

THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEORY OF THE STATE: BERNARD BOSANQUET ON ETHICAL CITIZENSHIP AND THE IDEA OF THE STATE

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The Philosophical Theory of the State, first published in 1899, is a landmark in British Idealist political thought and one of the major works of the British philosopher and social reformer Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923). It "was quickly acknowledged as a classic statement of the Idealist view of politics" and "criticised by all who espoused rival political philosophies" (Nicholson, 1990: 198). The most vociferous and damaging attack is found in L. T. Hobhouse's *The Metaphysical Theory of the State* (1918). I have defended Bosanquet against Hobhouse's hostile criticism and have addressed key points of his erroneous and misguided judgment (Panagakou, 2005a).¹ I have shown that a proper understanding of Bosanquet's moral, social and political philosophy requires knowledge of his logical and metaphysical views – the most complete statement of which is found in the two volumes of his Gifford Lectures, *The Principle of Individuality and Value* (1912) and *The Value and Destiny of the Individual* (1913).

Bosanquet affirmed the intellectual legacy of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Hegel, and T. H. Green, and propounded a moral view of politics and a holistic theorising of society, the state and the individual that challenged the assumptions of atomistic individualism. *The Philosophical Theory of the State* went to four editions and has been reprinted several times. The latest edition of the book is by Gaus and Sweet (2001). Bosanquet's narrative contains key tenets of British Idealism, representing thus a fine specimen of this philosophical movement. For the British Idealists, philosophy is a systematic whole of different areas of inquiry and experience that form a spiritual unity. They saw a logical connection between philosophy and society, between theory and social reform. They understood politics in ethical terms: state action and individual responsibility were regarded as complementary; self-realisation was part of the perfectionist ontology of the social individual; and citizenship was seen as the

¹ For previous accounts of Bosanquet's defense, see Pfannenstill (1936), Nicholson (1990), and Sweet (1997).

spiritual achievement of rational individuals united in the pursuit of a common good.²

Bosanquet inquires into the idea of the state from a philosophical perspective. He states from the outset that a “philosophical treatment”:

is the study of something as a whole and for its own sake. In a certain sense it may be compared to the gaze of a child or of an artist. It deals, that is, with the total and unbroken effect of its object. It desires to ascertain what a thing is, what is its full characteristic and being, its achievement in the general act of the world (Bosanquet, 1930: 1).

Theorising the state requires the dynamic engagement of mind, the expansive and penetrating power of which defies obstacles and limitations and opens in front of us new vistas of reality, new landscapes of spiritual experience that make the self more complete and assured. The philosophical theory of the state is an exploration of the idea of the state *qua* state, that is, an attempt to reveal the truth that the notion of the state conveys. The object of Bosanquet’s philosophical analysis is an inquiry into “the political life of man” that “has a nature of its own, which is worthy of investigation on its own merits and for its own sake” (Bosanquet, 1930: 2). For Bosanquet, the state is a logical whole that should sustain both the development of individuality and the promotion of the common good. His conception of the state encompasses both society and government and includes the self-realisation of individuals in the context of institutions as ethical ideas.³ The state must offer opportunities for the development of character and help individuals in their quest for perfection. The state is the locus of ethical life and its contribution to the attainment of social justice and happiness is paramount. The state hinders the obstacles “to the best life or common good” (Bosanquet, 1930: 178).

The ethical life is the life we can achieve within the political community as active social beings and moral agents – that is, as citizens. The ethical life signifies the meeting point between the subjective and the objective element, on the one hand, and between the social and the meta-social dimension, on the other.

² See Boucher (1997), Mander (2000), Panagakou (2005b), and Connelly and Panagakou (2010).

³ “I use the term ‘State’ in the full sense of what it means as a living whole, not the mere legal and political fabric, but the complex of lives and activities, considered as the body of which that is the framework. ‘Society’ I take to mean the same body as the State, but *minus* the attribute of exercising what is in the last resort absolute physical compulsion” (Bosanquet, 1912: 311 1n).

Truth, beauty, and the good – the highest manifestations of the spirit – transcend the frontiers of the socio-political whole.⁴ They become, however, more “tangible” and “concrete” through the formative matrixes of institutions and associations that cultivate the character and “spiritualise” the life of individuals.⁵ Institutions as ethical ideas refer to the relation between mind and the social whole (Bosanquet, 1930: 275-311). The proper function of institutions is to support individuals in the realisation of ethical life. Human beings, because of their finite-infinite nature, are in a ceaseless movement of restructuring and affirmation that enables them to harbour the axiological cosmos within their own individual centres (Panagakou, 2009). This spiritual process of ontological completion and fulfilment can be described as transcendence in immanence: we “reach out” for unity with a reality greater than the self and “return” to our selves empowered and more real.⁶ Ethical life and ethical citizenship require self-transcendence because, in order to achieve the best in the context of the organised social whole, individuals need to fight constantly against the hazards and limitations of the finite condition and to assert the real self and the real will. Bosanquet’s perfectionist ethics and his metaphysics of the self are based on his discourse of the logical connection between religious and ethical consciousness. Religion, philosophically understood, sustains moral thinking and guides moral action. The religious consciousness is incorporated into Bosanquet’s project of ethics as “the spiritual source of ethical consciousness” (Panagakou, 2010: 161).⁷ Ethical life and ethical citizenship are supported by religion, the essence of which is faith in the reality of the good as the only reality. The citizen’s commitment to the common good can be seen as deriving from a firm belief in the ultimate reality of the good – a faith that “nourishes and strengthens the ethical consciousness, and sustains the spiritual path to inner awakening and salvation” (Panagakou, 2010: 144). The art of living together, in a way that contributes both to the

⁴ Life in the state is not the ultimate limit of self-realisation. Mind expands to deeper and higher dimensions of the real and re-unites the self with sources of its being beyond and beneath its historical actuality. The state, Bosanquet writes, “is a phase of individuality which belongs to the process towards unity at a point far short of its completion” (Bosanquet, 1912: 312).

⁵ For the term “spiritualization” in Bosanquet’s philosophy, see Bosanquet (1905) and Panagakou (2010).

⁶ “The ultimate tendency of thought” is “to constitute a world”: this spiritual self-building process signifies “the nusus of thought to individuality.” Bosanquet explains: “It is true that it [thought] presses beyond the given, [...]. If its impulse is away from the given it is towards the whole – the world. And as constituting a world it tends to return to the full depth and roundness of experience from which its first step was to depart” (Bosanquet, 1912: 54, 55). See also Panagakou (1999a).

⁷ See also my detailed analysis of Bosanquet’s *What Religion Is* (Panagakou, 1999b).

attainment of the common good and to the ethics of self-realisation, requires self-transcendence. In affirming the real self and the real will, individuals win the battle against the obstacles that hinder the path to perfection. Bosanquet brings the doctrine of "justification by faith" into the moral discourse of self-realisation: faith in the ultimate reality of the good brings death unto sin and salvation (Bosanquet, 1899a: 151). And this happens in the here and the now – in the struggle for attaining a higher level of social being, in the endeavour to realise the best in ourselves. Bosanquet's humanistic hermeneutic of "the kingdom of God" not only offers a new perspective on his religious discourse, but also enriches his moral theorising and emphasises the ethical-spiritual dimension of life in society.⁸

The ethical life presupposes the existence of a social whole and becomes possible because of the rationality and spirituality of the human individual. Spirituality represents our inherent ability to conceive, understand, and realise values. The ethical life is the achievement of rational moral agents who strive for the realisation of values in their civic fellowship. The state, the "entity" that objectifies this fellowship, signifies a higher level of consciousness operating both at the individual and at the collective level of social self-realisation. The state represents the ethico-logical framework within which different conceptions of the good engage in a harmonising encounter that results in the formation of the common good. Recognition of, and respect for the common good is the foundation of a true political community. To realise the common good is to think in terms of the best life in the context of the state.⁹

Bosanquet's philosophical theory of the state focuses, to a great extent, on the principle of coherence that sustains the organisational logic of the social whole. The state exhibits a unique character of identity in difference that involves the experience of its members in their ethical fellowship of the common good.¹⁰ In his

⁸ "All that we mean by the kingdom of God on earth is the society of human beings who have a common life and are working for a common social good. The kingdom of God has come on earth in every civilized society where men live and work together, doing their best for the whole society and for mankind" (Bosanquet, 1899b: 121).

⁹ I limit my analysis to the concept of the state which is the predominant idea in *The Philosophical Theory of the State*. This does not mean that Bosanquet was indifferent to international and supranational politics. On the contrary, he reflected seriously on the relation between the state and the international organisation of the political community. Discussion of this topic, however, is beyond the scope of the present study. For this issue, see Bosanquet (1917), Bosanquet (1930: xlv-lxii), Nicholson (1976), and Boucher (1994, 1995).

¹⁰ "[H]istorically speaking, no doubt the human individual does not originate in isolation, but reflects some sort of community, so that from the first the self goes beyond the bodily unit" (Bosanquet, 1904 [1897]: 87).

hostile attack on Bosanquet's philosophy, Hobhouse erroneously asserts that, for Bosanquet, the state "is an end in itself, an end to which the lives of men and women are mere means" (Hobhouse, 1918: 19). Of course, there is nothing farther from the truth than this statement. Hobhouse's inability to comprehend not only the nature of Bosanquet's philosophy, but also fundamental principles of Idealism is glaring. Bosanquet had already "responded" to that sort of criticism in a compelling way:

For us, then, the ultimate end of Society and the State as of the individual is the realisation of the best life. The difficulty of defining the best life does not trouble us, because we rely throughout on the fundamental logic of human nature *qua* rational. [...] And the best life is the life which has most of this general character – the character which, so far as realised, satisfies the fundamental logic of man's capacities (Bosanquet, 1930: 169).

Bosanquet states clearly that the end both of the state and the society, as well as of the individual is the realisation of the best life. Yet, being a genuine liberal thinker, he does not prescribe the content of the best life. Instead, he stresses the role of reason in enabling humans to find and affirm it. For Bosanquet, rationality is paramount in the individual's quest for the best life. Hobhouse is thus mistaken when he claims that Idealism "denies that the reflective reason of the individual is the method by which truth about ideals is to be ascertained" (Hobhouse, 1918: 20). The attainment of the best life is the end (*telos*) of both the moral self and the social whole. It is an ideal that grows out from the ethical necessities of the social existence, and is achieved through the rational will, action, and self-transcending capacity of the human being. In the ethical fellowship of the state individuals develop consciousness of the common good through reflective activity and judgment. The state offers the logical structure for the realisation of the best life, namely, the life which satisfies the individual as a rational moral being.

The Philosophical Theory of the State, though published more than a century ago, contains ideas that are both important and instructive for contemporary politics. We live in an epoch that is characterised by wide-spread amoralism, indifference, and political apathy, narrowly conceived group interests, a technocratic view of politics, and the pompous, yet rather empty, rhetoric of the various international organisations. The current economic crisis has intensified fears about the future of democratic politics and has made us acutely aware of issues related to social justice (or the lack

of it), transparency and accountability, as well as the relation between the state and its members, and the role of national and international institutions in the building of viable structures of socio-political organisation. The need to rethink not only the nature of the state, but also the type of political life that realises the ethical possibilities of our social being is more pressing than ever. The political philosophy of Bernard Bosanquet and of the British Idealists can provide a robust and insightful vision of a moral view of politics for the 21st century.

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