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GEORGE ELIOT'S MIDDLEMARCH AS A TRANSLATION OF SPINOZA'S ETHICS
By Miriam Henson

In 1846 John Chapman of Newgate Street published a translation of David Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*. Although no translator was accredited, this book was the result of two years' arduous work by Mary Ann Evans, the woman who would later achieve renown as George Eliot. Strauss's presentation of Jesus is that of a historical figure; he denies his divine status, and suggests that the miracles written about in the Gospels are mythic in nature. Although Mary Ann was distressed by Strauss's destruction of all the 'miraculous and highly improbable' elements of the Gospel, she too had, for some time, been unable to regard Jesus as the Son of God; after reading Charles Hennell's *An Enquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* in 1838 she suffered a loss of faith and ceased her church attendance in 1842. The religious and scientific climates of the period were changing: by 1842 Mary Ann had read the work of the geologist Charles Lyell and, ten years later, Herbert Spencer presented his theory of evolution in the *Westminster Review* under her management; elements of each anticipated Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* of 1859. Although the change occurred gradually, the increasing secularization of intellectual thought, and the lack of a divinely endorsed role model, placed the nature of morality under scrutiny.

Mary Ann translated two further philosophical texts which could be considered to offer alternative systems of morality: Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and Benedict de Spinoza's *Ethics*, both of which reject the idea of a Judaeo-Christian creator god: Feuerbach's 'god' is a projected ideal of human nature, whereas Spinoza's equivalent is immanent in all substance. Both writers influenced her fiction, but it is especially interesting to consider her relationship with Spinoza as she became convinced that a simple translation was not sufficient to make his ideas available:

> What is wanted in English is not a translation of Spinoza's works, but a true estimation of his life and system. After one has rendered his Latin faithfully into English, one feels that there is another yet more difficult process of translation for the reader to effect, and that the only mode of making Spinoza accessible to a larger number is to study his books, then shut them and give an analysis. (*Letters,* I, 321)

Hilda M. Hulme believes that she effects this analysis through her literature and that her acknowledged masterpiece *Middlemarch* is such a 'process of translation'. It is certainly noteworthy that it was the very year Mary Ann finished translating the *Ethics* that she turned to writing fiction. This raises the question of the capabilities of fiction for moral education: is it the case that *Middlemarch* is 'a true estimation' of Spinoza's system of morality, and why did Eliot choose to write a novel rather than a philosophical treatise of her own?

The disappearance of an absolute ethical role model cast doubt over the concept of an objective morality external to humanity, or even external to the individual. Spinoza's presentation of what we call 'good' and 'evil' is highly subjective: 'there is nothing in a natural state which is by common consent good or bad, since every man in a natural state consults his own advantage
alone’. Eliot’s views in Middlemarch resonate with this as she presents a view of life restricted by the ego. Almost all of the characters’ greatest failings stem from their inability to see beyond the narrow horizon of the self, which is illustrated through the metaphor of the pier-glass:

> Your pier-glass ... will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent.

Although this does not exclude the possibility of objective truth, the subjectivity of experience makes it inconceivable that such knowledge could ever be fully discoverable.

Spinoza states that ‘Every thing ... strives to persevere in its existence’ (Ethics, p. 100); if this is the presiding rule in life then it is difficult to see how such an egotistical world could avoid leading to moral depravity through selfishness. Spinoza’s explanation as to why this does not occur rests on the human faculties of identification and imagination. This is an area in which George Eliot regards literature as playing a vital role: her digressive chapter in Adam Bede, ‘In Which the Story Pauses a Little’, is a fervent appeal for people to relate to their fellow-men: ‘It is these people – amongst whom your life is passed – that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love’ and realistic fiction helps promote this ideal. The ability to empathize was a quality much prized by Eliot and she believed that orthodox religion needed to be replaced by ‘a more deeply-awing sense of responsibility to man, springing from sympathy with... the difficulty of the human lot’ (Letters, V, 31). Spinoza describes the working of empathy: ‘From the fact that we imagine a being similar to ourselves ... to be affected with some emotion, we shall be affected with a like emotion ... therefore we strive to set the being we pity free from suffering’ (Ethics, pp. 112-13). What is to be cultivated is the ability of the mind to recognize another as having desires and sorrows that are similar to, but at the same time separate from, one’s own. Martha Nussbaum considers the potential, and indeed the necessity, for certain kinds of philosophy to be expressed through literature:

> The telling itself – the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, of the whole manner of addressing the reader’s sense of life – all of this expresses a sense of life and value, a sense of what matters and what does not.

Eliot’s frequent narrative identification with the reader through the use of the pronoun ‘we’, and direct appeals to the reader’s compassion by outlining the perspectives of different characters, actively encourage the identification and imagination necessary for empathy.

In spite of this seeming agreement, Eliot and Spinoza’s views then diverge. For Spinoza, ‘Compassion in a man who lives according to reason, is in itself evil and useless ... the good which we do ... we desire to do solely in obedience to the dictate of reason’ (Ethics, pp. 190-91). For Eliot, conversely, feeling is imperative, and altruism that is purely academic or that
originates from a sense of duty but no affection is not seen as desirable; both Casaubon’s treatment of Will and Bulstrode’s attempts to make amends are portrayed in this way, and it is significant that Will eventually refuses to accept either man’s offer. Eliot does agree with Spinoza that reason is of vital importance, although ‘reason’ for Eliot equates to a more general intellectual self-awareness than Spinoza’s rigorous logic. Indeed, a blend of the two is necessary:

‘To be a poet is to have ... a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge ...’

‘But you leave out the poems,’ said Dorothea. (Middlemarch, p. 217)

The chiastic presentation of ‘knowledge’ and ‘feeling’ leads Dorothea to anticipate the lesson she will have to learn about life and love: both feeling and consciousness are essential. It is not possible to become a poet by virtue of feeling alone: one must also have the intellectual ability to enable the writing of poems. Poetry is feeling become self-aware; it requires a functioning rational capacity. Bernard Paris refers this to the idea of empathy, and suggests that it has an important role to play: ‘Consciousness is the primary source of the moral order; it produces that awareness of species, of others as different from yet like ourselves, which is the basis of all ethical action.’ Nussbaum similarly considers ‘perception’, both of one’s self and of ‘the salient features of one’s particular situation’ to be an essential moral faculty, and describes it as being ‘built into the very form of the novel as a genre’ (Nussbaum, p. 37). Reading a novel, an intellectual process in itself, is an ideal means of encouraging rational consideration of emotion.

Certainly, as Spinoza states, an excess of feeling can be dangerous. George Levine suggests that in Eliot’s work a true knowledge of the world can only be gained through a complete annihilation of self: ‘clear vision requires selflessness’, and he quotes this passage from Middlemarch: ‘If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence’ (Middlemarch, p.189). This is perhaps a perverted empathy: one in which identification takes place not with other rational beings, but with life itself and, as a result, one’s sense of self is entirely absorbed. It indicates that it is possible to empathize too much: is this the case with Dorothea? It is certainly one interpretation of her pity for Casaubon, and her willingness to devote her life to him. However, Eliot makes it clear that, despite her generosity of spirit, Dorothea’s view of her marriage is ultimately egocentric:

[I]t had been easier for her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling ... that he had an equivalent centre of self. (Middlemarch, p. 205)

‘Reflection’ is fused with ‘feeling’ in a complex interplay. ‘Feeling’ is foregrounded: Dorothea needs to have a direct emotional connection with Casaubon, rather than a purely academic understanding of his ‘equivalent centre of self’. The word ‘equivalent’ is significant, reminding us that it is the connection between the two which is important; it is not until Dorothea has a proper understanding of her own ‘centre of self’, for which she needs to cultivate self-reflection, that she will be able to identify it in others.
The desire to avoid selfishness can be so strong that it is easy to underestimate the importance of self in empathetic relations and the functioning of society as a whole. Is complete selflessness possible? Eliot demonstrates that, no matter how philanthropic one is, one can never be altruistically selfless. Most people derive some self-satisfaction from helping others: '[Dorothea's] mind had glanced over the possibility, which she would have preferred, of finding that her home would be in a parish which had a larger share of the world's misery, so that she might have had more active duties in it' (Middlemarch, pp. 76-77). Eliot had first-hand experience of another form of self-interested altruism as she devoted her life to caring for her father through his last years. She writes: 'We are apt to complain of the weight of duty, but when it is taken from us, and we are left at liberty to choose for ourselves, we find that the old life was the easier one' (Letters, I, 334). Self-sacrifice is escapism: it allows one to repress problematic aspects of one's character, and to avoid the necessity of making difficult choices. This is shown through Maggie's plight in The Mill on the Floss. After reading Thomas a Kempis she experiences a period of renunciation during which, although she feels herself to be satisfied, 'one has a sense of uneasiness in looking at her, - a sense of opposing elements, of which a fierce collision is imminent', suggesting that her previous character is dormant rather than defeated. Her sacrifice enables her to evade making difficult judgements, and to dismiss the intense emotion that is so problematic: 'Our life is determined for us; and it makes the mind very free when we give up wishing, and only think of bearing what is laid upon us, and doing what is given us to do' (The Mill on the Floss, p. 314). Even if it were possible entirely to subjugate the self to something other, would it be desirable? Altruism requires engagement between the self and other, and this can only be fulfilled effectively if a sense of self is preserved. David Carroll writes of Dinah in Adam Bede: 'She had been called to minister to others, not to have any joys or sorrows of her own (I. 48); but ... this makes reciprocal relations impossible.' As Mrs Poyser observes, 'if you loved your neighbour no better nor you do yourself, Dinah, it's little enough you'd do for him. You'd be thinking he might do well enough on a half-empty stomach'; this suggests that healthy self-regard is essential in order to empathize fully (Adam Bede, p. 190).

As we have seen, self-fulfilment can never derive entirely from self-abnegation. As Hulme notes, Spinoza places particular emphasis on the importance of self-knowledge: 'It is self-knowledge, to be gained through the exercise of the human intellect, which will give them liberty' (Hulme, p.119). For Spinoza this is the only way to gain partial freedom from the determinism of life: 'men believe themselves free solely because they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined' (Ethics, p. 97). The rational capacity of thought, including the ability to acknowledge one's physical determinism, is the nearest we can get to freedom. Dorothea's freedom comes from her decision to withhold her unmitigated compliance with Casaubon's wishes. When Casaubon asks her to promise to continue his work she finally, albeit privately, agrees. This is her first complete act of self-abnegation as it is entirely against her inclination: she neither believes it to be conducive to her happiness nor in service of the greater good. However, she is saved from this fate as she chooses to consider the decision; rather than unthinkingly submitting she requests time to reflect and Casaubon dies before she has a chance to answer. Her further decision not to continue the work is problematic, as, having resolved to do so, it might seem that she is recoiling from something which she previously considered to be the morally correct action.
However this is further indication of the importance of the empathetic relationship between people. Dorothea’s decision to say yes relies upon her wish to avoid hurting her husband: she has discovered that the work has no intrinsic value of its own, and therefore, once she does not stand to injure someone’s feelings, she does not feel bound to complete it.

Self-knowledge requires introspection and self-reflection but it cannot be achieved by these alone; it necessarily requires interaction with others. The desire to live up to the expectations of others is something that Spinoza notes: ‘We try to do that which we imagine men will look at with pleasure, and on the contrary, we are averse to do that for which we imagine they will dislike’ (*Ethics*, p. 85). Whilst obviously true on a superficial level, this does not allow for people who like to fly in the face of public opinion as Will does, for example. Although he does not act in this way simply to be antagonistic he does relish the idea of being unconventional, and while Eliot mocks him for his delusions of grandeur, her tone is affectionate. However, what Eliot realizes is that this fear of judgement is only present when either the subsequent retribution is likely to be severely disadvantageous, or one has a connection (through identification or projection of one’s own ideals) with the person or community passing judgement. This is why, for a long time, Dorothea is so anxious to live up to Casaubon’s expectations, as he is, at this point, an embodiment of her own ideals. Similarly, whilst Rosamond becomes quickly disillusioned with Lydgate, and therefore disregards his expectations of her, she is hurt bitterly by the revelation that Will (whom she considers, mistakenly, to be something of a soul-mate) thinks badly of her.

Community expectation may also shape individual consciousness, thus playing a part in Spinoza’s determinism. As George Levine says of *Daniel Deronda*, ‘the source of both shame and fear is the possible exposure to communal observation and consequent judgment’ and this is true of all Eliot’s communities: for example, it is the force which Maggie so resents during her childhood and which devastates her adult life (Levine, p. 226). This is unsurprising as societal norms and communal judgement impacted so greatly on Eliot’s own life following her decision to co-habit with Lewes. As a result, much of her fiction is involved with the difficulty in reconciling a personal and a communal morality. Many critics have commented that the emphasis on the importance of societal opinion and the complex and symbiotic relationship between the individual and the community is indicative of Eliot’s interest in evolution and the organic nature of society. Sally Shuttleworth notes that descriptions of characters are frequently presented from the perspectives of others: the fact that Dorothea ‘was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever’, and Mr Brooke ‘was held in this part of the county to have contracted a too rambling habit of mind’, indicates that ‘Character cannot be defined apart from social opinion, for each individual is only the sum of his, constantly changing, relations with the social organism.’ Shuttleworth continues, ‘Such relativism, however, is more apparent than real; it is clearly undercut by the text’s claim to offer authoritative judgement.’ However, although the text may indicate that there is an objective truth, this is portrayed as in keeping with the pier-glass metaphor: if there is an objective truth it is impossible for the reader to locate, limited, as we are, by interpretation. Eliot ironically draws attention to this in her comment on the subjectivity of experience: ‘The text, whether of prophet or of poet, expands for whatever we can put into it, and even his bad grammar is sublime’ (*Middlemarch*, p. 50). In any case, the narrator draws back from making any kind of definitive moral judgement about the actions of characters. This then encourages interpretation on the part of the reader, and
demonstrates one of the key advantages Nussbaum believes fiction offers for moral education: ‘novels are more open-ended, showing the reader what it is to search for the appropriate description and why that search matters’ (Nussbaum, p. 47).

In effect, this ‘authoritative judgement’ of which Shuttleworth speaks is really no more than an awareness of the complex inter-relationships of character and community. This creates a difficulty: if individuals are determined by society and the morality of society is made up of an amalgamation of these individuals’ beliefs, then how is society ever to change or develop? Eliot makes it clear that anomalous and unconventional individuals are necessary for societal reform, through the representation of change instigated by outsiders such as Dorothea, Ladislaw and Lydgate. In Darwinian terms, the unusual individuals are the catalysts for wider change, and the challenge posed, through conflict and competition, is necessary for progress. However, this challenge cannot be revolutionary. Eliot was at the cutting edge of contemporary thought, publishing new and challenging philosophical, scientific and theological theories in the Westminster Review, but, as Kathryn Hughes notes, ‘Social change must come gradually... Revolution, liberation and upheaval were to have no place in Mary Ann’s moral world.’12 We can see evidence for this in the finale of Middlemarch, in what George Levine describes as ‘a hymn to gradualism’ (Levine, p. 256).

\[T\]he effect of [Dorothea’s] being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. (p. 795)

Dorothea Barrett reads the ending much less optimistically: ‘the relinquishing of vocation and the settling for something unspectacular but comfortable that we feel brooding beneath the surface ... suggest an ending neither happy nor tragic, but simply disappointing and mundane’.13 However, what looks like a disappointing compromise can often be the synthesis of a dialectical process. In her elucidation of Eliot’s attitude to social change, Hughes quotes from the prospectus for the Westminster Review:

Sharp scrutiny of ‘established creeds and systems’ would, it was maintained, lead not to their destruction but to their re-emergence in a stronger, refined form... ‘opposing systems may in the end prove complements of each other’.14 This is closely connected to Eliot’s insistence that change must come from within, as demonstrated, for example, by Will’s reluctance to use direct attacks against the systems that he wishes to change. In addition, the very positive message presented by the finale is that small changes go on to affect the world exponentially.

In any case, it is the endless process itself which is important. Will is a physical embodiment of this process: he is described as being in a state of constant flux. The narrator describes him using the vocabulary of change, often evoking water: ‘the little ripple in his nose was a preparation for metamorphosis’ (Middlemarch, p. 203). Shuttleworth also notes this: ‘Will ... is concerned less with origins than with the vital organic processes of historical growth; he would “prefer not to know the sources of the Nile” [(Middlemarch, p. 80)]’ (Shuttleworth, p. 165). From this we
can infer that it is much less important to concern oneself with the origins of morality: more significant is what one does with the moral capacities one possesses. This reflects the development of Eliot's attitudes towards religion. Despite her loss of faith and her dramatic renunciation of the church, as she grew older she developed a tolerance for religion, and recognized that it can be a helpful guiding principle. However, it is still the practicality of what this can achieve which is important. For Eliot, prayer has no function other than to improve the moral nature of the person praying, and it is his or her subsequent actions that are praiseworthy: morality is in the process of striving for altruistic ideals, whether or not the ideals themselves are true and substantive, or illusory, or projected. This is not to suggest that pursuing pointless chimerical ideals is something to be encouraged, rather it allows the possibility that principles which cannot be proved by reason may still be essential for the cultivation of an ethical attitude. Paris suggests that 'Sentiment saves existence from absurdity, for it hallows and sanctifies that which reason finds meaningless or relative. Sentiment moves us to acts of goodness, of unselfishness, of reverence, for which reason provides no motivation or rationale'; if we came to the conclusion that all our ideals were unobtainable, and stopped feeling (despite what we might rationally believe) that some intrinsic meaning exists in the world it would be easy to slip into a state of nihilism, solipsism and apathy (Paris, p. 64). So, as Paris states: 'Christianity, then, is not the source of the moral order for George Eliot, but, as a form of organized experience, it is certainly an important part of the ethical process' (Paris, p. 63).

The importance of process for Eliot is in accordance with Spinoza’s thoughts about analysis and active thought. He states: ‘the more [a being] acts the more perfect it is’ (Ethics, p. 240), and makes a distinction between ideas and other kinds of thoughts: ‘an idea involves an affirmation or negation ... an idea, since it is a mode of thought, consists neither in the image of anything nor in words’ (Ethics, pp. 85-86). This is connected to issues of choice and the self-awareness of our conscious thought which constitutes Spinoza’s freedom and self-knowledge. The conclusion that arises is that morality is not a list of rules and regulations; it is about the active choices that one makes. Gillian Beer notes that in Daniel Deronda ‘Mordecai ends by claiming that the strongest principle of growth lies in human choice: “The divine principle of our race is action, choice, resolved memory.”’ This can be seen through the emphasis that Eliot places on life-changing decisions. Eliot’s novels hang entirely around these key points: Dorothea’s decision not to continue Casaubon’s work, Mary’s decision not to burn Featherstone’s will, Gwendolen’s decision to marry Grandcourt, Gwendolen’s decision to let Grandcourt drown, Maggie’s decision not to marry Stephen, Tito’s decision not to search for his father, and so on.

Hulme argues:

> If George Eliot feels that any correction is necessary in Spinoza’s system ... it seems likely that she wishes to avoid any apparent overemphasis on the importance of ‘active thought’... one whose mind is quite untrained to active thought, may yet act rightly through an inspired energy of feeling. (Hulme, p. 124)

However, Hulme confuses ‘active thought’ with the kinds of reason and intellect which require
formal education. Paris describes his own version of 'active thought':

Lack of intelligence is also an obstacle to sympathy.... A sympathetic feeling is one which is excited by the signs of that feeling in another person; intelligence, that is, mental vision, is needed to read the signs.... Sympathy and vision are both dependent on experience. Unless we have had an experience much like that which another person is undergoing, we cannot perceive and share the states of feeling signified by that person's behaviour. (Paris, p. 68)

The definitions are slippery; 'intelligence' has nothing to do with the kind of education one receives in a schoolroom or from a philosophical treatise, but has everything to do with the moral education that comes from 'experience'. The importance of active thought is the reason why Eliot chooses to write a novel as an 'analysis' of Spinoza; it is something that cannot be achieved by 'words' or 'images' alone but has to involve feeling and self-awareness. Reading is a creative process, requiring readers to utilise their imaginative and empathetic faculties, and in this respect it develops their capacities for moral judgement. Rather than being didactic, it relies on identification in order to gain understanding; as Dorothea says to Celia, 'No, dear, you would have to feel with me, else you would never know' (Middlemarch, p. 781). This is something that Eliot discusses at length in her essay 'The Natural History of German Life':

Appeals founded on generalisations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made ... but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves.16

In Eliot's opinion, a 'great artist' is one who can use 'words' and 'images' to provoke feeling and reflection, thus leading to increased understanding.

It is in this respect that Eliot and Spinoza have different emphases: Eliot chooses to encourage a compassion based on feeling, rather than that exercised by Spinoza's ideal rational man. However, even the fact that she challenges some of these issues further fulfils Spinoza's system: it is the progress that comes from such challenges that constitutes his ideal of active thought. In any case, the importance of feeling is in accordance with Spinoza's system as a whole. One of the ways in which Spinoza differed from the Stoical writings of his contemporaries is that he allows for its presence, and even necessity. He writes about religion and morality: 'Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but is virtue itself; and we do not delight in it because we conquer our passions, but because we delight in it, we are able to conquer our passions' (Ethics, p. 242). This is why complete selflessness cannot be desirable: enjoyment of moral activity is an essential part of wisdom; it is in this way that Eliot gives a 'true estimation' of Spinoza's system, and the reason why she writes a novel. Middlemarch achieves what the Ethics never can; written in the style of a scientific or mathematical proof, the Ethics may advocate feeling, but it does not embody it. It is the way Eliot excites our emotions and makes us connect with her characters, combined with the necessary analytical and intellectual attitude from the reader, that develops our empathetic capacities and improves our understanding, both of ourselves and of our fellow-men with whom we share a common bond of consciousness.
Notes


