religion, or rather theology, denies it: it is not only I, an insignificant individual, but religion itself that says: God is man, man is God This is evident from the fact that religion makes God become man and only then sets up this God that has human form, human feeling and human thoughts as an object of its worship and reverence.'⁶

Once Feuerbach has circumscribed what he believes to be the solipsism that Christianity presents as objective and absolute truth, he points to a human ideal attributed to God by man, one essential to the ethos of Christianity, which according to Feuerbach alienates the human mind from complete identification with deity: the attribute of moral perfection. In his chapter "God as a Moral Being, Or Law," in The Essence of Christianity, Feuerbach understands the morally perfect god as "nothing else than the realized idea, the fulfilled law of morality, the moral nature of man posited as the absolute being,"⁷ a notion following logically from the concept of God as an image of man perfected by men. Feuerbach repudiates this morally perfect God, however, because it forces the human heart into conflict with itself.

'This morally perfect being is no merely theoretical, inert conception, but a practical one, calling me to action, to imitation, throwing me into strife, into disunion with myself; for while it proclaims to me what I ought to be, it also tells me to my face, without any flattery, what I am not Now, by what means does man deliver himself from this state of disunion between himself and the perfect being ...? Only by this; that he is conscious of love as the highest, the absolute power and truth No man is sufficient for the law which moral perfection sets before us; but for that reason, neither is the law sufficient for man, the heart. The law gives me the consciousness that I am worthless. The law holds man in bondage; love makes him

free. Love is God himself and apart from it there is no God.
Love makes man God and God man.’⁸

The pervasive moral and philosophic perspective in all of George Eliot’s novels involves a reliance on the God of love for humanity over and above the love of God in the stricter sense of obedience to doctrine that is a central element of the Judaeo-Christian tradition: the triumph of spirit over law; for Eliot, sympathy for one’s fellow man brings the individual to a greater understanding of himself and is largely a reciprocal process. Learning to love is the process from egoism to altruism,⁹ a process that Adam Bede does not fully accomplish until he has suffered through Hetty Sorrel’s incarceration and trial. At his father’s funeral in chapter xxviii he thinks to himself: “Ah, I was always too hard It’s a sore fault in me as I’m so hot and out of patience with people when they do wrong, and my heart gets shut up against them, so as I can’t bring myself to forgive ‘em. I see clear there’s more pride nor love in my soul.”¹⁰ And in the next chapter, the novel’s narrator, who is often a Feuerbachian voice in both tone and point of view, tells us: “Perhaps here lay the secret of the hardness he had accused himself of: he had too little fellow feeling with the weakness that errs in spite of foreseen consequences. Without this fellow feeling, how are we to get enough charity and patience towards our stumbling, falling companions in the long and changeful journey?”¹¹

Through man’s ability to love his fellow, Feuerbach would tell us, “man reconciles himself with God, or rather with his own nature as represented in the moral law.”¹² As positivists, both Eliot and Feuerbach distinguish between what Bernard Paris calls “moral order” and “nonmoral order.”¹³ Nonmoral order is that cosmic or teleologic law which acts independently of man’s will or desire. The moral order, or law, is the ethical process, manifest in all social institutions and relationships that humanize the world. In terms of man, the latter process has been described as the movement from moral blindness to moral vision, the movement from egoism to altruism. However, the moral and nonmoral orders cannot function independently of one another according to the positivists because man is a product of empirical nature as much if not more than his own will, and so his decisions are the result of the interrelationship of both orders. Thus, if his decisions are determined by nature’s nonmoral order, whether in part or whole, he is not ultimately responsible for his actions, or so Comte and Spencer assert. Then why attempt to decide or act at all? As deterministic as Eliot’s thinking was, she still believed that we must decide, we must act, and that we can be held responsible

for what we do. As George Levine has suggested in his article, “Determinism and Responsibility in the Works of George Eliot,”¹⁴ Eliot based this belief primarily on the refusal to comprehend the will as a causally controlled faculty. Of course, this refusal in and of itself is an equivocation; thus, Levine goes on to say that this evasive response to the notion of moral responsibility in a determined universe stems from Eliot’s moral bias: “Aware of the philosophical commonplace that no one can be obliged to do something unless he is capable of doing it, yet feeling with equal strength the call to duty ...[as Mrs. Poyser says, ‘I see plain enough we shall never do without a solution, and that’s enough for me.’] [Eliot] asserted the common sense point that nothing will get done unless we make the effort and that experience tells us we can make it.” In this, Eliot, as well as Mill, has been criticized by absolute determinists who claim that assuming responsibility for acts that are really the results of fixed conditions that produce “caused” or determined decisions is absurd, for how can the will be but the result of perception? However, the examination of another intellectual influence that shaped Eliot’s vision, the work of Benedict de Spinoza, may help to resolve the apparent inconsistencies in her thinking. Eliot had read Spinoza’s complete works by 1856, by which time she had also translated Spinoza’s Ethics.¹⁵ As early as 1849 when she was translating his Theological-Political Treatise, she wrote to Sara Hennell: “How exquisite is the satisfaction of feeling that another mind sees precisely where and what is the difficulty.”¹⁶

We should first say that, like the positivists, Spinoza also presupposes a universe of cause and determined effect, but one major point of departure from them is that Spinoza’s universe is ontologically theistic, that is, ultimately set in motion by God; thus, there exists a source for reality, which Spinoza ultimately conceives of as demonstrable. According to Spinoza, the nature of things is fixed by natural law originating in the mind of God which determines the material universe (natura naturata); but there is also an order of true ideas, similar to the platonic notion of eternal forms (natura naturans), which is a process of thought of which man himself is capable that leads to spontaneous and transcendent (i.e., “uncaused”) decision-making and consequent responsibility on the part of the individual for his decisions.¹⁷

In On The Improvement of the Understanding, Spinoza distinguishes between “essence” (essentia or substantia) and “fiction” (fictum). These terms are defined axiomatically. First, let’s define “essence” or what Spinoza also calls “a true idea”:

‘A true idea ... is something different from its correlate (idea-tum); thus a circle is different from the idea of a circle. The idea

of a circle is not something having a circumference and a centre, as a circle has; nor is the idea of a body that body itself. Now, as it is something different from its correlate, it is capable of being understood through itself....'¹⁸

This is to say that a body or object can be understood by itself (essentially) and not by an idea or correlate representing it; when something is understood in this fashion, it is a true idea, that is, knowing a thing *per se*, or in and of itself, which is understanding on the intellectual order (Kant would say this is impossible, but that problem is beyond our present scope). If I see a chair, I can perceive it as an object in space and time and understand its essence by its form and function. But if I attempt to reconstruct the history of its coming into existence, how and when it was made, for example, I am attempting a fictive understanding because I am trying to understand the causes of the chair in the natural order (*natura naturata*), something impossible since without being a witness to its construction from scratch, I lack sufficient data. I am thus removing the chair from its essence and connecting it to infinite and unverifiable possibility.

There is also a sense in which the creation of fictions in the Spinozan sense is analogous simply to jumping to conclusions, as when someone who sees a man running down a street and at the same time hears an alarm, becomes convinced the man is running from the alarm. In this way the individual has seen an effect and attributed to it a fictive cause if there is no connection between the two events. Had the individual seen the essence of the various actions in their full continuity, that is, both separate acts of the alarm going off and the individual running, he would not connect the events falsely, for then he perceives the situation essentially, just as it is possible to see the chair in its complete physical reality, although not beyond its present state. But we understand a chair because of its shape and use just as we understand a circle by its roundness, and cannot separate these essential concepts one from another. Thus the chair, circle and situation of the running man allow true ideas of them in their essences, and not in their ontologies, or causes, which may be impossible to determine. Spinoza tells us we cannot understand causes in the natural order because of that order's complexity, but we can understand essences on the intellectual plane, and, in fact, one cannot know a thing apart from its essence, since the essence of a thing is itself the act of knowing it. Perception equals the thing perceived. Therefore, understanding a fiction is "feigned" or false understanding.¹⁹

If one can distinguish thus between fictions and essences, between knowing something truly versus knowing it imperfectly, he is able to evaluate given situations and is responsible for his actions in response to them insofar as his understanding is accurate. The issue of accurate understanding is expressed by Adam Bede, albeit in more concrete and homely terms. As he says in chapter iv:

‘Maybe there’s a world about us as we can’t see, but the ear’s quicker than the eye and catches a sound from’t now and then. Some people think they get a sight on’t too, but they’re mostly folks whose eyes are not much use to ‘em at anything else. For my part, I think it’s better to see when your perpendicular’s true, than to see a ghost.’²⁰

Adam here distinguishes between understanding essence and fiction. Although specifically referring to the supernatural, his comment on ghosts may be interpreted as his rejection of trying to understand effects without causes, just as “seeing when your perpendicular’s true” refers to understanding a thing essentially in and of itself. In fact, his tendency to think in metaphors of carpentry throughout the novel with an emphasis on axiomatic expressions is a more general indication of his understanding of essence: “Whenever Adam was strongly convinced of a proposition, it took the form of a principle in his mind: it was knowledge to be acted on, as much as the knowledge that damp will cause rust.”²¹ Although Adam does condemn himself, and is condemned by Mr. Irwine, for overly formulaic thinking - in part suffering from what Nietzsche would call an overdose of “moralic acid” - Eliot still affirms that Adam’s understanding of things in principle is practical wisdom and knowledge to be implemented. That is, it is only with as full an understanding of truth as possible can one approach making the right decisions, and one is responsible for them in relation to the fullness of that understanding. There is also the sense in which true understanding in Spinoza’s terms is transcendent of the natural order of objects and events entirely, the grasp of an object or idea in its autonomous reality, which may well form the basis of Eliot’s refusal to comprehend the will as causally controlled, and her refusal in this light may be understood as a philosophical viewpoint and not an equivocation.

Of course, Adam’s vision, which is a paradigm against which the insight of the other characters is weighed, is tempered by fictions as well. His “blended susceptibility and self-command,”²² his ability to grasp certain things fully

and still misapprehend the causes of others, most notably in his mistaken notion of Hetty's motives in her liaison with Arthur Donnithorne, is what causes the suffering that brings him to a greater understanding of the difference between truth and fiction by the end of the novel, and that understanding is what makes him a more responsible being (in the most common sense of the word, one is responsible only in so far as he understands the consequences of his actions). As Irwine tells Adam in chapter xli:

'We sometimes form our judgment on what seems strong evidence, and yet, for want of knowing some small fact, our judgment is wrong. But suppose the worst: you have no right to say that the guilt of her crimes lies with him, and that he ought to bear the punishment. It is not for us men to apportion the shares of moral guilt and retribution You have a mind that can understand this fully, Adam, when you are calm ... if you were to obey your passion [in avenging Hetty] - for it is passion and you deceive yourself in calling it justice - it might be with you as it has been with Arthur; nay, worse; your passion might lead you yourself into a horrible crime.'²³

Irvine's hesitancy to impute evil may be seen as a synthesis of the capacity to distinguish essence from fiction on the one hand, and the Feuerbachian concept of love on the other. As we've discussed, Feuerbach asserts that Christianity invariably forces us to downgrade our fellow man on the absolute scale of moral perfection, since, in anthropomorphizing God, man has deified himself without realizing that he lacks the perfection and omniscience to assume the role. This lack of omniscience is another way of looking at man's inability to understand fictions which would become essences if he were clearly to see ultimate causes, which is transcendent understanding, and which would put man in the position of godhead; although it should be noted that according to Spinoza such ultimate understanding in the natural order is impossible. However, to return to the Feuerbachian problem of man's self-deification, when man does so, if unconsciously, he passes moral judgement on his fellows, which is a reciprocal function of self-deification, or egoism, and in so doing he jumps to conclusions, mistakes the part for the whole, the fiction for the true idea, as Irvine implies. Moreover, it is only through love, says Feuerbach, through what Spinoza calls union with God or the Divine Substance or Essence,²⁴ that we can be freed of human bondage to unhappiness, and this freedom involves an acceptance of one's own limitations in order to understand the limitations of humanity in general. If we know ourselves, we can know others, and to know, both Eliot, Feuerbach and

Spinoza would concur, is to forgive, as well as to love God.

Of course, Eliot's acceptance of the ethical process throughout her novels is couched in esthetic naturalism and abides with a keen didacticism as well as good common sense, so she is thus inclined towards the realistic if mildly tragic view that altruism can only be arrived at through suffering. Her concept of nemesis is not directly relevant to this discussion, but few would argue the point that experience is the best teacher. It is experience that generates in Adam what Reva Stump has characterized as the positive movement in the novel, the movement towards moral vision;²⁵ it is what changes Dinah Morris in a less precisely articulated fashion, what seems to bring Arthur out of his egoism by the novel's end, and it is what destroys Hetty. In light of what happens to the characters and why, at least if we accept the fact that Hetty has less capacity for understanding than, say, Adam, as Eliot says she does (although her potential for insight and change is not a moot point), how are we to hold her responsible for what she does? Absolute determinists contend that, despite our potential for free will, we remain defined by our natures; thus, how can we blame the irresponsible man for poor judgment or action, which would be tantamount to blaming the blind for their blindness or the circle for being round. According to Spinoza and, by implication, Eliot, we cannot. We may say that a man is responsible for his actions in so far as he appreciates their consequences, which is not unlike the legal definition of sanity, but it would be a far more complex issue to determine such degree of character outside of a novel or play. The issue may be restated as the problem of measuring the ability of someone to foresee his fate; as Irwine says: "Our deeds determine us as much as we determine our deeds, and until we know what has been or will be the peculiar combination of outward with inward facts, which constitute a man's critical actions, it will be better not to think ourselves too wise about his character."²⁶

Although the kind of individual who is capable of expanding his vision of truth is closer to the paradigm of Adam Bede than, let us say, Hetty Sorrell, as we have presented the model, this discussion has attempted to show how the individual human mind, although, almost needless to say, determined by certain factors, can nevertheless come to a greater understanding of life through a process that transcends certain natural or determining causes, a process largely dependent on the reciprocity of self and experience, although innate sensitivity to the process is necessary as well. We have then suggested that insofar as an individual is capable of accomplishing this process, he may be deemed conscious of his decisions and actions, and is therefore respon-

sible, if not for the ultimate consequences of his actions, then at least for having initiated them. The issue of absolute determinism and its belief that nature is unalterable cannot really be addressed if only because all ultimatums are unanswerable by definition, and are not implicitly relevant in what both Bernard Paris and Eliot have characterized as the web of experience, a phrase denoting the relativity and complexity of cause and effect. That web is so limitlessly complex that, as Irwine says,

'we find it impossible to avoid mistakes in determining who has committed a single criminal act, and the problem of how far a man is to be held responsible for the unseen consequences of his own deed, is one that might well make us tremble to look into it. The evil consequences that lie folded in a single act of selfish indulgence is a thought so awful that it ought surely to awaken some feeling less presumptuous than a rash desire to punish.'²⁷

That feeling is love and forgiveness and more, the triumph of spirit over law, for here Eliot has stated through her mouthpiece the central element of the Christian ethos that transcends the need to be labelled a religious doctrine at all, and is no more nor less than righteous kindness.

In Adam Bede, as in all her major novels, George Eliot recreates life with an incisive eye not merely for realistic detail, but with an acute awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of moral experience. Adam Bede is a richly painted portrait of rural life to which is appended the caption of intellectual and moral understanding, and the difficulties of her vivid world brightly reflect ours. Her neighbours, friends, lovers, and enemies are ours and we see ourselves in the mirror of her mind; so in the novel's epigraph Wordsworth echoes the difficulty of love and forgiveness in a clumsy and imperfect world:

And when
I speak of such among my flock as swerved
Or fell, those only shall be singled out
Upon whose lapse, or error, something more
Than brotherly forgiveness may attend.

That "something more" is for both Eliot and Wordsworth the possibility of increased moral awareness through example and experience, since forgiveness is useless if the giver proffers it blindly and the taker learns nothing from accepting it. In Adam Bede, George Eliot presents us with the difficulties of

such blindness and vision recreating the ideas of her beloved philosophers in novel form, attempting to resolve the problems they pose by presenting their abstractions in terms of character and situation that reflect our own lives and the lives of those around us, whom the web of experience has inextricably bound to our actions and our hearts.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Bernard J. Paris, Experiments in Life (Detroit: Wayne State U.P., 1965) 26.
- ² Paris, 26.
- ³ Adam Bede. Gordon S.Haight, ed. (San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1948) 298.
- ⁴ Paris, 93.
- ⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, George Eliot, trans. (New York: The Cloister Library, 1957) 38.
- ⁶ Feuerbach, 39.
- ⁷ Paris, 106.
- ⁸ Feuerbach, 47-48.
- ⁹ See Barbara Hardy's Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form (London: Oxford U.P., 1967)
- ¹⁰ Adam Bede, 205.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 214.
- ¹² Paris, 106.
- ¹³ Paris, chapter 3.
- ¹⁴ George Levine, "Determinism and Responsibility in the Works of George Eliot," *PMLA* (March - June 1962)77, 268-279.
- ¹⁵ George Eliot: Life and Letters, J. W. Cross, ed. (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1884)I, 200.
- ¹⁶ George Eliot: Life and Letters, J. W. Cross, ed. (Boston: Dana Este and Co., 1968)I, 153.
- ¹⁷ See particularly Spinoza's On The Improvement of the Understanding and Part 1 of The Ethics ("Concerning God"). In Works of Spinoza, R.H.M. Elwes, trans. (New York: Dover Pub. Inc., 1955) 1-41, 45-81.
- ¹⁸ On The Improvement of the Understanding 12.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, *passim*.
- ²⁰ Adam Bede, 49.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 214.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 217.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 433.
- ²⁴ See note 17, particularly page 45 of the first part of The Ethics.
- ²⁵ See Reva Stump's Movement and Vision in George Eliot's Novels (Seattle: Washington U.P., 1959)
- ²⁶ Adam Bede, 320.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 433.

Editor's note: The above article was the winner of the Gordon Ray Prize at New York University for the best essay on a Victorian novelist submitted in the Spring of 1989.