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Bosanquet, Rousseau, and the General Will

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Suppose there is an election on tomorrow, and you are thinking about how you are going to vote. Suppose also that you are a conscientious voter: you don't just want an outcome that benefits you individually, or your immediate friends and family, but one which is good for the country as a whole. You are faced with a range of candidates, who offer a range of policies, and you are wondering what you should do tomorrow – which candidate ought you to pick?

But then a variety of sobering thoughts may strike you. First, it may occur to you that you only have a limited number of choices, extending to no more than the various candidates on offer. But perhaps none of these candidates is any good, and none of them will do what is best for the country. Secondly, it may occur to you that other voters are approaching this exercise differently, and are just picking on the basis of their individual interests, leaving you looking like a high-minded fool. But third, and perhaps most soberingly of all, you may think that even if one of the candidates is really excellent, and even if others are approaching the election in the same spirit as you, nonetheless you yourself are not really in a very good position to carry out your intentions, for what do you really know about what is best for the country? After all, you are just an average citizen, and are doubtless badly informed about various crucial matters. Even with the best will in the world, then, how can you cast your vote with a clear conscience, given how poorly placed you are to make a decision? Shouldn't this be left to the few people in the country who really know what is for the best?

But now a consoling thought may strike you. Maybe there is a wonderful alchemy at work within the democratic system, such that if you vote for your own interests, and everyone votes for theirs, nonetheless the good for all will emerge as the outcome. This would seem to resolve the second and third worries above. For, if the alchemy is right, it actually requires people to vote on their own interests, while of course we are much more expert about those interests than we are about what is right for everyone else as well. The first problem remains, though, for the democratic system of voting for party candidates only gives you a limited range of choices, and they may all be duff. But perhaps one could take a more radical step here, and propose to one's fellow voters that we don't choose candidates, but just adopt this

system on every issue that needs to be resolved, so making the process more direct. In this way, it may seem, equanimity can be restored.

It is this set of issues that concerns the British Idealist Bernard Bosanquet in his paper 'The Reality of the General Will' (International Journal of Ethics, 4 (1894), pp. 308-21), a paper which contains some of the central ideas that were then developed within his book-length treatments of social and political matters, particularly The Philosophical Theory of the State (1st edn 1899; 4th edn 1923). Bosanquet puts the 'problem or… paradox' that interests him as follows: 'the idea of a will whose sole aim is the common interest, although it can exist as a will only in the minds of the human individuals who make up the community, and all of whom are for the most part occupied with their own individual interests' (pp. 309-10). As Bosanquet makes clear, he has been particularly alerted to this difficulty by his reading of James Bryce's The American Commonwealth, with its candid exposition of the kind of pessimistic thoughts that were put into the mind of the voter above: namely, 'If the majority of separate individuals are, on any question immediately put before them, more likely to miss the common interest than to hit it, both from blindness and from selfishness, which cannot practically be distinguished, why does not society come to grief?' (p. 310).

Bosanquet also canvasses the consoling thought I outlined above, which of course is inspired by Rousseau; but Bosanquet makes plain that he thinks this sort of consolation is illusory, if nothing else because it could only cover 'a plebiscite on a single question', and so is 'not adequate to the action of a very complex society with elaborate constructive tasks before it' (p. 309). But Bosanquet nonetheless thinks Rousseau deserves great credit for raising the difficulty, which the research of Bryce and others have made even more vivid, even though he himself proposes to solve it in a different way.

The key to that solution lies in the following thought. In the scenario outlined above, the assumption that generated the pessimistic conclusion was the idea that far from proceeding on the basis of what is good for all, my fellow citizens can and will only proceed on the basis of their individual interest, for this is all people can properly grasp or understand, at least as compared to the grand abstraction of trying to grasp or understand what is truly best for the community as a whole. On this model, as Bosanquet vividly puts it, 'individual wills, or minds in action, are separate machines, locked up in separate boxes, each with its own indicator outside, and the response

which each of them will make to a stimulus from without is determined by its own private history' (p. 312). However, Bosanquet argues that this model is simplistic, for we are not cut off from each other in this way: rather, our minds and wills reflect and express certain general ideas without which we could not count as a community at all. But this fact may be lost to us, as we may think it means we must all think the same thing on certain issues, and so must all agree about such matters – which of course is not the case, so it may seem there are no common ideas between us at all, and thus that we are indeed just 'separate machines' who when we agree, do so merely out of shared interests. However, Bosanquet holds that ideas are not abstract universals, but are concrete universals: that is, just as the universal 'horse' can be exemplified in individuals that differ from each other in significant ways (e.g. by height or colour), so in a society there can be shared ideas which we nonetheless express and articulate in different ways given our different perspectives on society and places within it. So, while a student and a businessperson may be expected to differ about various social and political issues, for example, this does not show there is nothing in common between them, but could instead be taken to reflect their distinct but related outlooks on the matter at hand, where it is precisely through such differences that the general will expresses itself. Now, Bosanquet thinks this insight is vitally important, for I can now see that I am not related to my fellow citizens as merely one individual conjoined with another, but rather through occupying one or other or more of these social roles, which gives each of us some insight into the general will, albeit from our own particular perspectives upon it, which we have by virtue of the various roles we occupy. There is thus a dialectical relation between the universal and the particular: the general will, while it is something general, can nonetheless be expressed and articulated through the coming together of various particular wills, just as Rousseau in some way envisaged – but these cannot be the wills of atomized individuals as he assumed, but must be the kind of socialized individuals who occupy particular positions within the social whole, where the kind of mediating institutions that he wanted to do away with are in fact crucial, Bosanquet argues, in making the solution work.

Thus, faced with the election tomorrow, I need not feel despair in realizing that my place in the world gives me only a limited view of the social good, while I also need not fear that the limited place that my fellow citizens occupy disbars them from contributing to the determination of a will that reflects the good of all: rather,

once I see that good as constituted precisely out of the coming together of such related perspectives, I will realize that this is in fact an appropriate procedure (cf. p. 316). I may still fear, however, that the choices open to me here are restricted to the candidates who just happen to be on offer. But consolation on that score can come from realizing that the democratic process is in fact much broader than electoral votes of this sort, and that in all sorts of ways on all sorts of issues, individuals are coming together in decision-making processes of various kinds – so when all that is balanced out, the electoral moment is also given a wider context that makes it more defensible, but without resort to Rousseau's unworkable model of direct democracy (cf. p. 314). In this way, therefore, Bosanquet hopes the paradox that Rousseau had highlighted can be resolved, and the shadow of illegitimacy that hovers over modern political processes thereby dispelled.