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The Philosophical Theory of the State

After more than a decade teaching ancient Greek history and philosophy at University College, Oxford, British philosopher and political theorist Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923) resigned from his post to spend more time writing. He was particularly interested in contemporary social theory, and was involved with the Charity Organisation Society and the London Ethical Society. He saw himself as a radical in the Liberal Party, and at a theoretical level he was a ‘collectivist’, considering the individual to be a part of a larger social organism. He thought the state should be in harmony with the general will, and that going beyond it would lead to repression. Bosanquet’s political ideas are explained in this influential work, which was published in 1899 and ran to four editions by 1923. Bosanquet begins with the theory of state, and then addresses sociological and philosophical ideas about politics before examining the idea of ‘will’.

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THE
PHILOSOPHICAL THEORY
OF THE STATE

BY
BERNARD BOSANQUET

C'est le peuple qui compose le genre humain; ce qui n'est pas
peuple est si peu de chose que ce n'est pas la
peine de le compter. (*Emile*, livre 4.)

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PREFACE.

THE present work is an attempt to express what I take to be the fundamental ideas of a true social philosophy. I have criticised and interpreted the doctrines of certain well-known thinkers only with the view of setting these ideas in the clearest light. This is the whole purpose of the book ; and I have intentionally abstained from practical applications, except by way of illustration. It is my conviction, indeed, that a better understanding of fundamental principles would very greatly contribute to the more rational handling of practical problems. But this better understanding is only to be attained, as it seems to me, by a thorough examination of ideas, apart from the associations of practical issues about which a fierce party spirit has been aroused. And, moreover, it is my belief that the influence of the ideas here maintained upon practical discussion, would be, in a certain sense, to detach it from philosophical theory. The principles which I advocate would destroy so many party prejudices, would put the mind in possession of so many clues to fact, that practical "social" issues would in consequence be considered as problems of life and mind, to be treated only with intimate experience, and by methods adequate to their subtlety. The

result would be that such discussions would be regarded, if one may use the expression, more respectfully, and would acquire an independence and completeness worthy of their importance. The work of the social reformer should no more be regarded as a mere appendix to social theory than that of the doctor is regarded as a mere appendix to physiology. Such a division of labour is, of course, no hindrance to the interchange of facts and ideas between theory and practice. On the contrary, it tends to promote such an interchange, by increasing the supply on either side, and improving the intellectual communication between them.

It will occur to philosophical readers that the essence of the theory here presented is to be found not merely in Plato and in Aristotle, but in very many modern writers, more especially in Hegel, T. H. Green, Bradley,¹ and Wallace.² And they may be inclined to doubt the justification for a further work on the same lines by one who can hardly expect to improve upon the writings of such predecessors.

On this point I should like to make a brief explanation. To begin with, it is a truism that every generation needs to be addressed in its own language; and I might even plead that the greatness of a tradition justifies some urgency in calling attention to it. But further, as regards T. H. Green in particular, whom in many points I follow very closely, I had two special reasons for desiring

¹ See especially the chapter in *Ethical Studies*, entitled "My Station and its Duties."

² See *Lectures and Essays* by the late Professor Wallace, especially p. 213, "Our Natural Rights," and p. 427, "The Relation of Fichte and Hegel to Socialism."

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to express myself independently. One of these is to be found in my attempt to apply the conceptions of recent psychology to the theory of State coercion and of the Real or General Will, and to explain the relation of Social Philosophy to Sociological Psychology. For a short discussion of the Imitation Theory, which the purpose of the present work would not permit me to include in it, I may refer to a paper which will shortly appear in *Mind*.

My other reason lay in the conviction that the time has gone by for the scrupulous caution which Green displayed in estimating the value of the State to its members. I have referred to this subject in the body of my work (ch. x.); but I desire to emphasise my belief that our growing experience of all social "classes" proves the essentials of happiness and character to be the same throughout the social whole. Scepticism on this point is the product, I am convinced, of defective social experience. Indeed, it seems worth while to observe that the attention which is now rightly paid to such disadvantages, affecting the poorer classes of citizens, as it may be possible to remedy, has given rise to a serious confusion. The zeal of the advocate has led him to slander his client. In proving that under such and such conditions it would be no wonder if "the poor" were bad, he forgets to observe that in fact they are generally just as good as other people. The all-important distinction between a poor home and a bad home is neglected. And yet it seems probable that, omitting the definitely criminal quarters, there is no larger proportion of bad homes among the poor than among the rich. Such terms as "den" and "slum"

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are too freely used, with an affectation of intimacy, for homes in which thousands of respectable citizens reside. Our democratic age will be remarkable to posterity for having dimmed the time-honoured belief in the virtues of the poor. There was cant, no doubt, in the older doctrine, but it was not so far from the fact as the opposite cant of to-day; and it is time that the truth in it should be revived.

I must repeat that these remarks are not intended to be controversial. There is nothing in them which serious men of all schools may not accept. They are meant to defend my attitude in treating the Real Will, and Freedom in the greater Self, as matters of universal concern, and not merely as hopes and fancies cherished by "educated" persons. Indeed, although it would be churlish for a student to disparage literary education, it must never be forgotten that, as things are to-day, the citizens who live by handicraft possess a valuable element of brain-culture, which is on the whole denied to the literary class. Whatever, therefore, may be wanting in the following pages, it is not, I think, the relation of their subject-matter to the general life of peoples.

The social student should shun mere optimism; but he should not be afraid to make the most of that which he studies. It is an unfortunate result of the semi-practical aims which naturally influence social philosophers, that they are apt throughout to take up an indifferent, if not a hostile, attitude to their given object. They hardly believe in actual society as a botanist believes in plants, or a biologist in vital processes. And hence, social theory comes off badly. No student can really appreciate an object for which he is always apologising. There is a

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touch of this attitude in all the principal writers, except Hegel and Bradley, and therefore, as I venture to think, they partly fail to seize the greatness and ideality of life in its commonest actual phases. It is in no spirit of obscurantism, and with no thought of resisting the march of a true social logic, that some take up a different position. They are convinced that an actual living society is an infinitely higher creature than a steam-engine, a plant, or an animal; and that the best of their ideas are not too good to be employed in analysing it. Those who cannot be enthusiastic in the study of society as it is, would not be so in the study of a better society if they had it. "Here or now ere is your America."

BERNARD BOSANQUET.

CATERHAM, *March*, 1899.

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