Freedom and Determinism in *Middlemarch*, or Dorothea, the Lunatic

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In a recent monograph, Pauline Nestor asks if George Eliot continues to be relevant to us today. Contrary to some, who argue that Eliot "lives in a distant and unrecoverable country of her own."[1] Nestor insists that Eliot's fiction "forms an extended, particularized and dramatic investigation of fundamental ethical problems", especially those concerning ethical responsibility.[2] I am in broad agreement with Nestor's treatment of Eliot and in this paper will focus on the ethical problem of freedom and determinism as presented in *Middlemarch*. Let me add at the outset that I judge Eliot's understanding of the *embodied* dimension of ethical life to bind her closely to some strands of contemporary ethical philosophy. More on this later.

What do I mean by the ethical problem of freedom and determinism? Briefly, I refer to the problem raised by treating human being immanently, that is, as fully part of nature. If we do not stand above or outside nature then surely the same laws that govern the rest of nature must govern us? In other words, we must be part of a deterministic system. This "evolutionary", or "godless", view was familiar to Eliot. As is well known, she translated various works of Spinoza, Strauss, and Feuerbach, and was well acquainted with Comte's positivist view of human history as a path of progress through the ages of religion and metaphysics to science.

While there is certainly room for disagreement about Eliot's view of human nature, I am inclined to read her as a Spinozist on the issue of freedom. On his view, although free *will* is an illusion, freedom is not. Moreover, freedom itself assumes

rather than contradicts a determined universe. If our acts are to deserve the designation "free" then there had better be an ordered world in which such acts will be efficacious. As Spinoza put it "liberty … does not take away the necessity of acting, but supposes it."[3] Put differently, my freedom to plan my life assumes a degree of consistency in the conditions that frame my actions. For Spinoza, and I would argue for Eliot too, freedom crucially depends on acquiring some understanding of the circumstances within which I act. This view, however, commits neither Spinoza nor Eliot to a hard determinism in the context of human sociability. Both thinkers conceived of society in broadly "organic" terms but both viewed the social rules, norms and other determining conditions of specifically sociable existence to be marked by historical and cultural variation and diversity. Rules and norms may be broken, natural laws cannot. Nevertheless, social rules and norms may act to both enable and constrain human action with extraordinary force. Often, this force is as implacable as any law of nature. It is Eliot's demonstration of the implacability of social norms in provincial Middlemarch that I will take as the determining circumstances against which its various inhabitants pitch their character and so test the limits of their freedom. This freedom, I will argue, is intrinsically ethically structured. It is what links each to each as an embodied moral actor participating in an historically specific moral community. If we take seriously the idea that Eliot viewed society "organically" and as "incarnate history"[4] then we must also concede that the possibilities open to social actors are, in some sense, embodied in their contexts.

Eliot's account of the normative forces that constrain action in *Middlemarch* is often signalled by the metaphors of weaving or of a web. Whether caught in the finest gossamer strands or the thickest and stickiest threads, no character escapes the overall design of the web. Lydgate, for example, despite

assuring Farebrother that he means to remain independent in order to pursue his science, soon begins to feel "the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity."[5] Whether they acknowledge it or not, this is the destiny of all the characters – each is not only caught in the web but each is also necessarily complicit in the ongoing task of spinning the web. [6] Such complicity and interdependence is the price exacted for inclusion in the human community.[7] Eliot shows, again and again, the ways in which the freedom of each is conditioned by the freedom of every other. The moral development of any character in *Middlemarch* can be shown to be constrained or enabled by the choices made by others in the community. Of course, understanding these threads in normative rather than juridical terms means that the web may be torn. But norm violation attracts heavy costs. As Farebrother remarks: "If a man goes a little too far along a new road, it is usually himself that he harms more than any one else." (601) In spite of the use of 'man' and the male pronoun in this quotation, it is my contention that it is Dorothea Brooke who travels the 'new road' and who risks most through her willingness to break the 'threadlike pressure' of what passes for 'normality' and everyday 'decency' in Middlemarch.

Recall the opening pages of *Middlemarch* where Dorothea is described as 'remarkably clever' but lacking common-sense; who, although enjoying good "birth and fortune" could be found kneeling "on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer" praying; who was capable of "fasting like a Papist, and of sitting up at night to read old theological books"; whose idea of the ideal husband was someone who could be "a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it". In sum, Dorothea was "too unusual and striking" to gain the approval of Middlemarch. (pp. 7-10) But recall too the astute authorial observation, inserted in the middle of the description

of Dorothea: "Sane people did what their neighbours did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them." (9) Dorothea is, in this sense, a "lunatic" and the ideally feminine Rosamond is the embodiment of sanity.[8] Dorothea's exercise of the freedom that is available to her consistently involves breaking with the normative expectations of the Middlemarch community. Here, I will briefly mention four sets of norms that she violates.

Norms of femininity: She finds little interest in the occupations appropriate to her sex (embroidery, music, etc). Her judgement on such skills (that pass as accomplishments in Mrs Lemon's school for ladies) is nicely captured in the scene where she refuses Sir James' gift of "one of nature's most naive toys", a Maltese puppy. "It is painful to me to see these creatures that are bred merely as pets." says Dorothea "I believe all the petting that is given them does not make them happy. They are too helpless: their lives are too frail. A weasel or a mouse that gets its own living is more interesting. … Those creatures are parasitic." (28) It is worth noting here that Dorothea's beloved Monk, a St Bernard, and this lap dog do share a common nature – no doubt some "wolfish" ancestor. But one has been bred for strength, the other for decoration. Each creature embodies its past breeding and conditions of life and although it is possible that some future relative of Monk's may come to resemble the Maltese puppy more than Monk, Monk himself is incapable of being a lapdog. I believe Eliot's insistence on showing the limitations to Dorothea's freedom, (or, for that matter, the freedom of any other character in *Middlemarch*), derives from a similar insight to that provided by the difference between Monk and the puppy. In both cases, a significant passage of time is involved in transforming the one kind of creature into the other. Dorothea's resistance to the gendered norms of Middlemarch is a crucial step in bringing about such transformation.

Norms of the landowning class Dorothea stands apart from those of her class in the concern she shows for the tenants. Not only does she engage in amateur architectural planning for new housing for them, she also is actively involved in providing schooling for the tenants' children. While Mr Brooke may concern himself with the big picture politics of the time, especially the Reform Act of 1832, his tenants live in poverty and decrepitude. Dorothea wishes to reform the conditions of those around her, those whom she can see and feel are in need. Meanwhile, Brooke, and the 'masculine' world generally, preoccupy themselves with the abstract idea of reform.

Norms of marriage: Although some have complained that Dorothea's life options are few - marriage being the most obvious - one should not lose sight of the transgressive nature of the actual marriage choices she does make. Her desire to "lead a grand life here – now – in England" is what drives her choice of Casaubon as husband. As she naively muses: "There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal" (27) Her marriage to Ladislaw is even more transgressive. Initially, neither Ladislaw nor Dorothea can see how it is possible for them to marry. Neither can see their way around "the crowd of indifferent objects" and the "world of reasons" [that] "thrust them asunder." (597) The fact that this marriage involves the ultimate punishment for transgressing social mores – exile from one's community – should not be overlooked.

Norms of friendship: The norms of gender Eliot presents prohibit friendship between the sexes. The friendship that develops between Dorothea and Lydgate represents an enormous normative shift in ethical relations between the sexes. Dorothea's faith in Lydgate and her courage in speaking

up publicly for him when all around (including his own wife) doubt his honour, puts her at the moral core of *Middlemarch*. Bulstrode's loss of reputation is structurally inevitable in the unfolding narrative of *Middlemarch.* But Lydgate's association with Bulstrode is the result of choices Lydgate makes himself. His honour and reputation are put at the mercy of the scandalmongers, in part, through his own actions. In great need of a friend, Lydgate is helped not by his male peers but by Dorothea, whose confidence in her own capacity to play this role derives from her belief that "nothing could have seemed more irrelevant … than insistence on her youth and sex when she was moved to show her human fellowship." (716) Lydgate's response to Dorothea's belief in his honour warrants study: "It was the first assurance of belief in him that had fallen on Lydgate's ears. He drew a deep breath, and said, 'Thank you.' He could say no more: it was something very new and strange in his life that these few words of trust *from a woman* should be so much to him." (717) And later, when he reflects on this exchange with Dorothea, he thinks, "She seems to have what I never saw in any woman before – a fountain of friendship towards men – a man can make a friend of her." (723) From a contemporary perspective, it may be tempting to trivialise this encounter, but taking account of the norms of the time, I wish to stress the transgressive nature of this friendship and see in it an ethical advance in relations between the sexes.[9]

Does Dorothea's challenge to the norms of Middlemarch society seem trivial alongside her aspiration to lead a 'grand life here – now – in England'? Does it make her a 'lunatic'? Certainly, these acts are difficult to compare with the grandeur of a St Theresa or an Antigone. But such comparisons, arguably encouraged by the text itself (see "Prelude", pp. 3-4 and "Finale", p. 785), miss the point. If one's actions are conditioned by one's circumstances as well as by one's character, then the question Eliot leaves hanging in her

"Finale" deserves a carefully considered response: "Many who knew [Dorothea], thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in certain circles as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else *that was in her power* she ought rather to have done." (783) So, let us now confront, directly, the idea that Eliot often failed to provide her female characters with meaningful or non-traditional life options but rather allowed them to be defeated by circumstance.

My view is that such readings fail to note Eliot's commitment to portray her characters truthfully and realistically *in situ*. Moreover, they fail to consider Eliot's view of social change as a matter of slow 'evolution' rather than rapid "revolution".[10] To get a clearer picture of my view it may be useful to reflect again on Eliot's use of the framing device of the 1832 Reform Act. This Act is indisputably an important part of history. It heralded, if not directly delivered, the expansion of the democratising impulse in the West. But Eliot's astute political sense continues to ask the hard questions: how do we get from here – the present, to there – the future? How can present conditions of life promote new, improved ways of life? Consider one example of Eliot's exploration of social transformation in *Middlemarch*. Dagley's spirited chastisement of Brooke, his landlord, reveals much more than Brooke's failure to adequately provide for his tenant and his family. It also shows that Dagley's capabilities are very much limited by his social and economic circumstances. Dagley's capacity to grasp the Reform Act is very limited and his appreciation of the role that the King will play in forcing Brooke to treat his tenants decently would be risible were it not so tragic. Consider Eliot's reflections on Dagley's circumstances and his freedom to alter them:

> Some who follow the narrative of his experience may wonder at the midnight darkness of Mr Dagley; but nothing was easier

> in those times than for an hereditary farmer of his grade to be ignorant, in spite somehow of having a rector in the twin parish who was a gentleman to the backbone, a curate nearer at hand who preached more learnedly than the rector, a landlord who had gone into everything, especially fine art and social improvement, and all the lights of Middlemarch only three miles off. As to the facility with which mortals escape knowledge, try an average acquaintance in the intellectual blaze of London, and consider what that eligible person for a dinner party would have been if he had learned scant skill in 'summing' from the parish-clerk of Tipton, and read a chapter in the Bible with immense difficulty, because such names as Isaiah or Apollos remained unmanageable after twice spelling. Poor Dagley read a few verses sometimes on a Sunday evening, and the world was at least not darker to him than it had been before. Some things he knew thoroughly, namely, the slovenly habits of farming, and the awkwardnesses of weather, stock and crops, at Freeman's End – so called apparently by way of sarcasm, to imply that a man was free to quit it if he chose, but that there was no earthly 'beyond' open to him. (373)

Dagley's story is reason enough for us to concur with Eliot that the social state that frames choices in *Middlemarch* is indeed "imperfect." (784) But what would improve this social state? Given time, the Reform Act will bring improvement. But meanwhile, Eliot links Dagley's conditions of life to those with whom he is most directly connected: the rector, the curate, the landlord, the inhabitants of Middlemarch, and the parish-clerk. Eliot's focus on the everyday mores and the micro-political relations between Middlemarchers of all classes and both sexes highlights the ethical responsibilities of each person, as well as the way in which the freedom of each is connected to the freedom of every other. *Middlemarch* offers a history of the everyday acts that will, in time, become the determining past of its future possibilities. As she writes in the epigraph to chapter LXX, "Our deeds still travel with us

from afar,/ And what we have been makes us what we are." (660) It is in this way that Eliot values the cumulatively embodied history of our acts over the abstract idea of reform. For it is the acts of those who dwell in the "unvisited tombs", acts perhaps judged "unhistoric", that construct our present and make it a better, or a worse, place than it might have been. (785) In the popular imagination neither the lower classes nor women are seen to be capable of 'making history'. St Theresa and Antigone are the exceptions that prove the rule. *Middlemarch*, and especially the figure of Dorothea, offer a profound challenge to these popular understandings.

After Casaubon's death, but before Dorothea marries Ladislaw, a conversation takes place between Mrs Cadwallader (who functions textually as the "older woman" who polices the norms of Middlemarch) and Dorothea:

> "You will certainly go mad in that house [Lowick] alone, my dear. You will see visions. We have all got to exert ourselves a little to keep sane, and call things by the same names as other people call them by" …
>
> "I never called everything by the same name that all the people about me did," said Dorothea, stoutly.
>
> "But I suppose you have found out your mistake, my dear," said Mrs Cadwallader, "and that is proof of sanity."
>
> Dorothea was aware of the sting, but it did not hurt her. "No," she said, "I still think that the greater part of the world is mistaken about many things. Surely one may be sane and yet think so, since the greater part of the world has often had to come round from its opinion." (505)

For me, herein lie Dorothea's triumph and her courage and her greatness. She will risk calling things by their name, as she sees it, even at the cost of being thought a lunatic or being made an exile.

[1] The words are John Bayley's. Pauline Nestor quotes them in *George Eliot* (Palgrave: Hampshire and New York, 2002), p. 7.

[2] Nestor, p. 8.

[3] B. Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus*, pp. 295-96.

[4] The term is Riehl's and is used approvingly by Eliot in a review of his "The Natural History of German Life". See *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, ed. John Rignall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 162.

[5] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 169. Subsequent page references will be to this edition and incorporated in the text.

[6] Note Eliot's comment "any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our unintroduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* folded in her hand." (88)

[7] That all communities – no matter how restrictive - nevertheless assume the freedom of its members is made clear by Eliot's epigram to chapter LXIV: "cause it is not cause/ Unless effect be there; and action's self/Must needs contain a passive. So command/Exists but with obedience." (608)

[8] In support of this judgement, consider the sexually segregated conversations between the men of Middlemarch and the women of Middlemarch on the desirability of Rosamond versus Dorothea as a wife; see pp. 81-87.

[9] Contrasting Dorothea's and Rosamond's very different relationships with Lydgate may strengthen the point. Descriptions of the Lydgate marriage are marked by the frequency with which they are described as belonging to different species: the "bird" and the "bear"; Rosamond as "mermaid", and Lydgate's bitter observation that "It seemed that [Rosamond] had no more identified herself with him than if they had been creatures of different species and opposing interests." (560)

[10] The desire, "to show the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than exceptional", is noted in one of Eliot's letters with reference to *Middlemarch* in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon Haight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955), vol. v, p. 168, quoted in Nestor, p. 174, n. 4.

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