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☐ recensions

Peter P. NICHOLSON, **The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists: Selected Studies**. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1990.

The political philosophy of the British idealists is perhaps the most accessible part of their work, but it has long been held in disrepute. In this important, lengthy and sympathetic study, Peter Nicholson argues that its rejection is, in fact, the product of much misinterpretation and misunderstanding. His objective, then, is to contribute "to the reassessment of [idealist] political philosophy" (p. 1), and the care with which Nicholson presents his case, along with the ample textual documentation he provides, will force the modern critic to reconsider many of the charges made against it.

Nicholson's volume concentrates on the writings of F.H. Bradley, T.H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet, but he does not attempt an exhaustive account of their views. Instead, he presents six essays, each of which focuses on a "central and contentious" (p. 3) problem within one of the idealists. Specifically, he discusses Bradley's theory of morality (pp. 6-53), T.H. Green on the common good (pp. 54-82), rights and property (pp. 83-115), freedom (pp. 116-131) and state action (pp. 132-197) and, finally, Bosanquet on the general will (pp. 198-230). Nicholson sees these essays as complementary since, he suggests, the "British idealists [...] constitute a unified school or tradition of thought" (p. 4) and the "differences [...] between them are marginal" (pp. 4-5).

While most of Nicholson's attention is devoted to T.H. Green, the discussions of Bradley and Bosanquet are likely to be of greatest interest to scholars. There has been a more or less constant interest in Green, particularly in political science, but little has been written on Bradley's moral and political theory and Bosanquet has been virtually ignored since his death in 1923. Nicholson's assessment of their work merits a close reading, and it is with these two chapters that this review is primarily concerned.

* * *

Nicholson begins with an essay on "Bradley's theory of morality" because, he says, it provides the touchstone for later idealist work in ethics and political philosophy. Here, Nicholson's aim is to correct a number of misreadings of Bradley's *Ethical Studies*, by showing that the author's moral theory is not found in the (in)famous Essay V of this work, "My Station and its Duties", but in Essay VI, "Ideal Morality". He also argues that Bradley's focus is not "practical" (in the sense of being prescriptive) (p. 48), but descriptive of moral experience. Thus, it is entirely inappropriate to describe Bradley as defending either a "conservative" or, as has been recently claimed by James Bradley, a "radical" view.

This essay is intriguing and illuminating, but it is not clear whether it does all that Nicholson hopes it will. To begin with, his assertion of the centrality of *Ethical Studies* in idealist moral theory is not entirely convincing. As Nicholson notes himself, while Bradley and Green come to similar conclusions in moral philosophy, the structure of the argument in the latter's *Prolegomena to Ethics* differs from that given by Bradley and it is, therefore, doubtful that Bradley's work serves to clarify it.

Again, Nicholson claims that Bosanquet follows Bradley's moral philosophy "enthusiastically" (p. 52). Here, his case is based largely on Bosanquet's acknowledgement of his intellectual debt to Bradley. But the nature of this debt is never made explicit, and much of Nicholson's evidence is taken from the opinions of contemporaries, such as J.H. Muirhead, rather than supported by specific texts. It is not obvious, for example, that Bosanquet would follow Bradley in the sketch of morality that he presents in the later chapters of *Ethical Studies*. In fact, not only does Bosanquet's praise for this work seem to focus on Bradley's criticisms of Kantianism and of utilitarianism, but much of Bosanquet's own moral and political philosophy draws on a view that Bradley apparently abandoned. Although Bosanquet respected and admired Bradley, he was certainly no close friend and there is no obvious reason to hold that Bosanquet's ethical theory is any more influenced by Bradley than by Green, who was Bosanquet's teacher and mentor.

Another matter that arises in this essay, but which has implications for the work as a whole, is Nicholson's decision to look at the British idealists' political philosophy independently of their metaphysics. Nicholson correctly notes, for example, that Bradley makes no attempt at presenting a metaphysical theory in *Ethical Studies*. Still, Bradley's account of the self in this volume — on which his view of morality as "self-realisation" obviously depends — cannot be treated in isolation from that which one finds in *Appearance and Reality*. Indeed, in this latter work, Bradley says that *Ethical Studies* "in the main still expresses my opinion" (*Appearance and Reality*, p. 356, n. 1). But then Nicholson's approach becomes problematic, for it is questionable whether Bradley's view in *Ethical Studies* — that the "self" is "real" — is consistent with that which he gives in *Appearance and Reality*, where "self" is found in the realm of "appearance". Consequently, despite the difficulties involved in a presentation of idealist metaphysics, it is clear that without a consideration of certain metaphysical questions, a study of Bradley's — and, by extension, idealist — ethics is incomplete.

Finally, Nicholson returns in this essay to a topic he had discussed in his 1984 article, "Bradley as a Political Philosopher" (in *The Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*. Ed. Anthony Manser and Guy Stock. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1984: 117-130) — that is, whether Bradley's moral and political philosophy is, in fact, "conservative". Nicholson claims that Bradley's account of morality is not prescriptive and holds, therefore, that his "conservatism" is an open question. But this does not follow. Although Bradley's descriptivism does not commit one to the position that there is no room for change in the moral and political sphere, it also does not suggest that there can or should be change. And given that Bradley does not, for example, express any strong preference for democratic principles, his moral "neutrality" arguably has conservative consequences.

* * *

In Study VI, Nicholson discusses Bosanquet's "notorious theory" of the general will, but a good deal of space is devoted to another equally controversial topic—that is, the nature of, and the relation between, society and the state. Both issues have been the subject of much criticism, but Nicholson focuses on that raised by Bosanquet's contemporary, L.T. Hobhouse. Nicholson argues that many of Hobhouse's objections are based on a misunderstanding of Bosanquet's views. The "general will" was never held to be the "will" of any collective entity but, as Bosanquet describes it, is the set of "dominant ideas" in a society. Again, by "state", Bosanquet does not mean "government", but the sum of social institutions and practices that regulate behaviour in society through the use of force. When one notes this, Nicholson correctly points out, many criticisms can be seen to miss the mark.

Nevertheless, at times Nicholson himself seems to misunderstand these objections. For example, when Hobhouse criticises Bosanquet's account of the "real will", it is not that he is not aware that Bosanquet is using a particular sense of the word "real". Rather, he rejects using the word in this sense. Again, at times Nicholson is not entirely convincing in his reconstruction of Bosanquet's putative response to certain criticisms. It is clear, for instance, that Bosanquet takes the individual's "real will" to be identical with what he calls the "general will". Nicholson suggests that this is because the general will is society's "will", that we are social beings and, thus, we see society's will to be our "real will." But this approaches the argument from the wrong side. On Bosanquet's account, each individual's "real will" is ultimately identical. Thus, it is because all individual wills are the same that one can speak of any person's "real will" as congruent with the "general will".

It should be noted, as well, that Nicholson has a tendency to fall into the very linguistic confusions of which the idealists themselves were so often accused. If the "general will" is a set of "dominant ideas" (and not a *voluntas* of any kind), it is difficult to see how it could "provide" or "establish" anything, let alone "basic moral rules and standards" (p. 223). Of course, Nicholson's remarks may very well be a shorthand way of expressing something quite plausible, but it is important that he be clear, precisely because idealism is frequently criticized for covering gaps in argument through vague or overly metaphorical use of language.

When Nicholson turns to Bosanquet's account of society and the state, he suggests that the nature and relation between the two is, contrary to Hobhouse, quite straightforward. Yet, even the most sympathetic defenders of Bosanquet's political thought would have difficulty agreeing with this. Perhaps Bosanquet's best explanation of this issue occurs not where one might expect it — that is, in his political works — but (as Nicholson is aware) in a footnote to one of a series of lectures on metaphysics, *The Principle of Individuality and Value*. Still, Bosanquet does leave himself open to misinterpretation. In *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, he uses the term "state" sometimes to mean "the nation state" and, at other times, to refer to "the government". Careful attention to the context generally makes it clear what exactly Bosanquet has in mind, but it is not surprising that he has been misunderstood.

More importantly, however, it is again not clear that Nicholson has correctly interpreted what Bosanquet is saying. According to Nicholson's reading, the state is larger than society; it is society with the power to enforce. Yet Bosanquet speaks of the state as a social institution and, in principle, society can be larger than the nation state. Thus, he can argue for a "league of nations", which, if it is anything, is a 'society' of states that does not have a developed general will or sufficient shared experience to be a single state. Hence, a better reading of the relation between society and the state would be to see the state as present throughout, but not more than, society, so that it is still able to coordinate the relations among social institutions. Not only does this reflect what Bosanquet says the state does, but avoids an undesirable implication of Nicholson's interpretation — sc., that if society were simply the state without enforcement power, there would be no reason at all for Bosanquet to talk about "society".

In order to avoid some criticisms of *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, Nicholson argues (as he did concerning Bradley) that Bosanquet is writing at a "philosophical, not a political level" (p. 302, n. 50). This, he suggests, makes Bosanquet's principles susceptible of both a liberal and a conservative reading. But is this so? Admittedly, Bosanquet aims at describing the nature of society and the state, but the notion of "nature" he employs is supposed to be both descriptive and normative. In fact, it is for just this reason, as Nicholson notes (perhaps inconsistently), that Bosanquet argues that there are things in society that "can and should be changed" (p. 225). Of course, on the basis of a study into the nature of the state, Bosanquet cannot tell us specifically what to do any more than, on the basis of a study of the human body, a physician can tell us specifically what we ought to do. All one can do is make general recommendations. Yet they are, nevertheless, recommendations.

Finally, one is uncomfortable with Nicholson's attempt to assimilate Bosanquet's political theory to that of Hegel. Nicholson says that many misunderstandings of Bosanquet's views are due to "unpreparedness" and "reluctance to get to grips with his [...] Hegelianism" (p. 230). Yet while Bosanquet acknowledges a debt to Hegel and comes to many of the same conclusions, he would insist that his political philosophy is perfectly intelligible to those who did not know Hegel at all. It is important to remember that *The Philosophical Theory of the State* was based on a course of extramural university lectures. Moreover, despite Hegelian influences in Bosanquet's analysis of the nature and role of the state, his account of the general will is fundamentally drawn from Rousseau, and his "teleological" approach and account of the individual and society have their origins in classical Greek philosophy.

* * *

When one considers this volume as a whole, it is obvious that its merits far outweigh the criticisms noted above. Some of the studies deal with much-neglected topics and Nicholson notes (as I myself have argued at length elsewhere) that idealism might go some way in responding to problems in contemporary analytic political philosophy. Nicholson also reminds his reader of a number of important points. For example, one of the reasons why idealist political thought has been largely abandoned is that it is regarded as being too closely connected to that of Hegel. But this, the author notes — though he does not elaborate the point —, ignores the important role played by Greek philosophy in the development of British idealism. Moreover, Nicholson draws attention to — though, again, he does not pursue the issue — the "empirical" character of idealist political thought. Bradley and Bosanquet frequently appeal to ordinary experience and they were deeply concerned with what the "plain man" believes. Much like the view one finds later in mid-20th century Anglo-Saxon philosophy, the idealists held that the most adequate theory is one which will "fit the whole of the ordinary world" (p. 12). Historians of 19th and 20th century philosophy would do well to take note of this similarity.

One is reluctant, however, to go as far as Nicholson in claiming that the political philosophy of idealism is homogeneous (pp. 3-4). Bradley, in fact, had very little to say about political philosophy and, as noted above, there is good reason to believe that there are significant dissimilarities in the work of these three authors discussed in Nicholson's work. While it is true that Bosanquet saw himself in the tradition of Green and arrived at many of the same conclusions, he also thought that Green had underestimated such matters as the role of the state and the limits on state action, and it is clear that neither Green nor Bradley had any developed ideas on the general will — the very principle on which Bosanquet builds his account of the justification of the state.

Nonetheless, there should be no doubt of the significance and the value of this book. Not only does its author attempt to bring out the political thought of British idealism in a non-polemical light, but he provides a comprehensive bibliography that is virtually exhaustive and the most complete of its kind yet available. Philosophers, political theorists and researchers in 19th century intellectual history will all benefit from this important volume.

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