

Welfarist and Moral Justifications of the Strong State: Reconciling Hobhouse's and Bosanquet's Perspectives on the Role of the State

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Abstract

The paper traces the legacy of late Victorian and early Edwardian political thought in the shaping contemporary political values and theories. Nowadays the debate on the desirability of big government is highly heated, even though the welfare state has become part of the western political establishment, and it would be of interest to see the arguments through which the advocacy of the strong state was conducted in its early stages. Two sets of such arguments are studied in more detail: the welfarist arguments of L.T.Hobhouse and the moral arguments of Bernard Bosanquet. The two thinkers shared the judgement that their beliefs and ideas were incompatible as each of them balanced the demands for liberty with the justification for the strong state in a different way. I argue that in spite of these authors' mutual disagreement, their arguments were supplementary: more specifically that the idealist metaphysics behind Bosanquet's moral argument offered resolution to the problems of Hobhouse's welfarist project. The philosophical exchange between the two thinkers is of interest from the point of view how political theory has developed throughout the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Hobhouse's critique of Bosanquet's moral theory of the state anticipates the negative liberalism of the latter half of twentieth century. Bosanquet's argumentation, in turn, anticipates the late twentieth century communitarian challenge to this form of liberalism as well as the twenty first century theorisation of ethical particularism underpinning the national-cosmopolitan debates.

Key words: state, personal growth, moral development, real will, general will, liberty as growth, liberty as diversity, economic conditions

Arguments justifying a strong state, or in more contemporary terms, a big government, are among the legacies of Victorian political thought. Those arguments, however, were of rather diverse nature. Old Liberals, British Idealists, New Liberals and socialists defended the role of the state in various ways. The Old Liberals, represented by Herbert Spencer, were outspoken opponents of state interference as what mattered was the survival of the fittest. But Spencer still had distinct ideas about state policies and institutions: his reading of liberty as minimisation of any external intrusion went hand in hand with belief in society as a perfectly functioning organism.

The British Idealists, whose leading figure was T.H.Green, developed arguments in favour of legislation that regulated work and land tenancy contracts. Although for them, the state only offered the external conditions for good life, the significance they ascribed to social reform would allow later theorists, like the New Liberals, to make the case for rather significant state interventions, like guaranteeing the right to work and the right to a 'living wage'. At the top end of this spectrum we have the socialists, with their revolutionary (represented by Henry Hyndman) and reformist (the Fabians) variants, both supporting stronger state institutions.

At the same time, all these schools of thought, even the socialists, had an unwavering commitment to the value of personal liberty and this made their defence of stronger state institutions anything but easy and straightforward. Arguments, made to the same end, were rather sophisticated and contradicted each other. Indeed, some leading thinkers believed that their ideas were fundamentally opposed. Two of T.H.Green's disciples, L.T.Hobhouse and Bernard Bosanquet argued for a strong state, but each in a different way. Hobhouse defended what we would now call the welfare state.

Bosanquet did not believe that the state should engage in redistributive policies. But he thought that the state represented the most significant form of political community and as such it played a fundamental function in 'promoting the unity of mankind' (Bosanquet, 1917, p. 270). The state for him, was the embodiment of the general will. Hobhouse found the latter aspect unacceptable as he deemed it detrimental to personal liberty. So while Hobhouse saw the potential of the state to put in place policies that will improve people's economic and social conditions, Bosanquet eulogised the state as the political community that could sustain justice best. Hobhouse thought that the state should not have a say on matters of morality and personal conscience.

Bosanquet, on the other hand, advanced an argument in favour of ‘moral socialism’, which he explained in terms of ‘social organism’ and against ‘economic socialism’, understood as abolition of the private property (Bosanquet, 2001, pp. 330-6; see also Simhony).¹

In many ways the ideas of the welfare state have become part of contemporary political thought. And even though these ideas have provoked significant disagreements since the early part of the twentieth century up until now, in practice, the welfare state has become a permanent fixture of western democracies. Looking back at these thinkers, we are more likely to side with Hobhouse’s welfarism than with Bosanquet’s social organism. At the time, it was Hobhouse who was vocal and somewhat adamant in his critique of Bosanquet, rather than vice versa. This paper aims to demonstrate that Hobhouse’s welfarist argument should not conflict with Bosanquet’s moral argument in favour of a strong state. I will do so by targeting Hobhouse’s critique of Bosanquet and revealing its pitfalls. I will make the case that Hobhouse needs Bosanquet’s moral arguments in order to support his welfarist ideas.

One of the reasons Hobhouse cannot afford to reject Bosanquet’s reading of the state is that both of them share the same, in many aspects Victorian, understanding of the nature of individuality. The fundamental characteristic of all individuals is personal moral growth. The function of the state is to foster personal moral growth. This implies that both the nature of the state and the nature of the morally developed individual have to contain specific characteristics: unlike what Hobhouse believed,

¹ Collini discusses the paradoxical nature of the disagreement between Hobhouse and Bosanquet where the two thinkers were at the opposite side of two debates in a strange pattern. They opposed each other both on account of the welfare state and on account of the moral nature of the state, but in the first case Hobhouse was on the side of the strong case, while in the second case he took an anti-statist approach (Collini, p. 87). For other similar debates of this period in which Bosanquet was involved see McBriar.

the state cannot be seen as simply one of the many forms of community, neither can individuals have a full liberty of self-expression. Arguments that explain the distinct moral status of the state as well as the distinct features of personal morality are a needed supplement to Hobhouse's welfarist ideas.

The first section of the paper sketches Hobhouse's arguments in favour of an increased state involvement in the provision of economic conditions that make it easier for people to look after themselves and their families. The section looks more closely at Hobhouse's *Liberalism* (hereafter *L*) where the ideas in favour of increased state involvement – which throughout this paper I call welfarist ideas - are based on a reading of liberty in terms of personal growth as well as on an analysis of the social nature of private property. The following section shifts its focus onto a different work by Hobhouse – *The Metaphysical Theory of the State* (hereafter *MTS*) – where Hobhouse develops a series of perceptive critiques against Bosanquet's concepts of real will and general will underpinning his moral theory of the state. The title of Hobhouse's book is a parody of the title of Bosanquet's one: *The Philosophical Theory of the State* (hereafter *PTS*). The section reveals the philosophical depth of Hobhouse's attack on Bosanquet's understanding of morality and the profile of the morally fulfilled individual. The conclusion of this section, further reinforced by the last section on Bosanquet's moral defence for the state, is that Hobhouse could not sustain his challenge to Bosanquet's moral theory from the premises of his own welfarist project and commitment to personal growth. Indeed, Bosanquet's defence of the state offers solutions to one of the more sophisticated questions which Hobhouse raises: about the possibility of reconciling the diversity of personal self-expression and the uniformity of the public good.

The ideas of both Hobhouse and Bosanquet had their roots in the Victorian era, in the political philosophy of the British idealist T.H.Green. Both thinkers, in their different ways updated British idealism in an Edwardian context. Their readings of the welfarism and the moralism of the state are different from the contemporary ones, but the contemporary interest in all issues of the strong state warrants a retrieval of their ideas.

The philosophical disagreements between Hobhouse and Bosanquet on the nature of the state, and as we shall see, morality and personal liberty as well, anticipated some of the most significant developments of twentieth and twenty first century political theory. Hobhouse's critique of Bosanquet foresaw the theorising of liberty along the lines of Berlin's (1969) 'negative liberty' associated with protection of diversity and scepticism towards philosophical rationalism. Bosanquet's moral defence of the state, in its turn, anticipated a subsequent development: the communitarian critique of cold war liberalism², making the case for the social ontology of personal identities. By retrieving and re-assessing Hobhouse's and Bosanquet's arguments the paper addresses a fundamental tension underling the liberal-communitarian debate: how to reconcile the diversity of personal forms of self-expression with the uniformity of shared political values that underpin political institutions. Arguably, Bosanquet was more successful than Hobhouse in balancing the necessity of a strong state with the commitment to personal liberty both in terms of personal growth and in terms of diversity. Furthermore, Bosanquet's explanation of the state as the only community that possesses 'the unity of experience necessary for constituting a general will'

² Cold war liberalism is a term that places together thinkers like Berlin, Hayek and Rawls who commonly viewed liberty as threatened by comprehensive moral, philosophical or ideological sets of beliefs.

(Bosanquet, 1917, p. 272) anticipates recent defences of ethical particularism (Miller) underpinning the national-cosmopolitan debates.

Hobhouse on liberty and the welfare state

T.H.Green's political theory has served as an example of the ability of the British idealist philosophy to justify social reform (Richter, p. 266, Nicholson, pp 132-81, Tyler, pp 1-13, den Otter). His *Lecture on Liberal Legislation* (1986b, 1881) is a paradigm example of how idealist moral philosophy and social critique of existing institutions go hand in hand. More specifically, the lecture demonstrated the capacity of the idealist concept of positive freedom to justify new legislation envisaging a larger role of the state in the regulation of work and land tenancy contract. We can argue, however, that Green left the mission incomplete. He 'opened up' legitimate space for state interference but the examples he gave of it were limited in number and only sketched a soft touch state involvement. The balance he tried to strike between the state helping but not interfering, left an air of ambiguity about the level and contents of state intervention (1986a, 1895 p. 21). It was the New Liberals, whose most high profile exponents were L.T.Hobhouse and John Hobson, who took the hints for social reform and filled them up with more substance. The type and scope of state action they recommended are nowadays associated with concept of the welfare state.

The New Liberals cashed in the political implications of positive freedom seen as 'the maximum of power for all members of human society alike to make the best of themselves' (Green, 1986a, p. 200) in terms of specific suggestions for state action. Hobhouse's monograph *Liberalism* outlined an ideology that has changed beyond

recognition: Hobhouse's was not a development of the *laissez faire* liberalism but its counterpoint. Liberty is fostered better not by letting people alone but by helping them to develop their personality. 'Harmony in the full sense would not involve merely absence of conflict but actual support', the latter meaning 'improvement of the conditions of life' (L, p. 69).

The main justification for this re-defining of the role of the state from non-interfering to providing actual support is the New Liberal reading of liberty as personal growth. Hobhouse's definition of liberty inherits the spirit of the British idealist positive liberty. For him the 'foundation of liberty is the idea of growth' (L, p.66). The conception of liberty is 'broadened out to cover the whole idea of personality' and 'manhood' and 'womanhood', he argues, rest on 'spontaneous development of faculty' (L, p. 60). We need a supportive state because liberty does not belong to us as a matter of course, but is acquired through the process of developing our personality. Liberty is a moral good which we acquire through effort: this outlines the space for the state's helping hand.

What specific forms of state support does Hobhouse envisage? He did take a significant step beyond Green's recommendations for legislative reform by arguing that '[t]he "right to work" and the right to a "living wage" are just as valid as the rights of person or property' (L, pp. 83-4). He supported a policy of a 'super-tax on large incomes from whatever source' (L, p. 103). The discussion of 'the principles for equitable distribution' was for him part and parcel of explaining how liberty can be promoted.

One of his distinct arguments in support of a proactive state is about the social nature of private property. He claims that without the social provision of justice, order and skilled labour, nobody would have succeeded in their business endeavours. He also points out to the social nature of the process of production which relies on ‘the machinery which the brains of other men have devised, of the human apparatus which is the gift of acquired civilisation’ (*L*, p. 99).

In *Liberalism* Hobhouse is trying, not unlike Green, to draw a fine balance between protecting individuals’ liberty by interfering as little as possible in their private affairs, on the one hand, and providing the conditions that support them in the development of their personality, on the other. The significant advancement upon Green is that he makes the philosophical case for more substantive state support. The economics of redistribution is related to the politics of freedom, because property and wealth have social components. The property does not belong fully to the individuals who own it because they would not have acquired it independently of the social system of production. Policies should be undertaken in order to redress this misunderstanding of the status of wealth.

This is the background against which we will now examine Hobhouse’s critique of Bosanquet. The shift from his *Liberalism* to his *Metaphysical Theory of the State* is not simply one of focus but also of philosophical tone. The concept of liberty as personal growth seems to give way to a different emphasis – on unsanctioned self-expression. The question which this paper answers in the negative is whether Hobhouse can sustain his philosophical insights on liberty as unconditional diversity.

Hobhouse's critique of Bosanquet's idealism

Hobhouse's critique of Bosanquet's idealism struck a chord with the pro-liberal and anti-idealist tendencies of the greater part of twentieth century western political thought. It was well received in its time and was recognised as 'the standard, most devastating, criticism of idealist political theory in English' (Collini, 1976, p.86) up until the end of twentieth century when the emergence of communitarian critiques of liberalism provided the context for more favourable interpretations of Bosanquet (see Nicholson, 1990, Panagakou, 2005). Hobhouse's attack on the idealist conception of the state was based on a particular analysis of liberty that anticipated some of the most high profile anti-totalitarian theories to come: Popper's, Hayek's and Berlin's. So, arguably, he was ahead of his time as his *Metaphysical Theory of the State* was published in 1918. In addition, Hobhouse's critique of Bosanquet's metaphysics anticipated Rawls's distinction between political and comprehensive liberalism (Rawls, 1993, p. 196). In the context of his *MTS*, Hobhouse's reading of liberty as diversity goes together with his critique of prioritising the common good over personal self-expression. Like Rawls, he believed that commitment to specific moral or philosophical outlooks was counterproductive to protecting personal liberty. However, we shall shortly see, he was more 'liberal' than he could afford to from the premises of his overall philosophy, that drew its vitality from the British idealism of the late Victorian era and its commitment to moral development and personal growth.

In Hobhouse's summary (*MTS*, p. 71), Bosanquet makes three major claims in *PTS*, and the former takes all three to target. According to Bosanquet, true individuality lies in conformity to our real will, our real will is identical with the general will, and the

general will is embodied in the state. In this section, I will look more closely at Hobhouse's critique of the first and the second claims. His allegation is that Bosanquet's alignment of the real with the general will fails to acknowledge the difference between the 'is' and 'ought', and more specifically, the significance of the 'real' as 'actual' in addition to the significance of 'real' as 'fundamental'. Furthermore, the alignment of the real with the general will is antithetical, not synonymous with liberty as it promotes conformity and stifles diversity. Two conclusions will be advanced. First, Hobhouse's critique of Bosanquet's idealist metaphysics is notably deep and perceptive and as such, it does anticipate, as mentioned already, some of the most high profile twentieth century defences of negative liberty and value pluralism. Secondly, despite of its penetrating nature, Hobhouse's criticism fails to give credit to the significance of the idealist insights in the justification of the strong state. Implied in Bosanquet's concepts of the real and the general will is an understanding of personal transformation which is instrumental for the explanation of personal growth and moral agency. Charitably interpreted, Hobhouse's critiques can be seen as suggestions for revisions and adjustments of Bosanquet's understanding of personal transformation. Hobhouse does uncover tensions which the British idealists do not articulate – as the tension between diversity of personal self-expressions and uniformity of the common good. The last section will demonstrate that Bosanquet goes a long way towards addressing this tension in a way that does not undermine the project of the strong state.

Bosanquet's concept of the real will rests on an opposition between our transient desires for objects in which we cannot find lasting satisfaction, the will we exercise 'in the trivial routine of daily life' (*PTS*, p.125), on the one side, and our will to make

the best of ourselves, to achieve what is good and right, 'the ineradicable impulse of an intelligent being to a good extending beyond itself, as far as that good takes a form of a common good' (*PTS*, p. 127). The real will refers to the second. It is synonymous with 'true' and 'rational' will and is Bosanquet's way of explaining what Rousseau meant by 'general will' (*PTS*, p. 125). The identity between the real will and the general will expresses the idea that only one's commitment to the common good realises their true human nature. At some fundamental level our personal will is directed to the good of society because only thus do we live up to our rational nature and experience genuine satisfaction. And as the state embodies the general will, it also embodies the real will. Bosanquet discusses 'the identification of the State with the Real Will of the Individual in which he wills his own nature as a rational being' (*PTS*, p 159).

Hobhouse deems many aspects Bosanquet's concept of the real will problematic, but before he launches into his serious critique, he restates it in ways he finds more plausible. He says that the real will, 'if it means anything, means the permanent underlying nature of any of us' (*MTS*, p.46). He thinks that the terminology of 'real' and 'unreal' is dubious, but that Bosanquet still has a point. 'For the contrast between the real and the unreal then should be substituted the contrast between the self as it is permanently constituted and the self as it acts in some transitory excitement' (*MTS*, p. 46). Hobhouse singles out, as a distinctive feature of the real will, its harmonious nature. The harmony between my will and the will of others explains the identity between my real will and the general will. In order to make the concept credible, Hobhouse argues, 'the real will must be one which would be perfectly harmonious

with itself. This is assumed to involve harmony with other wills. ... Let us agree that the perfectly rationalised will involves a harmony with self and others' (*MTS*, p. 46).

Hobhouse also goes along with Bosanquet with respect to the possibility of individuals 'willing' the common good. To the ordinary person, and he evokes the fictional 'John Jones' as the paradigm of the unsophisticated man, 'the process of revealing the true rational harmony ... cannot be an intellectual process merely, it must be one which touches his emotions, his will itself' (*MTS*, p. 47).

What, Hobhouse believes, however, to be damning for Bosanquet's argument is an implication which he unveils: the willing of the common good is not a matter of course but a matter of 'transformation'. Hobhouse thinks, or so his argument suggests, that this unveiling of the need for transformation uncovers at the same time the non-reality of the real will. If the real will comes as a result of transformation, it is not here and now, therefore, it is not real. 'But what is this but to admit that the true John Jones must undergo a change? If he is to be formed into a rational will, he must be transformed. I would be far from denying that every human being is capable of such reformation. I insist only that it is a reformation which is a transformation, and that the will which Bosanquet calls real and which I would call rational, harmonious or simply good, is not real in the average man, not even in its completeness in the best of men' (*MTS* p. 47).

What is interesting here is that while both thinkers believe in the possibility and desirability of personal transformation, they embrace a different concept of personality. For Bosanquet, our human nature is defined by the results of this transformation: the real will which we adopt as a result of it, is our true will. In the

case of Hobhouse, however, the understanding, and indeed the acceptance, of this transformation does not get internalised by his concept of personality. Judging by how his argument develops, personality remains represented by its state before the transformation. The real John Jones is the one before the transformation: this is because the likelihood is he will not perform it. The real will is not real for the average man.

This disagreement between the two thinkers can be explained by their different reading of the nature of transformation. The difference may be seen as subtle, but it does give Hobhouse grounds to reject Bosanquet's idealist metaphysics, a move that, I argue, undermines the New Liberal's justification of the strong state. Hobhouse understands the transformation implied in the adoption of the real will as a 'one off' act that is of the scale of religious conversion. Hobhouse claims that the concept of the real will evokes an ideal that 'at best may only be attained by that great transformation of ourselves which is symbolized by the religions in such phrases as "being born again"' (MTS, p. 71). On Bosanquet's understanding, which is representative of the British idealist moral philosophy, the transformation at stake is something less miraculous and taxing: it is about willing your duty, doing your duty not out of fear of punishment but due to belief that it is good to act in conformity to it. It is not only that everybody is capable of it, but that it is not unreasonable to expect that, in the right environment, everybody would be likely to adopt this attitude. Being rational and socially minded is not a matter of unusual transformation, but a natural transformation – one that can realistically be expected from most people. The adoption of the real will is not a matter of excelling but something that is part and parcel of moral behaviour. Challenging the credibility of transformation could

significantly undermine the British idealist metaphysics of moral action – this would strike at the heart of their philosophy. Hobhouse seems to be doing exactly this when he describes ‘transformation’ as something rare and exceptional. However, the depth of Hobhouse’s critique clashes with his own project of reconciling liberty with a strong state. The political implication of his philosophical angle on liberty, displayed in *MTS*, is assignation of liberty to the private sphere: a political implication alien to his welfarist project.

Hobhouse’s different interpretation of ‘transformation’ goes deeper than that. So far we have established that, while for the British idealists the transformation is not an optional but a necessary aspect of the build-up of the moral agency, for Hobhouse it is a matter of exceptional circumstances and non-necessary personal choice. In addition to this, Hobhouse places the whole idea of desirability of the transformation into question. Are we certain that the transformed agency is ontologically superior to the non-transformed one? What Hobhouse tries to redefine are the parameters of the transformation leading to the real will: its start point and its end point. In the context of Bosanquet’s philosophy, before the transformation we have an agency with trivial aims and transitory impulses. At the end of it, we have an agency with real will directed towards permanently valuable objectives like service to the common good. It is also part of Bosanquet’s theory that these two agencies, i.e. these two sides of the transformation curve, exist in tension, and this tension always has to be resolved in favour of the second. Hobhouse’s argument here is that the characteristics of the agency before the transformation are more complex and therefore not easy to dismiss on normative grounds. The aims of the non-transformed individual are not necessarily ‘transitory’ or ‘trivial’. They may be significant, even if they come into contradiction

with the common good. So even if Hobhouse agrees with Bosanquet that a tension between the two types of desires exists – between more personal desires and those directed towards publically worthy goals – and that a transformation will resolve this tension in favour of the second, he does not agree that it is obvious that the second is more permanent or ultimately more significant.

It is misleading to contrast real with transitory, trivial aims. It is not merely one's superficial or casual interests that clash with others and exhibit contradiction with one another so that they interfere with the best life, it is also the deepest passions and sometimes the most fervid conscience. A man may feel, and a feeling may be no illusion, that a personal passion goes to the very foundation of his being, and yet the passion may be lawless or it may collide with the entire bent of his life in other directions, his devotion to public duty for example, or perhaps deeprooted obligations to family and friendship. If the real self means that which goes deep, we cannot deny that it contains possibilities of contradiction far more serious than the collision between permanent interest and passing desire (MTS, p. 48).

The observation made by Hobhouse is that our commitment to the common good clashes not only with the transient, the trivial, the whimsical aspects of the self. It may also clash with things that are personal, but significant on account of their depth, intensity and even capacity to express fundamental aspects of our personality. In this sense, Bosanquet's decision to associate the real will with the commitment to the

common good is questionable. Even if 'real' means not just 'actual' but 'fundamental', certain personal passions can qualify for this status. Interestingly, 'conscience' comes under the category of personal, and not public, matters: an issue that will receive more attention at the end of the next section.

Hobhouse's rebellion against the real will and the transformation implied in it, is also a rebellion against the unconditional subordination of the personal to the communal. There are non-public aspects of our personality that are nonetheless 'real' and legitimate on their own right. He articulates a tension that slips from the attention of Bosanquet and poses a challenge to British idealist metaphysics altogether. This is the tension between the diverse nature of personal self expression, on the one hand, and on the other, the harmony of personal wills that makes the general will possible, the adjustment of personal goods that make the common good possible. This is a tension that the British idealists can address and partially resolve even though the solution they could offer would not do full justice to its complexity. In articulating this tension Hobhouse scores a philosophical achievement – the achievement of linking liberty with diversity not subordinated to moral objectives - which is destined, however, to stay isolated and problematic within the context of his own moral and social philosophy.

As mentioned, Bosanquet's philosophy does have the resources to address the tension between non-publicly sanctioned forms of self-expression and those that are harmonious with the common good. The solution is sensitive to the issue of personal heterogeneity but imposes specific limitations that will leave some liberty lovers, as

well as the Hobhouse of *MTS*, unsatisfied. Their solution, however, will work in favour of Hobhouse's welfarist project.

The solution is that the real and/or the general will can accommodate some diversity in principle because their content is not set in stone but always a result of a process of personal transformation and adjustment. What is behind the real will, and the pursuit of the common good more generally, is a principle of aligning your personal interests to what is beneficial to the society you live in. The British idealists outline a process where not only the individual changes his objectives in the light of public duty, but also a process where moral norms are questioned and challenged as a result of one's personal convictions. The caveat here is that these personal convictions would still be about the common good.

However, the Bosanquetian solution to this tension will impose restrictions to some forms of personal diversity. The real will would not channel, would indeed suppress, forms of personal self-expression that clash with the common good. On British idealist grounds there is no moral justification, either in terms of liberty or diversity, for someone pursuing a course of action conflicting with the common good as a matter of principle. For them, this type of diversity is not representative of liberty, properly understood.

This section has demonstrated that despite Hobhouse's perceptive challenge to Bosanquet's metaphysics, the latter succeeds in giving a meaningful explanation of the moral nature of human agency. If Hobhouse is committed to his understanding of liberty as personal growth and the moral nature of social institutions in general, he

cannot sustain his critique of the real will and the transformation implied in it. He also cannot defend liberty as unconditional entitlement to any form of self-expression.

Only publicly minded forms of self expression are coherent with the understanding of liberty as growth and of ethics as fundamental measure of human progress.

The next section will review some of Bosanquet's arguments in favour of the institution of the State, which will uncover further dimensions of the general will and draft a vision of social institutions that reconciles liberty and efficiency in a way that would be very beneficial to Hobhouse's welfarist project.

Bosanquet's Moral Defence of the State

In his paper 'The Function of the State in Promoting the Unity of Mankind' (hereafter *FSUM*) Bosanquet puts a number of arguments in defence of the significance of the state and due to the nature of these arguments I refer to them together as his 'moral argument' or 'moral defence' of the state. These arguments throw further light on the nature of the general will and in doing this disclose the process through which the state acquires power to act. Hobhouse's welfarist argument demonstrates that the state has an important function. Bosanquet's moral argument shows how the state acquires the capacity as well as the legitimacy to perform any function.

In *FSUM* Bosanquet defended his philosophical theory of the state from a set of arguments that were representative of a turning tide: a tide away from idealism, German or British, away from the Victorian values of moral growth and social

cohesion. This shift in attitude started in the aftermath of the WWI and lasted over the greater part of twentieth century. So Bosanquet tried to resist philosophical arguments that were there to stay. But while he did not have much of a philosophical impact in his own time, he did anticipated the late twentieth century shakeup of Cold War liberalism initiated by communitarian theories, like those of Sandel, Tyler and MacIntyre, that pointed towards the social ontology of the personal forms of self-expression.³ As it is the case with the communitarian critique of Cold War liberalism, Bosanquet's re-buttal of anti-Hegelianism and anti-statism of the post WWI intellectual climate aimed not at the rejection of liberal values but at a more sophisticated assessment of their genealogy.

Bosanquet's opening statement about the nature of the state expresses the British idealist position familiar from T.H.Green: the role of the state is to provide external conditions for good life seen as personal moral development. This emphasis on 'external conditions' aims to make the point that the state cannot interfere with the personal moral growth – it can only aid it in an indirect fashion. Behind this formula of the state as maintainer of the 'external conditions' we are supposed to see the British idealist attempt to balance the demands for personal freedom with the expectation from all to embrace moral duty. This explanation of state action, referred in *PTS* as 'the hindrance of hindrances' (pp. 189-190) does not yet touch onto the core of the moral defence.

³ Bosanquet's arguments on the nature and role of the state developed in *FSUM* are particularly pertinent in the context of contemporary debates on nationalism versus cosmopolitanism, coached in terms 'ethical particularism' versus 'ethical universalism' (see Miller).

Still, a step short of revealing the real nature of this defence, we could mention another statement of the nature of the state: this time Bosanquet says that the task of the state is to guarantee rights, thus becoming specific about the nature of the conditions for good life that the state should provide.

I understand by the state the power which, as the organ of a community, has the function of maintaining the external conditions necessary to the best life. These conditions are called rights. They are the claims recognised by the will of a community as the *sine qua non* of the highest obtainable fulfilment of the capacities for the best life possessed by its members. (*FSUM*, p. 271)

It is worth mentioning this formulation, as it is here that Bosanquet and Hobhouse's positions on the role of the state are put in very similar terms. By associating the state with the provision of rights, Bosanquet in essence does not only cast the state in terms of moral environment, but also in terms of an agency that helps citizens in a substantive way. The wealth of meanings behind the term 'rights' allows such interpretation. And even though, in this paper Bosanquet will not speak much of the state in conjunctions with rights, this common ground with Hobhouse should be noted (see Morrow, 2009, pp. 63-4, and Gaus, 2001a).

But creating the conditions, whether external or internal, for best life is not an innocent affair: the state does so by exercising its coercive powers. Even if the state does not interfere with the moral reasoning of its citizens, it still enforces laws and regulations and has powers over life and death. This consideration, I believe, is the

starting point of Bosanquet's moral argument. We can distinguish three components in it. Firstly, the state power is noncoercive only if it expresses our will. In other words, only if the state embodies the general will, does it not violate our freedom as citizens. Secondly, in addition to this Rousseau-ean observation about the link between sovereignty, general will and freedom, Bosanquet introduces the consideration that the state is the ultimate adjudicator in case of conflict. Thus the function of the general will becomes significant in two ways: it is crucial not just for protecting our freedom, but also for embodying the moral norms according to which we can adjudicate in case of significant disagreements. Finally, once the pertinence of the general will is outlined, Bosanquet comes to what, I think, is the crucial point of his moral defence of the state. The reason that the state, and not any other community carries exclusive political significance is that the state is the community that most successfully nurtures the formation of the general will. It fosters the optimal level of unity and cohesion. I will address these arguments in turn.

For Bosanquet, the first link between the State and the general will is to be found in the possibility of self-government. The latter combines the coercive element of every government with the freedom implied in the obedience to your own will. If the state embodies the general will then the commands of the state are derived from our will. 'There is no other way of explaining how a free man can put up with compulsion and even welcome it' (*FSUM*, p. 271). The fact is that the state is coercive and that its power extends to 'life and death and complete disposal of property' (*FSUM*, p. 272). This is one aspect of its 'absolute' nature. But this aspect is not so important. If the state is underpinned by a general will, that is, if it is a moral state, then the coercive

nature of the state is not definitive: then the fostering of freedom becomes centre-stage.

There is another, more significant aspect of the 'absolute' nature of the state. The state can be seen as absolute due to its function of an ultimate adjudicator of conflicts. This function is made possible by the general will as it expresses the moral norms people hold in common. The state is such a community that represents, 'as nothing else in the world does, that special system of rights and sentiments, the complement of his [the individual's] own being, which the general will of his own group has formed a state to maintain' (*FSUM*, pp. 273-4). The general will consists of harmonised individual wills and as such it carries the contents of the communal moral norms. Moral norms ('rights and sentiments') exist through the general will. So if the general will did not exist, the state would not be able to perform legitimately its function as an ultimate arbitrator.

Against this background we can appreciate the weight of Bosanquet's clincher-statement about why the state is more significant than any other form of community: 'the community which organises itself as a state will be for every group the largest body which possesses the unity of experience necessary for constituting a general will' (*FSUM*, p. 272). The general will only exists if there is sufficient unity of experience. There can be seen certain virtues in having larger communities as more people will be sharing their benefits. However there are limits to the size of the community posed by the capacity of the community to foster sufficient unity and cohesion for the formation of the general will.

The moral argument for the state does not appear first in *FSUM* – it is already familiar to the readers of *PTS*. In the paper, however, Bosanquet puts the argument in practice by using it to address a number of critiques against his theory – critiques, similar in spirit to Hobhouse’s - that have emerged in the context of the aftermath of WWI. The ideology of the nation state was put under question mark for at least two reasons: the link between state aggrandisement and war, and the link between the politics of the German state and German idealist philosophy.⁴ The philosophical and ideological attacks on Bosanquet’s moral argument were deeply intertwined and that is why it is important to set aside the anti-German feelings from the sustainable arguments (see Collini, 1976, pp. 89-91). In general terms, the accusation against Bosanquet’s position was that the state was a perpetrator of evil, therefore we should have less not more of it. In Bosanquet’s own listing, the examples of such evils included ‘war, exploitation within or without, class privilege, arbitrary authority, discontent directing ambitions to foreign conquest and to jealousy of other states’ (*FSUM*, p. 276). In more sophisticated terms, the argument against Bosanquet was that it is not just the state that should not be enhanced, but also the intensity of the moral community behind it. ‘In short, the whole moral status and moral being of the community is to be indefinitely but considerably lowered’ (*FSUM*, p. 280). This consideration echoes Hobhouse’s discontent with the unifying nature of the general will and the threat it poses to self-expression and personal diversity. In his words ‘the institutions of society are not the outcome of a unitary will but of the clash of wills’ (*MTS*, p. 83). So Bosanquet’s reply to his critics of the moral state is simultaneously a reply to Hobhouse’s critique from *MTS*.

⁴ Hobhouse was a vocal critic of German idealism and politics. In his *Democracy and Reaction* he claimed that ‘Bismarck’s career was a complete exemplification of the Hegelian state’, and that Bismarck ‘might create an army and an Empire, but he could not give back to Germany the days of Kant, of Goethe, of Fichte and of Schelling’ (1904, pp. 81, 83).

Bosanquet points to a categorical mistake of seeing the specific failures of states as failures of the state institution in principle. In a nutshell, his reply is: 'The remedy for disorganisation is not less organisation, but more' (*FSUM*, p. 281). The process of correcting biases and mistakes of social institutions cannot happen in isolation from these institutions. The nature of dissent is as social as the practice it targets.

But the mischief is, that the popular mind, observing that the present trouble has arisen through aspirations in others which we pronounce perverse, is inclined to attribute to a false philosophy the whole conception of national aspirations as representing a conscience of a people and its overmastering sense of duty. Men do not reflect that precisely such aspirations are determining their own group-action at every step (*FSUM*, p. 280).

The concluding observation here is that the individual's discontent with, or protest against, the state is social in its nature. It is expressive of his or her commitment to public duty. 'If he sees a reason to rebel, it is still a social duty.' (*FSUM*, p. 281) Thus Bosanquet touches directly on the issue of personal conscience. The latter comes across as an instance where the personal judgement clashes with the communal moral norm, but the term fails to account for the constitution of this personal judgement. The 'personal' in this case is not the one that represents private objectives, but one that represents an individual who takes a public stance. To use the vocabulary from the previous section, the 'personal' here refers to the individual after the transformation. In this sense, Hobhouse's critique is not as powerful as it may seem to be. If his

critique of the general will is premised on the tension between personal conscience and the public good, it loses its sting once we see that personal conscience and public good are continuous with each other. ‘The point to be remembered is’, Bosanquet argues, ‘that the individual only has his individuality through the social consciousness’ (*FSUM*, p. 281, see also Panagakou).

These insights allow us to turn back to the tension between the diversity of personal choices and the uniformity of the general will, flagged up by Hobhouse. The solution to this tension lies in the observation that the unity and cohesion of the general will are not symbolic of conformity, but of its efficiency in upholding shared moral principles. Without it, personal voices of either dissent or conformity would not receive recognition or acquire capacity to impact. Hence, Hobhouse’s statement that diversity and not uniformity is a more fundamental feature of state institutions meets a powerful set of counterarguments. The uniformity of the general will makes it an efficient medium of personal diversity. The reason Hobhouse cannot sustain his critique of Bosanquet’s understanding of the state and the general will is that the latter is not about the letter of the moral norm, but about the process of creating it. And both the transformation of wills and harmonisations of wills implied in the general will are part of a process constitutive of personal growth and morality.

Conclusion

This paper traces the legacy of the Victorian era onto contemporary politics and political thought in two ways. Firstly, it does so by looking into the history of a topic that causes a lot of disagreement in contemporary politics: the nature and the scale of

the state. Those contemporaries who do not think the state should be ‘rolled back’ can relish in the arguments of the Victorian and Edwardian thinkers. Secondly, it does so by zooming into a selected set of arguments that resonate strongly with dilemmas in contemporary political thought, like the balancing of the diversity between the various forms of personal self-expression and the uniformity of the public values without which we cannot have legitimate and efficient political institutions. This dilemma is at the heart of not just the liberal-communitarian debate, but also of contemporary discussions of nationalism, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism.

The paper has retrieved two sets of arguments from the late Victorian and early Edwardian era in favour of the strong state: welfare ones as developed by L.T. Hobhouse and moral ones as developed by Bernard Bosanquet. The two thinkers, however, saw their defences as incompatible with each other and strongly objected to some of each other’s main beliefs. This paper has argued that their defences of the strong state are supplementary not only because of their common root in the British idealism of the Victorian era. They supplement each other for at least three more reasons. First, the concept of personal growth on which Hobhouse’s welfarist project is premised, can be substantiated best by the logic of the real and the general will as explained in Bosanquet’s moral theory. Second, the state that should provide economic conditions for better life, that is, the welfare state, needs to be legitimate and efficient. Bosanquet’s theory of the state gives a strong narrative for the state’s legitimacy, seen as the protection of citizen’s freedom, and for the state’s efficiency, seen as its capacity to adjudicate in cases of conflict. Finally, even Hobhouse’s liberal attack on idealist metaphysics developed in terms of liberty as diversity and not liberty as personal growth can be aligned with Bosanquet’s moral defence. The moral

argument for the strong state caters not only for personal development but also for accommodating diversity. The key insight is that the social and moral cohesion generated through the general will serves as a medium for recognition and as a framework for empowering the voices of personal dissent.

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