

**PROFILES IN PANENTHEISM –
COMPARING THE PHILOSOPHIES OF
BARUCH SPINOZA AND ARTHUR GREEN**

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I. Introduction – Daring to Break the Monopoly

You can consider this talk part of a larger effort to break a monopoly. I know a bit about antitrust law, but the monopoly I have in mind isn't one that an antitrust lawyer can confront. It is much more insidious. For this is an unseen monopoly – not a business, but an idea. It is the notion that the word God refers to one thing and one thing only: a supernatural, omnipotent, omnibenevolent deity that is altogether separate from the world He created in accordance with His perfect will. That is the perspective on God that continues to be associated with each of the Abrahamic faiths, especially in their most Orthodox schools. And it is also the source of the widespread popularity of modern atheism and agnosticism. If you scratch the surface of those heresies, you will find that when people choose to avoid a belief in God, what they are truly avoiding, and in some cases defiantly rejecting, is a belief in the traditional conception of divinity. The self-proclaimed atheists and agnostics generally accept the traditional definition of God, and as a result, they have ceded the domain of religion to the monopolists.

I am not willing to make that concession. Nor are the two thinkers we will discuss this evening. They both ground their philosophy on the one they call “God,” yet they are clearly attempting to redefine that word. In that sense, they are engaging in what progressive clerics have come to mean by “reclaiming” the divine. In other words, while they recognize that they cannot accept the traditional notion of divinity, they are unwilling to reject the idea of God altogether. Others are doing the same thing, albeit with different re-definitions. I have selected these two thinkers, however, because I believe that the future of progressive religion will largely involve a confrontation between their two perspectives on God, notwithstanding the similarities between them.

II. Spinoza and Green – Two Panentheists with a Common Set of Core Ideas

The Washington Spinoza Society hardly needs a biography of the first of these two thinkers, Baruch Spinoza. But our members may know little about the second, Arthur Green. Rabbi Green is one of the pre-eminent Jewish theologians alive today. While at the Jewish Theological Seminary, he studied under the great Abraham Joshua Heschel. Later, he became the Dean of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), the only rabbinical school in the Reconstructionist movement. Then, after leaving RRC, he founded a non-denominational rabbinical school called Hebrew College.

Rabbi Green is arguably the leading contemporary exponent of the Jewish school of thought known as neo-Hasidism, which attempts to combine modern intellectual sensibilities with the basic principles of 18th century Hasidism. Perhaps most importantly, when he speaks in public, he doesn't act like a big *macha*. Green is a plainspoken man who happens to love mystical pursuits, reasoned discourse, modern ideas, and progressive social action. In short, he is a philosopher's kind of theologian.

But Green is, first and foremost, a theologian. And Spinoza is a philosopher. Therein lies not only the source of differences in the language they use and the materials they cite (or don't cite), but also in the content of their teachings. That is especially fascinating, because those teachings rest on a common foundation known as *panentheism*. Literally, this word denotes that the "all" is *in* God. It can be contrasted to the more commonly used term "pantheism," which means simply that the "all" *is*, or means the same thing as, God.

In his book, *Radical Judaism*, Green explicitly adopts the mantle of a panentheist:

my theological position is that of a *mystical panentheist*, one who believes that God is present throughout all of existence, that Being or Y-H-W-H underlies and unifies all that is. At the same time (and this is panetheism as distinct from pantheism), this whole is

mysteriously and infinitely greater than the sum of its parts, and cannot be fully known or reduced to its constituent beings.ⁱ

In another extensive statement of Green's theology, *Seek My Face*, he points to the Shema, Judaism's central prayer, to illustrate his panentheism. After referring to the first line of the Shema, 'Hear O Israel, Y-H-W-H our God, Y-H-W-H is One' as the "higher unity, the inner gate of oneness," Green says,

According to the unity of the *Sh'ma*, all is one as though there were no many. Nothing but the One exists. ... Infinity goes on as though our world, with all its variety and beauty, with all its suffering and crises, makes not the slightest bit of difference. The garbing of divine energy in the countless forms of existence is naught when seen from the point of view of infinity. ... Only infinity is real here: God of endless cosmic space-time."ⁱⁱ

In other words, Green says, taken from the perspective of the "inner gate of oneness," God represents complete transcendent unity, or if you prefer, the unity of nothingness, because it does not refer to any one thing or even a collection of things. From this standpoint, God is more verb than noun, and the divine name can best be translated as "was-is-will be," for it "contain[s] all of time in eternal presence."ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, let's get to what Green calls God's "outer gate."^{iv} He presents this idea through the second and final sentence of the Shema:

‘Blessed is the name of God’s glorious kingdom forever and ever!’ This is the lower unity ... the one *within* the many. We refer to it as the unity of God’s kingdom. Here we encounter God’s oneness *in* and *through* the world, not despite it. Each flower, each blade of grass, each human soul, is a new manifestation of divinity, a new unfolding of the cosmic One that ever reveals itself through its multicolored garments, in each moment taking on new and ever-changing forms of life. ... Existence here is celebrated in variety, in specificity, rather than in vast sameness. This God too represents infinity, but the infinity of One-in-many. ‘The whole earth is filled with God’s glory.’^v

The outer gate, then, is the same God as the inner gate, but this time, the divine is not viewed as a single unity but rather as a complex, interconnected web of worldly beings. Green states that these two perspectives “stand in dialectical relations to one another; they represent the same finely wrought transparent vessel, here seen in emptiness, here in fullness.”^{vi} “Our religious task,” he concludes, “is to see through to the oneness of these two truths, to recognize that the one beyond and the one within are the same One.”^{vii}

Clearly, Green sees his theology as being outside of the mainstream of Jewish tradition. Why else would he have named one of his books “Radical Judaism”? Yet Green locates the roots of his panentheist teachings in the views of the early-Hasidic sages of the 18th

century. The phrases, “The whole earth is filled with His glory! There is no place devoid of Him!” are core Hasidic teachings.^{viii} Even today, Orthodox Hasids commonly adopt panentheism, refusing to buy into the traditionally rigid wall of separation between the so-called “Creator” and the “Creation.” But Green’s heresy goes *well* beyond that. According to Green,

the faith in a transcendent and personal God (that is, a God conceived in personalist terms), no longer satisfies our religious needs. The parental, royal, and pastoral metaphors we have inherited ... are not adequate for describing the relationship between God and world as we experience and understand it. Providence ... is not ... the center of our faith. The terrible course of Jewish history in our century has made this conventional Western religious viewpoint impossible, even blasphemous, for us. If there is a God of history, an independent all-powerful Being who shapes the historic process, such a God’s indifference to human – and Jewish – suffering might lead us to cynicism or despair, but not to worship.^{ix}

As you can see, this respected neo-Hasid has taken a fateful step away from the teachings of the traditional Hasidic communities. Green styles himself as a modern, even post-modernist, thinker, who has adopted a Judaism that dares to take into account both the teachings of modern science and the stubborn facts of history, including the profound

truths of the Holocaust. Gone, as you might suspect, is the notion that all events flow from God's mercy and justice. In fact, it would be difficult to reconcile what Green has said about the "inner gate" of the divine with positing *any* human-like qualities as part of God's essence. For example, Green's philosophy even limits God's free will. He asks if God is able to choose whether or not to create, or if God is better viewed as possessing a nature that "require[es] a flowing forth of the stream of life."^x Green's answer is indeed the invocation of *necessity*; the path, in other words, of Spinoza.

Those of you who have been steeped in Spinoza, but not Green, must be wondering at this point whether Green simply decided to lift Spinoza's entire philosophy and pass it off as his own. By the end of this talk, you will see just how far from the truth that is. For now, let it suffice to point out a superficial difference between the two thinkers: Spinoza never adopted the term "panentheism," as it had not come into our lexicon until well after his death. Even today, Spinoza scholars debate whether he was really a panentheist or whether he was instead, a "simple pantheist" whose God in no meaningful respect transcends the world.

With the rise of the atheist/humanist movement, we can see Spinoza's panentheism questioned on a regular basis. Adherents of that movement realize how much they can benefit from adopting great heretical thinkers from by-gone eras, and Spinoza is about as heretical as

they come. He did, after all, famously use the phrase “God *or* Nature,” suggesting to some that his God *is* nature – nothing more and nothing less. To the humanist, the difference between Spinoza’s pantheism and their own humanism is merely a semantic one. They would argue that while Spinoza uses the term God and they use the term nature, neither believes that anything exists that transcends nature, and in that sense, both are truly atheists, at least in the way the rest of the world defines God. That would explain why Richard Dawkins, in *The God Delusion*, refers to the “pantheism” of Spinoza and his disciple, Einstein, as “sexed-up atheism.”

Personally, I belong to a school of thought that views Spinoza to be every bit as panentheistic as Green. In other words, I see Spinoza as neither an atheist nor a simple pantheist. It is true that Spinoza referred to God as “nature,” but he also referred to God as “substance.” Substance, in Spinoza, represents the *ground* of Being or existence. It is a perspective on God that can be contrasted to what we mean by nature -- the sum of all animals, vegetables, minerals, particles (in other words, what we mean by natural forms), or for that matter to the sum of all thoughts. For Spinoza, those things and thoughts are all examples of the infinite ways in which substance expresses itself. We human beings are thus mere expressions of God as substance, which underlies who and what we are.

Spinoza sees substance as necessarily infinite,^{xi} indivisible^{xii} and eternal.^{xiii} It is simple creative energy or power, which unifies all that has existed, does exist or will exist. To use Spinoza's words, "the eternal does not admit of 'when' or 'before' or 'after,'^{xiv} and every worldly form exists just as it must because it is grounded in the creative nature of the divine substance.

Spinoza uses the term *Natura naturans* – literally, "nature naturing" -- to refer to God insofar as God is substance (or the creative ground of Being). And he uses the term *Natura naturata* – literally, "nature natured" -- to refer to God's expressions, which include nature as we know it and all the mental conceptions that accompany physical forms. So there you have it: two perspectives on the same God – as active and as passive. Spinoza sees the ground of Being (or substance) as God insofar as God is active, and he sees the world as we know it (animals, vegetables, minerals, thoughts) as God insofar as God is passive, or understood through the expressions of the divine power. Substance, Spinoza thought, expresses itself based on its own creative nature. As for notions like "intellect ... will, desire, [and] love," Spinoza tells us that they apply only to God as *passive* nature, or *naturata*, and not to substance itself.^{xv} In other words, for Spinoza, the world of our perceptions is like an infinite array of photographs or snapshots – the real source of the action, the unified substance of it all, is

beyond our ability to perceive, but we can infer its existence through logical reasoning.

Before I continue discussing Spinoza's panentheism, let me note that Green did not explicitly adopt all of Spinoza's doctrines. But time and time again, you can hear echoes of Spinoza's metaphysics in Green's writings, which postdate Spinoza's death by three centuries.

In the notion of substance, or *Natura naturans*, you thus have what may aptly be called a transcendent element in Spinoza's philosophy. This element is clearly at the heart of Spinoza's God. His "substance" is literally the indivisible, timeless creative force, uniquely infinite in all respects, which underlies and powers every discrete being that shall ever exist in any dimension of reality. Atheists to my knowledge do not hold to the belief in such a power, and in fact I would argue that it requires a leap of faith to do so, despite all of Spinoza's attempts to prove its existence with the logical precision of a mathematician. Without taking that leap, we may well view reality as a realm of universal multiplicity, tied together by common properties perhaps, but ultimately existing purely as a collection of separate forms without anything that truly glues them together.

Further drumming in the notion that his "God" is more than just the sum of earthly forms, Spinoza taught that God has infinite attributes of which we know merely two, extension and thought.^{xvi} To Spinoza, the world as we know it – the world of matter and mind – is but a tiny

domain when compared to the totality of the infinite God. Of course, one could argue that those dimensions of existence which give rise to other, hidden attributes are really part of the same “nature” in which we all knowingly partake. But the common parlance would be to acknowledge that those dimensions “transcend” our perceptive powers. Thus, once you start recognizing in God not only dimensions of reality that transcend our perceptive realm but also a unifying power that transcends multiplicity itself, you have posited an altogether different reality than that which is recognized by the *scientific* mind.

In short, Spinoza and Green both appreciate that a panentheistic God may be conceived through two perspectives: as the unique, indivisible, creative ground of Being; and as sum of all expressions of that creative ground, whether we are able to perceive them (in the case of mind and body) or whether they transcend our perceptive powers. To these panentheists, God is the dialectical synthesis of these two perspectives. The Hidden One and the All-in-One conceived as the highest unity of them all – the One-and-Only. Again, semantically, one person could refer to that synthesis simply as “nature,” just as another could make up another name for it, like the “Absolute Synthesis.” But whenever you join Spinoza and Green and invoke a venerated, emotionally-laden name for that Absolute Synthesis -- the name of *God* - - and whenever you teach that this God should be the object of the greatest love of all, not only have you laid the groundwork for stripping

God of all human-like qualities, but you have also clearly removed yourself from the realm of atheism, sexed-up or otherwise. This could explain why Spinoza, at the end of his *Ethics*, referred to the intellectual love of God as the state of “blessedness.” It is a religious word befitting an affirmatively religious ethics.

III. The Divergence – Panentheism-the-Philosophy Versus Panentheism-the-Theology

Spinoza was a Jew and a Torah scholar. Yet he based his conclusions about God on rigorous logical reasoning, rather than the teachings of Scripture or later Jewish theology. The result is that we associate him today with Western philosophy and not the religion of Judaism. In Rabbi Green, we have an example of a Jewish theologian whose core philosophy was set forth in Spinoza’s *Ethics* in far greater depth and clarity than it had otherwise appeared in the annals of Jewish theology. But did Green, in the fundamental statements of his *theology*, ever credit Spinoza for anticipating or grounding his own philosophy? Of course not.^{xvii} The only time Green references Spinoza either in *Radical Judaism* or *Seek My Face* was to blast the way Spinoza interpreted the Torah. For example, Green says that “We stand in open conflict with Spinoza’s insistence that the Bible must be treated just like any other document, its words meaning what critical scrutiny seems to indicate, and nothing more.”^{xviii} With that statement, Green indicated that for all his self-proclaimed “radicalism,” he was indeed speaking to

us as a text-based, religious Jew – as a theologian, and not a mere philosopher like Spinoza.

Spinoza is a hero among students of philosophy today because he followed Socrates in striving to follow the truth wherever and whenever it leads. Sometimes, it would lead to heresy, and Spinoza would say as much, in terms that were direct, provocative and guaranteed to make him a marked man throughout his lifetime and beyond. That, my friends, is a radical.

Arthur Green is a great rabbi and a good man, but he is no radical. For years, his same approach has been employed in progressive synagogues all over the United States. That approach is far from Orthodox Judaism to be sure, but then again, most Jews are not Orthodox. What Green and his fellow mainstream, progressive clerics deliver is an alternative to Orthodoxy that seeks to avoid its most obviously antiquated feature – the idea that the world as we know it is the product of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent deity who acts in accordance with a merciful, just and ultimately inscrutable will. What these clerics don't do is explain their alternative as clearly and coherently as did Spinoza. For if they did, they would have to confront the issue of whether many of the traditional Jewish teachings and prayers are better off being attacked as false than reinterpreted as deeper truths. That's what true radicals or heretics do – they slay sacred cows. Arthur Green is more of a pragmatist. He would rather identify

whatever beauty can be found in cow worshipping and suggest how it can be harmonized with God worshipping by changing the meaning of the rituals and prayers. What we are left with is nice poetry, but incoherent philosophy, when it is examined in the light of the statements that we have already considered.

In the Introduction to *Seek My Face*, Green reveals his intentions – to find a balance between tradition and truth. It’s the same balance that Jewish thinkers have sought since the time of Maimonides, who wrote that tradition was for “women, children and common people,” who can’t comprehend the truth.^{xix} Green said that he will be searching for truth, while at the same time

turning to the wisdom and language of religious tradition ...[which is] shrouded in mystery and awe. ... Ultimately, we will strike a bargain, [between] the tradition and the seeker. I will enter into ...[Biblical] language ... not as a literal ‘believer’ but rather as one who recognizes that all these [Biblical] ‘events’ are themselves metaphors for a truth whose depth reaches far beyond them.^{xx}

We have seen one result of this “bargain” – Green has grounded his metaphysics in Spinozistic panentheism. But when it comes time to apply the lessons from Jewish tradition, he largely undermines the thrust of that philosophy. This begins by refusing to follow Spinoza’s lead by ridiculing the practice of humanizing God.

“A triangle, if it could speak,” Spinoza said, “would likewise say that God is eminently triangular, and a circle that God’s nature is eminently circular.”^{xxi} By contrast, Green states sympathetically that “We cannot live with a faceless God. ... For us ... God needs to have a human face.”^{xxii} How human? Consider that this post-Holocaust Jew, in connection with praising the “language of love,” reminds us of the “great single love of God that animates the cosmos.”^{xxiii} Green goes on to explain that “compassion is divine,” for “it is the presence of Y-H-W-H within us that causes us to give, to love generously, and to care.”^{xxiv} And then he cites with sympathy the teaching that “The Compassionate One desires the heart.”^{xxv}

Note that when Green makes such proclamations about God’s inherently loving nature, he refrains from clarifying whether he is talking about God as an active, indivisible power or God as the sum of worldly forms. Unlike Spinoza, who routinely announces which perspective on God he is speaking about, Green conflates the two. Thus, we are left to guess for ourselves whether he is talking about *Natura naturans* or *Natura naturata*, when he speaks of God as “the eternal source of inner light. As the One calls us into being, so does it cry out from within us to seek out its light in others, to brighten the light that glows within ourselves, and to draw others to that light.”^{xxvi} (As a Spinozist, I have to ask: is that what happened during the Holocaust? Is that what is happening in the Middle East, or for that matter, on Capitol

Hill? In other words, should God really be associated more with the “light” than the darkness?” Aren’t they both part of the One-and-Only?)

Green the metaphysician might agree with Spinoza. But Green the theologian is offering us a metaphysics that is as warm and uplifting as Spinoza’s is cold and hard-headed. Green’s uplifting message continues with the central role that he assigns to the concept of *evolution*. Despite the existence of black holes and stars going nova, Green teaches that evolution is the greatest of all religious dramas. To Green, the force of God strives “relentlessly, though by no means perfectly, toward greater complexity and consciousness.”^{xxvii} This, Green suggests, is a “new narrative of Creation” that we should be able to embrace today.^{xxviii}

What Green has done is simply shelve the old metaphors about a foreboding God above and replace them with a softer God who reigns deep within our bodies and souls. To quote Green “the God who speaks in thunder is ... still the one who dwells in heaven and atop the highest peak. We are seeking a more fully *internalized* version of that foot-of-the-mountain experience.”^{xxix} Though benevolent, Green’s internalized God is limited in power to beatify this earth. He requires a partner, and yes, that’s where we human beings come in. We exist to supply the added compassion and energy that is necessary to re-create Eden throughout the world. This is what Green means by saying that “religion is the human fulfillment of the divine will or purpose.”^{xxx}

As you can see, Green has simply replaced one cosmic narrative with another, and he has done so by utilizing virtually the full panoply of Jewish metaphors. At different points, he provides sympathetic, though reconstructed, interpretations of the concept of the Creation story,^{xxxix} the Messiah,^{xxxix} revelation,^{xxxix} Eden (158), miracles,^{xxxix} Tsimtsim (the self-contraction of God),^{xxxix} (178), the Ayekah (God calling out to us “Where are You?”),^{xxxix} (27-29), God as “Father” and “King,”^{xxxix} and the idea of human beings as the images of God.^{xxxix} Green has the opportunity to criticize these ideas, but in each case, he embraces them. And he is not alone – rabbis from Reconstructionist, Jewish Renewal and Reform synagogues frequently employ the same approach: re-interpret, don’t reject! Far from being Radical Judaism, I’d prefer to call it Will Rogers Judaism: these clerics have virtually never met a traditional Jewish word or phrase that they didn’t like, though they reserve the right to change its meaning however they see fit. There is, of course, one Jewish concept they won’t reconstruct, the bugaboo of every progressive Jew – the concept that Jews are God’s chosen people. That one is unsafe at any speed.

IV. Giving the Philosophers and the Theologians Their Due and No More

Ken Wilbur has written that we must “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, to Einstein what is Einstein’s, to Picasso what is Picasso’s, to Kant what is Kant’s, and to Christ what is Christ’s.”^{xxxix} That is a nice

way of saying that Green was right that critical decisions invariably involve bargains, and we always need to be balanced – we always need to recognize that when we devote our heart and mind exclusively to one discipline, whether it's economics, theology or yes, philosophy, we will have missed the boat. Just as no person or movement should have a monopoly on the meaning of "God," no discipline should have a monopoly on our approach to enlightenment. Religion and philosophy both have their proper place.

Green's failure, in my view, doesn't come from the fact that he was striking a bargain with philosophy but from the manner in which he struck it. He appreciates that at time after Voltaire, Darwin and Hitler, Biblical literalism will fail to speak to many of us, for we have proclaimed ourselves rationalists and have rationally observed our connection both to monkeys and to madmen. Nevertheless, the metaphorical interpretations that Green has substituted for Biblical literalism don't exactly reflect a willingness to give philosophy the full respect it deserves. When you combine Green-the-philosopher with Green-the-theologian, what you get is an incoherent mish-mash – rationalist one moment, Pollyanish the next. As we've seen, when he's not referring to "the conventional religious viewpoint" as "blasphemous," he's adopting so many conventional religious concepts that he can theologically embrace nearly all the traditional Jewish prayers.

The truth seeker in me doesn't believe that Green has allotted philosophy its proper place. We need philosophy in order to harmonize our thoughts and feelings as much as possible with our highest vision of the truth. Philosophy impels us to be courageous in opening our eyes to that vision, and rigorous in our devotion to what that vision entails. It asks us to strive to be logical, consistent, and self-critical. And with respect to these points, there is never a legitimate reason to make a compromise. But that hardly makes philosophy all powerful. It need not, for example, restrict our ability to live emotionally, physically, socially and spiritually rich lives.

It is easy to criticize Green from the standpoint of logical consistency. And yet the fundamental task of a philosopher who reads Green is not to do what I've done – to point out his limitations and mistakes – but rather to find the beauty in what he has said. In my view, Green has written much that we can use to build on Spinoza's relatively pure, consistent and hard-headed approach to panentheism.

Consider that Spinoza gives us an ethics centered on neurobiology, in which all of our actions are necessarily founded on selfishness, for neurons are selfish. Green, for his part, gives us a valuable complement – a heart-based ethics centered on compassion. From an ethical standpoint, if not a metaphysical one, can we really say too much about the importance of compassion? Does a balanced philosophy not require

us to appreciate that if reason must be our keel in life, empathy should be our rudder?

And speaking of compassion, or love, Spinoza taught that what is central to our blessedness is our ability to intellectually love God. But as Green reminds us, optimal spirituality requires not merely intellectual love, but also *awe*. Even though Spinoza never emphasized that emotion, there is nothing in his philosophy that compels us to neglect its value. In fact, I might even argue that our capacity for awe is more heightened when it comes to Spinoza's conception of God than Green's counterpart. Green would have us especially revere the interior of the world, which he implies is more divine than the world of our senses. But to Spinoza, we don't live in a realm of levels of reality in which God is associated primarily with the unknowable abyss. Instead, we associate his God equally with every earthly form that we encounter – every thought, every physical object. And we would be wise to realize that all such forms are exactly as they must be, unique expressions of a God whose power extends infinitely in every direction we can imagine and an infinite number we cannot. Why wouldn't such a God be worthy of awe? And if we are at all capable of the emotion of gratitude, why wouldn't such a God be worthy of worship as well? If anyone tells you that “worship” would not be an appropriate response for such a non-humanlike God, I would say that they are inappropriately narrowing what we can mean by “worship,” just as the monopolists have

inappropriately narrowed the concept of “God.” Green has much to say about the magical power of that latter word, and on that point, I personally cannot agree with him more.

Part of the power of the word God is that it easily lends itself to becoming a *name*, and as such, it truly does call out to be *encountered*, not merely studied. This is an idea that was never really explicated in Spinoza. And while there are many who believe that Spinoza in his personal life may have been a *mystical* panentheist, just as Green calls himself, Spinoza was hardly clear about his devotion to mystical practices. Philosophers shouldn’t fear those practices; in fact, the contemplation to which they lead can fulfill us intellectually as well as emotionally.

Perhaps most importantly, Green’s teachings serve as a reminder that the whole notion of personal enlightenment should not be our sole goal in life, though it would be easy to forget this point when you read such philosophy books as Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Marx, whose radicalism rivals that of Spinoza, famously taught that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”^{x1}

Green, who recognizes the fundamental religious importance of the *deed* even above that of knowledge, has demonstrated his commitment to making the world “whole” through, among other things, his environmentalism, vegetarianism, universalism, pacifism, and commitment to economic equity. If he had distinguished as religiously

as did Spinoza between God as *Natura naturans* and God as *Natura naturata*, Green could have built on his predecessor's teachings to show that while human efforts to transform our planet may be of no moment to God from the standpoint of *naturans*, they are vitally important from the standpoint of *naturata*. As Green's teacher Heschel might say, when we look at God through the world of God's infinite expressions, human beings truly are a *divine need* – a point that Spinoza never made.

So remember, just as philosophy has its proper place, so too do our theologians' efforts to lift up the world rather than simply to contemplate and discuss it.

For me, the real tragedy of progressive theologians like Green is not that they have little to offer us that philosophers haven't already provided. They have a whole wealth of spiritual gifts in their bag. The problem is that by failing to recognize the proper place of philosophy – as the vital keel to the vessels on which we travel through this life – these theologians have become irrelevant *as theologians* to the vast majority of educated human beings. No, most educated people today are not philosophers. They're not even students of philosophy. But they do live in a post-enlightenment world, and they do recognize philosophical mish-mash and evasion when they see it.

I try to imagine most people I know reading Green's statements about the "inner gate" of God -- the higher inscrutable unity in which the power of both Heschel and Hitler resides, and which acts out of

necessity rather than free will. And then I imagine these contemporary readers noticing Green's comments about how we are made in God's Compassionate image and have been put on the earth to fulfill the "divine will or purpose." I suspect these readers would be struck above all else by the incoherence of the message. And we cannot expect them to believe in such a conception of God if it is stocked with internal inconsistencies. Green is hardly alone as a cleric in trying to have his cake and eat it too when it comes to grappling with the Divine. As a result, it is not surprising that I so often hear members of progressive synagogues admit that while they don't believe in God or see themselves as religious, they attend their synagogue for cultural reasons and because they like being part of a community that shares similar social values.

So, from my standpoint as a devout panentheist, the tragedy here is that without a solid, coherent philosophy as its foundation, progressive Judaism has lost its proper place as a vehicle to help people connect with God. And this is why for all of Green's work, and all the teachings of other neo-Hasids, panentheism remains a fringe theology. To me, it might actually grow in popularity if Green were willing to embrace and build upon his core philosophy – in other words, his Spinozism -- rather than hide from it. Green has demonstrated that a person *can* be a theologian without embracing all the traditional prayers and concepts. After all, he doesn't do gymnastics to adopt the idea of Jewish "chosenness." Green knows how to blow hot, but he also knows how to blow

cold. And that's all a philosopher can ask of the theological community – that, and to have the courage to blow cold more often, in the name of logical consistency, clarity and truth.

As for Green's penchant for redefining terms, I can't exactly find fault with that. Spinoza redefined terms. In fact, the whole panentheist project rests on the decision to redefine a term, at least to a degree. The issue is not the willingness to redefine, but the lack of willingness to stop redefining and start attacking when appropriate.

Spinoza understood that truth. And that is one reason why, just as Goethe once called him *Christianisimum*, the most Christian, I would argue that he is among the most Jewish. To be sure, Spinoza was no Moses, for he was not devoted to the Torah as our people's eternal law. Yet Spinoza does resemble Moses' Patriarch, who we know as Abraham. After all, both Abraham and Spinoza were Jews, men of God, men of truth, men of courage, men of conviction, slayers of sacred cows, and ultimately, fathers of religious philosophies that have stood the test of time. It will be up to rabbis who follow Green to give Spinoza's religious philosophy its proper place as an honored alternative in our spiritual marketplace of ideas. And it will be up to philosophers who study Spinoza to give Green's theology its proper place as a helpful supplement to the overly intellectualized geometrical proofs and hard-hearted conclusions in Spinoza's majestic *Ethics*.

V. Conclusion

Let me conclude with the words of a wise woman who sadly is venerated neither as a philosopher nor as a theologian, but who is nevertheless beloved. There are those who claim she isn't real; but then again, you often hear the same about God, and no panentheist could take that seriously either.

The sage to whom I refer is the great Wilma Flintstone. Wilma once repeated the old saw, "Men, can't live with 'em; can't live without 'em." Well, the same thing could surely be said for theologians. It is up to us students of philosophy to find the best ones, learn from them, love them, and yet hold their feet to the fire when necessary. Knowing what we know about Wilma and her husband, I'm sure she understood these points all too well.

ⁱ *Radical Judaism (RJ)*, Arthur Green (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), at 18.

ⁱⁱ *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology (SMF)*, Arthur Green (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), at 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ *RJ* at 76; *SMF* at 16-17, 109.

^{iv} *SMF* at 5.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} *Ibid.*

^{viii} See *RJ* at 67.

^{ix} *SMF* at 13.

^x *Ibid.* at 92.

^{xi} *Ethics*, Baruch Spinoza, Part I, Proposition 8. Quotations from the *Ethics* and other writings of Spinoza are taken from *Spinoza: Complete Works*, Samuel Shirley translator (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002).

^{xii} *Ibid.*, Part 1, Proposition 13.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, Part 1, Proposition 19.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, Part I, Proposition 33, Scholium 2.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, Part I, Proposition 31.

^{xvi} See *Ibid.*, Part II, Propositions 1-2.

^{xvii} Personally, I have no reason to believe that Green is a Spinoza scholar or that Spinoza's metaphysical teachings influenced Green's thinking. What is striking, however, is the extent to which Spinoza did anticipate Green's core philosophical beliefs.

^{xviii} *SMF* at 116.

^{xix} Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), pp. 81-82. Here is the complete quotation:

The Torah speaks the language of man, as we have explained, for it is the object of the Torah to serve as a guide for the instruction of the young, of women, and of the common people; and as all of them are incapable to comprehend the true sense of the words, tradition was considered sufficient to convey all truths which were to be established, and as regard ideals, only such remarks were made as would lead towards a knowledge of their existence, though not to a comprehension of their true essence.

^{xx} *SMF* at xxii.

^{xxi} Letter 56, to Hugo Boxel from Spinoza.

^{xxii} *SMF* at 31.

^{xxiii} *RJ* at 75.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.* at 93.

^{xxv} *SMF* at 156.

^{xxvi} *Ibid.* at 153.

^{xxvii} *Ibid.* at 50. See also *ibid* at 122.

^{xxviii} *Ibid.* at 51.

^{xxxix} *Ibid.* at 106.

^{xxx} *Ibid.* at 123.

^{xxxix} *Ibid.* at 49-52, 158.

^{xxxii} *Ibid.* at 174-180.

^{xxxiii} *Ibid.* at 110-112.

^{xxxiv} *RJ* at 21.

^{xxxv} *SMF* at 178-179.

^{xxxvi} *RJ* at 27-29.

^{xxxvii} *Ibid.* at 47-49.

^{xxxviii} *Ibid.* at 29; *SMF* at 123.

^{xxxix} *Integral Spirituality*, Ken Wilbur (Boston: Integral Books, 2007), 194.

^{xl} *Theses on Feuerbach*, Karl Marx, Section XI.