Bosanquet and British Political Thought

William Sweet

Fernand Dumont sociologue, philosophe et théologien
Volume 55, numéro 1, février 1999

URI : id.erudit.org/iderudit/401218ar
DOI : 10.7202/401218ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval et Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, Université Laval

ISSN  0023-9054 (imprimé)
1703-8804 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

William Sweet "Bosanquet and British Political Thought."
BOSANQUET
AND BRITISH POLITICAL THOUGHT*

William Sweet
Department of Philosophy
St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia

ABSTRACT: The place of British idealism in the history of political thought has been the subject of much debate. Some have maintained that it represented "a complete change" from the liberal tradition of Mill and Bentham. We reexamine here some features of Bosanquet's political philosophy, arguing that evidence for its alleged "conservative" or "illiberal" character is far from conclusive. Still, while there are a number of key liberal values to be found in Bosanquet's thought, in several important respects he breaks with the earlier liberal tradition in Britain. This will allow us to draw some conclusions about the place of idealism in the history of 19th century British liberalism.

The place of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century idealists in the history of British political thought has been the subject of much disagreement. Some have seen them as taking positions that are incompatible, if not entirely incommensurable, with the classical liberalism of Locke, Bentham and Mill. Others, such as L.T. Hobhouse and, more recently, John Morrow have argued that there is a significant shift in political philosophy from the earlier (e.g., T.H. Green) to the later (e.g., Bernard Bosanquet and D.G. Ritchie) idealists and that it is only this "second genera-

* Previous versions of this paper have been presented at the conference on "Idealism in the Twentieth Century" sponsored by the British Society for the History of Philosophy (University of Hertfordshire, England, September, 1994), and at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, (Université du Québec à Montréal, June, 1995). I am grateful to the participants for their critical comments.

tion” that is fundamentally “illiberal”. And there are yet others, such as A.D. Lindsay and Frederick Harris, who have maintained a quite contrary view — that “the social philosophy of British Neo-idealism exhibits a fundamental continuity with British liberal thought from the time of Locke.”

I wish to return to this question by focusing on some aspects of what is, arguably, the most developed account of later idealist political thought — namely, that found in the work of Bosanquet. After briefly considering the main arguments for the three interpretations noted above, I suggest that there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that Bosanquet’s views “signified a clear break with liberal political theory.” Nevertheless, I also suggest that, in several important respects, Bosanquet moves beyond the liberalism of such figures as Bentham and Mill.

I

According to one of the first extensive studies of the movement, Rudolf Metz’s *Die philosophischen Strömungen der Gegenwart in Großbritannien,* British idealism was not merely an alternative to the preceding utilitarian and empiricist traditions, but represented “a complete change.” It was, Metz writes, “a complete recoil from the old ways, a turning of the philosophic rudder in an entirely new direction” from that of “John Stuart Mill, in whom all the currents of philosophical thought then really alive met.”

This thesis was taken up, developed, and applied to idealist political thought by Klaus Dockhorn, in his 1937 study, *Die Staatsphilosophie des englischen Idealismus, ihre Lehre und Wirkung.* Dockhorn argues here that there had long been a fundamental distinction between German and English theories of the state. Germanic political thought, he claims, had focused on “the realization of the moral worth of the state, the grandeur of the political, [and] the spiritual-organic way of being of the community” whereas English political theorists had traditionally concentrated on “living together as ‘society,’ as [a kind of] ‘limited company,’ as an aggregate and as

6. See *ibid.,* p. 237.
the association of interests of bare individuals.”

With the introduction of idealism into England, however, the earlier “individualistic tradition [was confronted with] a new organic theory that exalts the supremacy of the national state.” Thus, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, “unheroic-bourgeois, liberal-individualist, un-connected-secular, humanitarian-moral, ‘civilizing’-positivistic, Enlightenment-abstract” thought was replaced by a “Gemeinschaftsmetaphysik, that enables the individual to lose himself in a mystical union with the superior unity of the state.”

On this view, then, British idealism — its political thought in particular — is an aberration in the history of Anglo-Saxon philosophy, and (so a number of commentators have since argued) it is understandable why its influence seems to have lasted only as long as its major exponents were alive.

Although the Metz-Dockhorn interpretation reflects a still-influential reading of the place of idealism in the history of British political thought, there is a second, more modest, view. L.T. Hobhouse, J.A. Hobson and John Morrow, among others, have claimed that there was a shift from T.H. Green’s idealism to the later formulations by F.H. Bradley, D.G. Ritchie and, particularly, Bosanquet. It was only after Green, they argue, that British idealism explicitly adopted both the ontology and the political philosophy underlying the “Germanic” theory of the state. As the later idealists became more “Hegelian,” however, they “retreated” from the liberal tradition.


11. F.P. HARRIS, The Neo-Idealist Political Theory, p. 3.


15. This view, long accepted in the Anglo-Saxon world, can also be seen in Bertrand Russell’s comments on idealism in his “Philosophy in the Twentieth Century” (in Sceptical Essays, London, Allen and Unwin, 1962, p. 39). Similarly, J.L. Hemingway argues that idealism represents “a significant break in the liberal tradition, particularly in its introduction of German idealist elements into Anglo-Saxon liberalism” (See his The Emergence of an Ethical Liberalism. A Study in Idealist Liberalism from Thomas Hill Green to the Present, Ph.D. thesis in political science, University of Iowa, 1979).


This second reading of the later idealism focuses on Bosanquet’s work and, specifically, on his accounts of the limits of state authority and the value of the individual. In his classic critique of idealist political thought, *The Metaphysical Theory of the State*, Hobhouse describes Bosanquet as the “most modern and most faithful exponent” of a Hegelian social philosophy wherein the state becomes “an end in itself.”20 Bosanquet, Hobhouse maintained, follows Hegel in a defence of a “god-state”22 which is above all criticism and, in such an environment, the individual human being ceases to have importance.23 (Morrow finds an illustration of this in what he sees as Bosanquet’s openness to eugenics as a solution to the “problem” of “hereditary paupers”24.) Furthermore, this view asserts, such consequences are not accidental; Bosanquet’s political philosophy here is entirely consistent with the principles underlying his logic and his metaphysics.

Both of the preceding accounts, then, hold that later idealist political thought—particularly, that of Bosanquet—is inconsistent with, if not antithetical to, British liberalism. For evidence of this, critics often cite Bosanquet’s remarks on the nature of the state, the individual and the general will. For example, attention has frequently been drawn to Bosanquet’s claims that the state is an “organism,”25 that its power is “absolute” (PTS 192; see PTS XIII) and that there is little with which the state should not concern itself (PTS XII). Again, Bosanquet repeatedly insists that the human individual is not an ultimate principle of value26 and that the state can “force” individuals “to be free” (PTS 119). Finally, Bosanquet asserts that all organized social life must be based on a common good and on a general will that represents rationality *par excellence*, and that the state may do “with the moral approval of all what the explicit theory of scarcely one will morally justify”27. These remarks seem to be in clear conflict with the classical liberal accent on the inherent worth of the individual, the emphasis on diversity, pluralism and the right of individuals to determine and to


22. Ibid., p. 6.


pursue their private conceptions of the good, and the necessity of imposing limits on state action.

On these two accounts, then, if he was not explicitly statist and “absolutist,” Bosanquet was, at the very least, “conservative.” Given its opposition to individualism, its accent on the authority of the state and its alleged tendency to find the ideal in the real, his work appears to defend, if not glorify, the status quo. Thus, Bosanquet has been described as “the ‘ideal’ expression of the Tory noblesse oblige of the Disraeli-Joseph Chamberlain-Unionist tradition” and, according to Bertrand Russell, “[r]eligion and conservatism look mainly to this school for defense against heresy and revolution.” If the preceding arguments are correct, Bosanquet’s political thought clearly lies outside the late nineteenth century British liberal tradition.

II

Nevertheless, these interpretations are by no means universally accepted. It has been claimed, not only that nineteenth and early twentieth-century British idealism reflects a lengthy tradition of idealist thought in the Anglo-Saxon world but that its political philosophy is in continuity with earlier liberalism. According to A.D. Lindsay, “so far as their political and social theories are concerned, the idealists ‘are all of them, for all their Platonism and Hegelianism, in the succession of the utilitarians,’” and, more recently, Gerald Gaus has argued that “J.S. Mill, Green, Bosanquet, L.T. Hobhouse, John Dewey and John Rawls share fundamental assumptions and constitute a single, coherent tradition of liberal thinking.”

34. A.D. Lindsay, “T.H. Green and the Idealists,” p. 151 (cited in F.P. Harris, The Neo-Idealist Political Theory, p. 2-3).
35. As summarized by Peter P. Nicholson, “A Moral View of Politics: T.H. Green and the British Idealists,” Political Studies, XXXV (1987), p. 122; see Gerald Gaus, The Modern Liberal Theory of Man, Canberra, Croom Helm, 1983. While he says that Bosanquet is a liberal, it is interesting that Gaus does not explicitly define what he means by “liberal”. Instead, he appears to use the six authors of his study to establish a “consensus” about what form liberalism might take and what “prescriptions” liberalism would support (see ibid., p. 3-9).
There is much to be said in favour of this latter reading. Bosanquet was an active Liberal\textsuperscript{36} : he worked in elections on behalf of the Liberal Party\textsuperscript{37}, was pro-Boer during the South African War\textsuperscript{38} and supported Irish home rule\textsuperscript{39} and the extension of the right to vote. After resigning his position at University College, Oxford, in 1881, he moved to London, where he was a principal figure in the Charity Organization Society and became involved in educating social workers.\textsuperscript{40} He lobbied for making university-level studies accessible to a wide audience, and organized courses of popular lectures through the London Ethical Society and the London School of Ethics and Social Philosophy.\textsuperscript{41} Moreover, Bosanquet defends a number of liberal\textsuperscript{42} principles in his work — he emphasizes the importance of human liberty, claims that the nature and form of government are limited by individual interests, and argues for the recognition of the value of the individual.

Specifically, Bosanquet advances a political philosophy in which the “end” of the state is liberty and personal development — “the perfection of human personality” (PTS 189). State action is described as the “hindrance of hindrances” (PTS 182ff.), and it is to be employed only to protect or ensure individual moral activity.\textsuperscript{43} Moreover, for Bosanquet, the only legitimate form of government is “self government”\textsuperscript{44}

---

36. See also F.P. Harris, The Neo-Idealist Political Theory, p. 37-38 and 110, n. 136. According to his wife, Helen, Bosanquet “was always an advanced Liberal with a strong sympathy for Labour aspirations” (Bernard Bosanquet. A Short Account of his Life, London, Macmillan, 1924, p. 97).


43. In fact, it is for reasons such as this that Bosanquet was accused by Hobhouse and Hobson of being too “individualistic” (see Stefan Collini, “Hobhouse, Bosanquet and the State. Philosophical Idealism and Political Argument in England: 1880-1918,” Past and Present, 72 (1976), p. 87, 95 and 109).

44. Admittedly, the notion of “self government” here is quite different from that employed by earlier liberals, such as Bentham or Mill. It seems that, wherever one finds a system of institutions which function in order to attain a public and common good, Bosanquet would allow that one has an example of genuine and legitimate self government — even if, paradoxically, that government turns out not to be democratic. Thus, for Bosanquet, it is possible to have “self government” where the form of government is neither popularly elected nor representative — and even where the state is directed by a single individual. (Here, one might think of Hegel’s view of a single head of state — a “monarch” — who establishes, promulgates and enforces law. See Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, [tr. T.M. Knox, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1945], secs. 279ff. and 286.) Nevertheless, as I note below, Bosanquet would insist that, in the western world at least, self-government should be democratic.
which, he says, is based on the will of the individual, via the mechanism of the “rational” or “real will”\textsuperscript{45}. And, for peoples that have reached a level of civilization comparable to his own, he would insist that government have the form of a representative, parliamentary democracy (e.g., PTS XXX; LVIII; 51; 66). One also finds in Bosanquet a defence of individual rights that have legal weight and that serve as a measure to evaluate the moral character of states (PTS 189; FS 277).\textsuperscript{46} Finally, he argues that the activity of the state is subject to change as a result of “criticism” from within (PTS 111, 140)\textsuperscript{47} and, in the event that a particular government does not respond to such criticism, he says that one may even have a duty to rebel against it (FS 281; see PTS 199).

Bosanquet also underscores the importance of the individual. Although he takes pains to remind his readers of the social dimension of the human person, Bosanquet denies that individuals can be reduced to their functions or that they become “one with the community” (PTS 51), and says that the individual is unique — though “not as an atom, but as a case of a law” (PTS 292). In fact, some of Bosanquet’s remarks suggest a value for the individual based on the will, à la Kant.\textsuperscript{48} He says that “[t]he will or character which is the atmosphere of values and shares their quality is itself a value... [and has] a value of its own”\textsuperscript{49} and that “we have an undeniable human value of a distinct and universal type, in which there cannot be a human creature who is not a partaker in some mode or degree.”\textsuperscript{50}

Bosanquet’s recognition of the worth of the individual is also reflected in his claim that “[t]he aim of politics is to find and realise the individual” (PTS LVI). Admittedly, in The Philosophical Theory of the State, he seems to hold that the value of a human person is influenced by the extent to which that person fulfils the requirements of his or her position or function in society.\textsuperscript{51} But this does not mean that


\textsuperscript{48} There are other apparent Kantian influences in Bosanquet’s work, such as the emphasis on the value of motive in moral action and on the development of moral character — the “good will” — as the end of moral life.


\textsuperscript{50} Some Suggestions in Ethics, p. 77.

\textsuperscript{51} BOSANQUET states that one cannot separate individuals from their roles in society: “man really does not exist as man without some station and duties” (“The Kingdom of God on Earth,” in Essays and Addresses, London, 1889, p. 116, reprinted in Science and Philosophy and Other Essays by the Late Bernard Bosanquet, J.H. Muirhead and R.C. Bosanquet, ed., London, 1927). And it would seem that there is little to persons apart from the functions they have and the positions they fill. (See Bosanquet’s reference to an individual who loses all her “positions” and functions [ibid., p. 118].)
the individual is just an instrument necessary to carry out certain social tasks. Bosanquet emphasizes that the individual self cannot be used as a means. Again, it is true that Bosanquet says it is the "realization of human personality as a whole," and not the human individual, that is the basis or principle of value. Nevertheless, by insisting that one cannot have an adequate account of the nature and value of individuals, separate from the social world in which they exist, it does not follow their value is incidental or secondary.\(^52\) For Bosanquet, neither the individual nor the state is fundamental; an individual is neither merely a means, nor of instrumental value, to anything else; he writes that "[t]o make the totality the means to the differentiation or vice versa is like making a drama the means to the characters, or the characters the means to the drama" (PTS 168).

This third view of later idealist political thought acknowledges that Bosanquet's philosophy must be distinguished from the more "atomistic" views of Bentham, Mill and Spencer. Harris maintains that the idealists, Bosanquet among them, "were reinterpreting an indigenous empirical theory and bringing to a more complete development the British concept of individuality"\(^53\), which he calls "socialized individuality."\(^54\) Moreover, this view claims that, in arguing that the principle of value is to be found in the "realization of human personality as a whole" — which, Bosanquet would note, is consistent with the value of the individual — the later idealists are seeking to avoid the kinds of problems that arise in theories that insist that individuals have an absolute value (e.g., how to resolve those cases where the desires — and the putative rights — of individuals may conflict)\(^55\). Harris concludes that, despite these differences, "idealistic liberalism [including that of Bosanquet] was a continuation of what was essential and lasting in the earlier liberalism."\(^56\)

On this third reading, then, there is no inconsistency between Bosanquet’s idealism and nineteenth century liberal political thought. Not only does one find a general defence of liberal democratic institutions, such as representative government, but a similarity in basic principles and in aim.\(^57\)

---


53. F.P. HARRIS, The Neo-Idealist Political Theory, p. 2. This characteristic is also emphasized by Gerald Gaus.


56. F.P. HARRIS, The Neo-Idealist Political Theory, p. 5. One example of this might be found in Mill’s reference to the “Greek ideal of self-development” and the comparable notion of “self-realization” promoted by the idealists. (For Mill’s view, see On Liberty, Elizabeth Rapaport, ed., Indianapolis, IN, Hackett Publ. Co, 1978, p. 59.)

It may be objected, however, that there are a number of features of Bosanquet’s social and political philosophy that are incompatible with liberalism. As noted above, Bosanquet has been charged with being open to "eugenics" as a means of dealing with "hereditary pauperism". And, further, his defense of the Majority report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law (1909)\(^{58}\), and his resistance to state intervention in matters of social welfare, have led to the charge that his political thought is fundamentally "conservative." It has also been noted that Bosanquet describes society as "organic" and that the basis of social life is a "common good," so that individual interests and individual conceptions of the good must be ultimately unimportant. But this, a critic will note, is inconsistent with liberalism, and it is a view that has had notoriously illiberal consequences.

Such evidence is, nevertheless, not conclusive. To begin with, Bosanquet argued that the poor, as a class, are no more susceptible to vice than the rich (PTS 270), and he did not think that there was any evidence to suggest that poverty or criminality could be linked to heredity — though even if it were, the solution was not obviously "extinction," but segregation.\(^{59}\) Although Bosanquet provides no argument against forced sterilization of the "congenitally feeble-minded," the proposal of "eugenic selection" was widely accepted in England at that time and was considered to be on a par with the control of disease. Bosanquet, however, explicitly rejected the view that "social improvement can come about only by selection."\(^{60}\) And while the Majority report of the Poor Law Commission, with which Bosanquet largely agreed, did endorse the idea of "a penal system for the intractable residuum of paupers," this was also the opinion of the (predominantly Fabian socialist) authors of the minority report.\(^{61}\)

Second, while it is true that Bosanquet questioned whether the state ought to guarantee full employment or provide housing for all (PTS 178), he nevertheless favoured wage and educational reform (PTS 178). He argues, for example, that publicly-financed education is necessary for the moral and intellectual development of the young — and points out that this policy has been effective (PTS 63). While there are differences between Bosanquet and earlier liberals, such as Mill, it seems that what separates them on several issues is not their endorsement of liberal ideals, but matters of strategy. There is a remarkable similarity between Mill’s three restrictions on state action in *On Liberty*\(^{62}\) and Bosanquet’s enumeration of the three cir-

---


59. See *Some Suggestions in Ethics*, p. 186.


circumstances under which state intervention in an individual’s life is morally allowable (PTS 179-180), and Bosanquet sometimes criticizes Mill for proposing measures that seem inconsistent with Mill’s own emphasis on the development of individual character.

Finally, it is not at all evident that a theory which insists on the centrality of a common good is incompatible with liberalism. Bosanquet argues that the common good is each individual’s good and, while it may not be what an individual wants at some particular moment, it does not follow that it conflicts with his or her interests. Moreover, Bosanquet insists, this notion of a common good (which reflects the end of all human activity, the perfection of human personality) is the basis for his justification of the legitimacy of democratic institutions and for his defence of freedom. If one looks at history, the notion of a common good, by itself, no more leads to political totalitarianism than a positivistic theory of law does, and Bosanquet would undoubtedly deny that ethical pluralism or broad individual “licence” is necessary for either democracy or liberalism. And, furthermore, it has been argued by some contemporary liberals (such as William Galston and Steven DeLue) that the existence of a common good is compatible with liberalism and does not exclude the possibility of a sphere where individuals can pursue their private interests.

From what has been said, it is obvious that there are a number of key liberal principles present in Bosanquet’s political thought. His ideal is that of a society where “free individuals, freely discussing and investigating, may freely develop their interests and their capacities.” And even though his concept of individuality is broader than that which one finds in earlier liberals, his commitment to democratic institutions and to the development of the human person is in line with their own. This is something which Bosanquet himself seems to recognize. In a letter of January 1907 to Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison, he writes that there was a “remarkable thread of continuity between the Philos.[ophic] Radicals and the later development of the social spirit.” That Bosanquet would think that there was such a continuity is not, of course, surprising, given his view of the progressive nature of society and social change.


64. It is true that pluralism or the freedom to determine one’s own good is characteristic of many democratic traditions, but it does not seem that absolute liberty here is essential to liberalism; Mill, one will recall, restricts liberty to individuals and cultures that are “mature” (See On Liberty, p. 9-10). Nor does a claim to entirely determine one’s good seem justifiable unless the “atomic” individual is an ultimate principle of value.


Nevertheless, Bosanquet does break with the liberal tradition in a number of respects. Specifically, he rejects its analyses of liberty and the law and the description of the "individual" that, he would argue, these reflect.

Consider, to begin with, Bosanquet's discussion of the nature of liberty and the role of the state and law. According to the earlier, individualist tradition of liberalism, liberty is "the absence of [...] external impediments of motion," and one is free when "in those things, which by his strength and wit he is able to do, [he] is not hindered to do what he has a will to do."68 Corresponding to this account of liberty, these writers viewed law "negatively". By its very nature, law is a restriction of liberty and, as Mill says, "[a]ll restraint, qua restraint, is an evil."69 Thus, these authors were concerned to ensure a "region of human liberty"70 outside of the control of the law, where individuals can "pursue their own good in their own way."71

Bosanquet rejects this account in its entirety. He disagrees not only with a description of liberty as fundamentally "negative liberty," but with both the justification that he believes underlies it (e.g., the intrinsic value of the individual self) and its extent. At the very least, then, it is misleading to suggest (as Harris does) that the idealists were "inclined to accept Mill's theory of liberty."72 For Bosanquet, "liberty" means more than "absence of restraint". It means "becoming the best that we have it in us to be" (PTS 119) or what was referred to above as "self-realization."73 This "end" is objective; it is not a matter for each individual to determine. Still, Bosanquet also recognizes that "self-realization" is not attainable unless human beings participate actively in their own development. It is only through uncoerced moral activity that "the good"—the development of human personality—is possible.

Furthermore, Bosanquet insists that "law and order" is "the condition and guarantee" of liberty (PTS 119), and argues that there is no liberty where there is an absence of law. In fact, he says that, as the "restrictions" imposed by law increase, so does freedom (PTS 181-182)74. It is, for example, through the law (and, where necessary, the exercise of force) that the state hinders or punishes those who impede other individuals in the exercise of their liberty. Again, certain compulsory enactments (such as those requiring and providing for the education of children) are the means to "an enlarged liberty"75. Moreover, through the legal institution of punishment, the

70. J.S. MILL, On Liberty, p. 11.
71. Ibid., p. 12.
73. Some Suggestions in Ethics, p. 148.
75. "Liberty and Legislation," p. 369; see also p. 376.
state “brings us to our senses [...] [and] makes us conscious of our errors and the moral decision to improve our behaviour” (PTS 208). It is, in other words, by means of the state and the law that “we find at once discipline and expansion, the transfiguration of partial impulses, and something to do and to care for, such as the nature of a human self demands” (PTS 140). Indeed, following Kant, Bosanquet notes that the “free mind” cannot exist “[e]xcept by expressing itself in relation to an ordered life.”76 But this is not to say that the state may do as it wishes, and Bosanquet insists that the law can properly be invoked only once certain conditions have been met (PTS 179-180).77

Bosanquet also breaks with earlier liberalism so far as he rejects the individualism that, he argues, is presupposed in the theories of such liberals as Spencer, Bentham and Mill.

On this individualist view, there is no “self” or “individual” other than the biological individual, and individuals are the basic units of the social sphere.78 Consistent with this, and “[a]t the core of this mode of political thought was a fundamental postulate about the nature of value, viz., that all value inheres ultimately in the satisfactions and realizations of human personality.”79 For example, it is on the basis of pleasures and pains, which can exist only in individuals, that Mill was able to construct a calculus of value.80 Moreover, according to this account, an individual is “the final judge” of his or her “own concerns.”81 In short, much of the liberalism of Bosanquet’s predecessors is marked by an ontological and a moral individualism, where “the individual human being is conceived as the source of values and as himself the supreme value.”82

---

76. PTS 236. Bosanquet cites Kant that, in living in civil society, man “has totally abandoned his wild lawless freedom in order to find his entire freedom again undiminished in a lawful dependence, that is, in a condition of right or law ; [undiminished], because this dependence springs from his own legislative will” (PTS 226). See Immanuel KANT, Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Rechtslehre (1797) Benzion Kellermann, ed., (Die Metaphysik der Sitten, 2. Teil, 1. Abschnitt), in Kant’s Werke, Bd. 7, Ernst Cassirer, ed., Berlin, 1916, S 47, p. 122.

77. These criteria are : first, an important development in individual character must be being frustrated in some way ; second, the benefits of such a development must be greater than the disadvantages involved in the restrictions to be imposed on the person ; and, finally, it must be better that the action to be commanded by the law be done from any motive whatsoever than that it not take place (PTS 179-180). When the law is used to hinder the liberty — that is, the self-realization — of an individual, it is incompatible with itself.

78. As Mill remarks, “[h]uman beings in society have no properties but those which are derived from, and which may be resolved into, the laws of the nature of individual men” (System of Logic, Bk. VI, ch. 7, sec. 1, in Collected Works, vol. VIII, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1969-1986, p. 879). One finds the same view in Bentham, where he remarks that “the community is a fictitious body” ; it is but “a sum of the interests of the several members who compose it” (An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, ch. 1, 3.4, p. 12).


80. Ibid., p. 640.


Again, Bosanquet notes, for there to be the “region of liberty” insisted upon by his predecessors — a precinct in which individuals are free and autonomous — there must be some principle of “demarcation” that allows one to separate “the individual” from “others,” and to distinguish the sphere of individual liberty from the sphere of social obligation. He argues, however, that any such boundary is simply “arbitrary,” for “every act of mine affects both myself and others; it is a matter of mood and momentary urgency which aspect may be pronounced characteristic and essential” (PTS 60). More importantly, he believes that such a principle exhibits too narrow an understanding of the nature of persons. It implies a view of the individual as “a sort of inner self” (PTS 178), independent of “the varied play of relations and obligations in society” (PTS 74), and ignores the centrality of the social dimension of human personality. Furthermore, the demands of such a “principle of demarcation” seem to conflict with important liberal ideals. Sometimes “the maintenance of external conditions of good life” (PTS 64) lies within the power of the law but, because this could violate the putative boundary between “self” and “other,” the individualist view would forbid it.83 On the other hand, Bosanquet believes that it would certainly be wrong to suggest that, simply because our moral obligations touch on the legitimate interests of others, they can or ought to be enforced by law (PTS 63; xxxv). But some individualist views seem to allow just this. In short, Bosanquet argues that the concept of “self” employed in these authors is inadequate and inconsistent with several of the aims of liberalism — including the development of the individual.

Finally, Bosanquet objected to the liberalism of his predecessors because he saw it as implying a theory of political obligation and of self-government that he considered deficient. Like Bentham and Mill, he embraced democratic and representative government, but noted that laws based simply on the majority decision still involve the coercion of “others” over “the one” (see PTS 71-72). Because its accounts of law, liberty and the individual lead to problems in understanding the nature of human autonomy, and because it ignores the possibility of a “real” or “general” will having authority over an individual’s “actual will,” Bosanquet believes that, in the end, authors such as Spencer, Bentham and Mill can turn only to force as the basis of the state.84

83. As an example of this, see Bosanquet’s criticism of Mill concerning publicly-financed education, noted above. Mill’s objection to this policy, one will recall, is not merely that this “establishes a despotism over the mind” by public authorities (On Liberty, p. 105) and leads to conformity, but also that it works against “the importance of individuality of character” (ibid., p. 104). Bosanquet’s response to this is that Mill’s fear of public intervention is unwarranted, and that his alternative proposal for “universal State-enacted examination” (PTS 63; see L 103-107) is more likely to produce bland conformism and a hierarchical society, inattentive to individual differences. It might appear that there is little fundamental disagreement between Mill and Bosanquet on this point — that it is just an empirical question of which policy will best lead to the development of individual character. But what is really at stake here is something more far-reaching — that is, each’s view of the role of the state. Bosanquet is concerned with what the state can do to positively contribute to moral and intellectual development. Mill’s view seems to be that such a view of state action goes too far; the state can intervene only when a parent harms or risks harming (e.g., through negligence in assuring the education of) his or her children. Bosanquet would surely say, however, the issue should not be whether someone might be harmed, but whether the state can help.

84. Again, for a more complete argument here, see my “Law and Liberty in J.S. Mill and Bernard Bosanquet,” supra, n. 57.
In rejecting these elements of earlier liberalism, Bosanquet believed that he was still faithful to many of its principles and goals. In fact, he maintained that these goals required a recognition of the social nature of the individual and a defense of a “positive” understanding of liberty and the law. A.D. Lindsay acknowledges this when he says that the idealists “were convinced [...] that no further progress could be made in an understanding of politics till a new philosophic basis was found for liberalism.” This meant abandoning a focus on duties and rights — on “claims and counter claims” — and turning, instead, to an ideal of “service and counter-service.” Thus, Bosanquet described himself as a “moral socialist” (i.e., one who held that “the good of the social whole was to be identified with the moral essence of the individual”), and said that, if this doctrine were made the basis of an “economic socialism,” it would be “heaven.” He was also in favour of worker ownership and, Muirhead says, “was prepared [...] for any amount of collectivism.” Not surprisingly, later in life, Bosanquet found his sympathies at times rather close to the Labour Party.

V

It is clear, then, that Bosanquet is not an individualist, that he sees no fundamental antagonism between liberty and law, that he emphasizes the importance of a common good, instead of the pursuit of merely private or personal goods, and that he maintains that state action and the law play essential roles in the development of the individual. Bosanquet is certainly not a “classical” liberal.

Still, given his view of the nature and limits of the state, and of the importance of
the individual, it is also inappropriate and unjust to describe Bosanquet’s thought as
“illiberal.” While it may be true that, on such issues as the role and limits of the state,
Bosanquet and earlier liberals (such as Bentham and Mill) disagree, the practical
differences between them are minimal. He shares many of the aims and concerns of
“liberals” before him, he champions a number of liberal institutions and, as there is
no necessary connexion between liberalism and individualism,93 there seems no
sufficient reason to hold that he stands outside the current of nineteenth century
British liberalism. While the arrival of “German” thought in England may have
provided idealists, like Bosanquet, with new approaches and arguments, there is not
enough evidence to establish that there was “a complete break”94 or “a complete
recoil” from the tradition of Anglo-Saxon philosophy.95 Commentators such as
Dockhorn and Metz — as well as Hobson, Hobhouse and Morrow — obviously go
too far in their insistence that Bosanquet’s work is incompatible with British liberal
political thought. In fact, Bosanquet may well be seen as pointing to a “liberalism”
that puts the lie to some of the notions often associated with it.

It is true that Bosanquet embraced an “organic” conception of society with a
common good and held that there were “collective interests” which were more im­
portant than the particular desires of “finite individuals.” But there is no evidence to
support the claim that Bosanquet’s theory defended the absolute power of the nation
state. Moreover, his claim that one cannot adequately understand the nature of indi­
viduals apart from their “station” and duties within the state neither entails nor pro­
poses that individuals “lose themselves” in it.

Nevertheless, despite the continuity in history and in aim, given the influence on
his political theory by his own non-individualist metaphysic96, Bosanquet does not

93. For a recent recognition of this, see S.M. DELUE (e.g., Political Obligation in a Liberal State, p. X-XI).
DeLue speaks of two competing kinds of liberalism: individualist and “communalist.”
95. Metz argues that British idealism “was neither directly nor indirectly connected with” the “idealistic
systems and motives” of earlier centuries, and that “it could not have sprung directly from a native tradi­
tion” (R. METZ, Die philosophischen Strömungen der Gegenwart in Großbritannien, p. 238). But for all its
admitted indebtedness to Kant and Hegel, it does not follow that there is a break with the older tradition.
Such allegedly “Germanic” influences as the organicist view of the state and the analysis of the individual
as a social and political being owe at least as much to Plato and Aristotle as to Hegel and Kant, and Metz
touches only lightly on the fact that Kantian and Hegelian ideas were quite clearly a product of the distinctive situation in philosophy in mid-nineteenth century Britain. Metz
does not, moreover, address the argument of J.H. Muirhead, that the “German” influences on idealism have
been exaggerated and that many have failed to recognize the lengthy tradition of “Platonic” philosophy in
96. Hence, I would reject the view that British idealist social philosophy can be separated entirely from its
metaphysics — though the question then becomes how far the relation between the two extends. According to
Bertil Pfannenstil, the relation is essential. He writes that “[i]f, as Bosanquet does, a philosopher calls
his political theory philosophical, metaphysical, or speculative, the natural result will be that the political
theory, severed from its theoretical philosophical relations, will appear to be, so to say, floating in the air”
(Bernard Bosanquet’s Philosophy of the State, Lund, 1936, p. 116). A.J.M. Milne, however, argues that the
political philosophy can, at least, be separated from a theory of the Absolute (see The Social Philosophy of
English Idealism, London, 1962, p. 196). Stefan Collini simply notes that there is “sufficient overlap in
[the idealists’s] social theories and their metaphysical foundations to justify considering the structure of
merely repeat the liberalism of the nineteenth century, but provides a genuine advance on it. On his view, many of the underpinnings of the earlier liberalism need to be not just modified, but rethought. Yet, for all this, in light of his account of the individual, liberty and the state, one must recognize Bosanquet’s place in the liberal tradition of British political thought.

97. Thus, according to Ernest Barker, “not a modification of the old Benthamite premises, but a new philosophy was needed; and that philosophy was provided by the idealist school” (See Ernest Barker, *Political Thought in England: 1848-1914*, London, 1915, p. 10-11).