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Between Individual and Community.

On the Uniqueness of the British Idealists' Vision of Politics

Abstract: This paper is dedicated to the subject of the relations binding British idealists' thought to nineteenth and twentieth century disputes in political philosophy. The two of them are taken into consideration: liberal-conservative and liberal-communitarian. The Author follows through the nuances of idealist thought in search of those of its elements, that weight in favour of its conciliatory, individualist-communitarian character. The first step of the argument is the characterization of liberal-conservative/liberal-communitarian standpoints. Then some of the fundamental elements of idealists' social and political thought are analyzed: the social recognition thesis, the concepts of common good and positive liberty. On this basis the following features are pointed to as crucial to accepting liberal-communitarian/conservative character of the idealists' theories: teleology; metaphysical foundation of politics; contextualism; a tension between ethical relativism and universalism; the criticism of the concept of negative freedom; and individualism.

When someone chooses for the subject of his analysis the uniqueness of the British idealists' thought, this may entail considerations of various issues. For although sometimes the opinions appear that thinkers representative of this tradition blindly followed the ways paved by the German idealists, pointing to the counter-evidence to such a thesis is easy. The criticism of the reality of time by J.M.E. McTaggart, F.H. Bradley's proofs of the contradictions inherent in discursive thinking, R.B. Haldane's idealistic view of relativity, D.G. Ritchie's Hegelian Darwinism – these are just the best known examples of British originality which took the whole idealist tradition to territories undeveloped by Germans.

Similar originality is met on the ground of political philosophy. Although the thinkers discussed in this paper had for their chief inspiration classical German philosophy, their loose usage of Kantian, Hegelian and even Fichtean concepts resulted in thought incompatible with established theoretical divisions. Three main representatives of the idealist political philosophy have to be mentioned here: Thomas Hill Green, Francis Herbert Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet. The significance of their concepts becomes most clear attempting to describe them with contemporary philosophical notions. Such attepmts have recently been made e.g. by Gerald Gaus, Rex Martin, Avital Simhony, William Sweet, Colin Tyler and David Weinstein, who situated the idealist standpoint within the frames of the liberal-communitarian and liberal-republican debate.[1] Their approach

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[1] G. Gaus, 'Bosanquet's Communitarian Defense of Economic Individualism: a Lesson in the Perplexities of Political Theory', in: *The New Liberalism. Reconciling Liberty with Community*, ed. A. Simhony, D. Weinstein, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 137-58; R. Martin, 'T.H. Green Complex Common Good: Between Liberalism and Communitarianism', in: *The New Liberalism*, pp. 69-91; A. Simhony, 'Rights that Bind: T. H. Green on Rights and Community', in: *T. H. Green. Ethics, Metaphysics and Political Philosophy*, ed. M. Dimova-Cookson, W.J. Mander (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 236-61; idem, 'T. H. Green's Complex Common Good: Between Liberalism and Communitarianism', in: *The New Liberalism*, pp. 69-91; idem, 'A Liberal Commitment to the Common Good: T. H. Green's Social & Political Morality', in: *The Moral, Social and Political Philosophy of the British Idealists*, ed. W. Sweet (Charlottesville, Imprint Academic, 2009), pp. 31-50; W. Sweet, 'Individual Rights, Communitarianism and British Idealism', in: *The Bill of Rights.*

is quite revolutionary from the perspective of the former ways of estimating the idealists' intellectual heritage. For a long time, from the second decade of the twentieth century until the last, there was a widespread conviction that at least some idealists (Bradley and Bosanquet were mentioned here most often), took an illiberal standpoint, being, if not apologists of dictatorship, certainly the advocates of preserving the *status quo*. During the two past decades many papers have been published, in which the idealist tradition was portrayed as insisting not only on communal or social foundations of human consciousness, but also as strictly individualist, or at least liberal-communitarian/conservative. Of course the liberal-communitarian interpretation in this context entails a lot of risk, since it seems to be exposed to the danger of anachronism, so convincingly described e.g. by Quentin Skinner. Nonetheless, there are many arguments in favour of admitting the affinities between idealistic and communitarian theories. Most of all it is the fact that some communitarians (namely Taylor and Sandel)[2] admitted the existence of parallels between their critiques of Rawls's *Theory of Justice* and Hegelian critique of Kantian ethics. Despite this argument, more methodologically secure seems to be the establishment of a linkage between idealism and conservatism.

Bicentennial Reflections, ed. Y. Hudson, C. Peden (New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), pp. 261-77; idem, 'Introduction: Rediscovering Bosanquet', in: *Bernard Bosanquet and the legacy of the British Idealism*, ed. W. Sweet (Toronto-buffalo-London, University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 23; C. Tyler, 'Contesting the Common Good: T. H. Green and Contemporary Republicanism', in: *T. H. Green. Ethics, Metaphysics*, pp. 262-91; A. Simhony, D. Weinstein, 'Introduction', in: *The New Liberalism*, pp. 1-25; D. Weinstein*, '*The New Liberalism and the Rejection of Utilitarianism', in: *The New Liberalism*, pp. 159-83.
[2] M. Sandel, 'Introduction', in: *Liberalism and its Critics,* ed. M. Sandel (New York, New York University Press, 1984), pp. 5, 7; Ch. Taylor, 'Hegel: History and Politics', in: *Liberalism and its critics*, pp. 177-99.

Here probably the firmest example of such connections is the relation binding some idealists to Edmund Burke's thought.[3]

In this article I will analyze the possibility of positioning British idealists within the liberal-conservative or liberal-communitarian tradition and the theoretical basis of such ascription. I will present those elements of idealist theories which taken together, create a thought situated beyond the established theoretical divisions, especially that between communal/communitarian and individualist/liberal paradigms. The following elements will be considered: (1) Hegelian/Aristotelian teleology, (2) metaphysical foundation of politics, (3) ethical and legal contextualism, (4) constant idealist tension between unconditional acceptance of 'my station and its duties' and the ideals of social and non-social perfection, (5) the criticism of the liberal concept of negative freedom and the apology of freedom as positive self-determination and (6) individualism. Each of these elements will be later examined more thoroughly. Now let us start with the introduction concerning the nature of the mentioned philosophical hybrids: liberal conservatism and liberal communitarianism.

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[3] It is well known that e.g. Green advised his student to study Burke's writings (J. MacCunn, *Six Radical Thinkers: Bentham, J. S. Mill, Cobden, Carlyle, Mazzini, T. H. Green* (London Edward Arnold, 1910), pp. 225-41; cf. R. H. Murray, *Studies in the English Social and Political Thinkers of the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, W. Heffer, 1929), p. 288; J. R. Rodman, 'Introduction', in: *The Political Theory of T. H. Green. Selected Writings*, ed. J. R. Rodman, (New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), pp. 12-13). Another proof of such connections between idealism and conservatism may be the impact that idealism had e.g. on T.S. Elliot and Michael Oakeshott (both openly admitting the importance of Bradley's writings in their intellectual development).

Liberal Conservatism. Liberal Communitarianism

Contemporary debates in political philosophy are dominated by the criticism of both theoretical and practical implications of liberal theory. The attacks of communitarians and republicans have exposed the contradictions resting at the foundations of Rawls's, Ronald Dworkin's, or Nozick's theories. Nonetheless some scholars point to the fact that both sides of this dispute substantially oversimplify its subject, i.e. the nature of liberal thought. They claim that there is no fundamental difference between the liberal and the communitarian (or republican) concepts of individual, community, freedom and rights. This is the opinion, for instance, of Thomas Spragens,[4] who states that taking the atomist individualism to be a constitutive feature of liberal theory (and this is precisely what its adversaries are accustomed to do) is simply a misunderstanding. Of course, today's liberal concepts (and this applies both to libertarians and egalitarians) are based on individualist methodology, acknowledgment of the primacy of rights over good, exaggeration of the value of particular persons and underestimation of the role played in their life by communities. But it was not always like this, as can be proved by analysis of the nature of liberal theory from the seventeenth until the nineteenth century. Let us make an example of Locke's, Condorcet's and J.S. Mill's writings. Locke thought that the state ought to aim at the common good, and for the role of education in promoting virtue. More than once he referred to the law of nature as the source of moral imperatives, never being in favor of absolute, unrestricted freedom. Condorcet and Mill were joined in a belief that liberal society should contribute to the moral development of its citizens, as well as in their insistence on the necessity of social solidarity.

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[4] T.A. Spragens, Jr., 'Communitarian Liberalism', in: *New Communitarian Thinking: Persons, Institutions, and Communities*, ed. A. Etzioni (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 1995), pp. 37-51.

They did not consider individuals apart from communities, rights apart from duties, they did not understand the relations between citizens and the state as antagonist in principle, but rather as mutually beneficial. Thus, contemporary communitarians do not oppose liberal thought *in toto* (as most of them wishes to do), but rather its twentieth century variant, strictly individualist, which is unrepresentative of whole liberal tradition.[5] Most probably Locke, Condorcet and Mill, who had shared some of communitarian concerns, if they were still alive, would join such criticism.

The list of thinkers whose writings disclose the same individualist-communitarian feature is much longer. Charles Taylor suggests Wilhelm von Humboldt as one of them, Charles McCann holds that even philosophers considered the most individualistic of all liberal individualists: Herbert Spencer, Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich August von Hayek (he also mentions here J. S. Mill and William Graham Sumner) have never accepted views nowadays ascribed to them by communitarians or conservatives.[6] In fact their thought contains many elements characteristic of the communitarian *Weltanschaung*. Polish scholar Jan Klos speaks directly of liberal-conservative philosophers intentionally uniting in their theories the elements typical to both disputed traditions. They constitute what Klos has called the nineteenth century 'healthy liberal faction'. 'This improvement – let us call it ... conservative – … consisted in exceeding the rationalist point of view, the modern *ego-cogito* attitude, scientific reasoning and opening to the integral vision of a

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[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 40-7.
[6] Ch. Taylor, 'Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate', in: idem, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 185; C.R. McCann, Jr., *Individualism and the Social Order. The Social Element in Liberal Thought* (London-New York, Routledge, 2004).

man-as-a-whole: to tradition, community, religion'.[7] These liberals were perfectly aware of the fact that without cultivating specific values and virtues, communities would not survive. Thus Klos's thesis is that 'not only does liberalism not exclude morality (as derived from Christianity); it cannot even exist without it, if it is still to be a support to its own fundamental values – freedom, individualism, progress. Every liberal-democratic order implies this sort of morality as its basis'.[8] Klos named liberal reformers – Lord Acton, Frédéric Bastiat, Benjamin Constant, John Henry Newman, and Alexis de Tocqueville as such.

These thinkers cannot, however, be called liberal communitarians *sensu proprio*, at least if we understand 'communitarianism' to be a particular political doctrine, and not just a pro-communal attitude. We may speak about liberal communitarianism in a strict sense only with reference to contemporary thinkers. Most commonly mentioned here are the 'late' John Rawls, Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, Amitai Etzioni, John Gray, William Galston, Judith Shklar, Joseph Raz, as well as Allen E. Buchanan, Gerald Dworkin, Joel Feinberg and Amy Gutmann. A common denominator of their theories is the acceptance of liberal society as the ground for dissolving ethical dilemmas. This results in appreciation, as David Miller has pointed out, of 'the importance of autonomous choice: whichever way of life a person follows, it is important that he or she should have chosen to follow it after reflection on alternatives, rather than simply having been inducted into it'.[9] Secondly, liberal communitarians are united in their opposition to abstract universalism, nowadays best represented by the works of 'early'

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[7] J. Kłos, *Wolność, indywidualizm, postęp. Liberalizm konserwatywny wobec nowoczesności* (Lublin, Wydawnictwo KUL, 2007), p. 20.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[9] D. Miller, 'Communitarianism: Left, Right and Center', in: *Liberalism and Its Practice*, ed. D. Avnon, A. de-Shalit (London-New York, Routledge, 2005), p. 142.

Rawls, and in the nineteenth century by Kant's ethical concepts. Instead, liberal communitarians share a belief 'that both the availability of a spectrum of ways of life and the capacity for autonomy depend upon a communal background'.[10] And finally, thinkers constructing this political 'third way' diagnose and accept the inevitability of cultural diversity of contemporary societies. They believe that different communities, as belonging to different ethical and political traditions, should be reigned in accordance with them, and not with the imperatives implied by some abstract philosophical theories. Thus liberal communitarians place their emphasis on concrete visions of the common good, deprecating in this way the politics of standardizing legislation. 'The key idea in the liberal communitarian vision of things is that a political society should be made up of a plurality of communities which ought as far as possible to have the character of voluntary associations'.[11] One could add to this short list of constitutive features an optional one – ethical perfectionism, which however in some variants of liberal communitarianism (namely those related to postmodernism, such as Gray's) is at odds with anti-essentialism and subjectivism.

The Liberal-Communitarian Character of British Idealism

The thesis about the liberal-communitarian character of idealist thought has been advanced by such scholars as Gerald Gaus, Rex Martin, Avital Simhony, William Sweet and David Weinstein, who agree that at the beginning of the twentieth century British idealists were already leveling the same charges against liberalism as communitarians did over fifty years later. They did not however reject liberalism as such, but rather its particular variant, which was impossible

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[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid.*

to reconcile with the acknowledgment of the primacy of community over individuals, ethical and legal contextualism over universalism and particular goods over abstract rightness. Also unlike communitarians, idealists did not hesitate to propose their own theory of rights, in this way intentionally binding the 'language of rights' with that of the 'common good', giving 'a liberal, albeit non-individualist, theory of rights'.[12]

The afore-mentioned scholars unanimously emphasize the importance of the idealist theory of rights, which consists of everything that is crucial in the context of liberal-communitarian dispute. The 'social thesis', characteristic of conservative and communitarian thought, is combined here with the acknowledgment of recognition as the foundation of social and political order, insistence put on *bonum publicum* and its linkage with individuals' welfare, emphasis placed on the positive functions of legislation, and at the same time an appreciation of the importance of individuals' spontaneous activities. Idealists' juridical theories oppose the belief that the nature of relations binding the state with its citizens is fundamentally antagonistic as well as similarly confrontational visions of rights and communities. They are based on the rejection of methodological individualism, abstractionism, universalism and ethical subjectivism.

As the elements of the idealist theory of rights determining its conciliatory, liberal-communitarian character, scholars usually list the social recognition thesis and the significance of the concept of the common good. It is worth expanding this list with the idealist vision of freedom and the role of individual and community rights and to examine all these factors more thoroughly.

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[12] W. Sweet, 'Individual Rights, Communitarianism and British Idealism', p. 261.

Social Recognition and the Common Good

Green wrote that every right consists of two, strictly connected elements: (1) a claim put forward by a person or a group of people 'to the free exercise of some faculty',[13] and (2) the recognition of the legitimacy of such a claim on the part of a community. To Bosanquet right 'in a widest sense'[14] is a moral claim recognized by the community. What is the nature of this claim and where does it come from? Its direct source is yearning for self-realization – this opinion unites the above-mentioned thinkers, although each of them understands it a bit differently. According to Green individuals project their visions of the moral ideal, which they later try to realize. There is a multitude of such visions, for they arise in the minds for example of hedonists seeking satisfaction in pandering to their carnal whims, perfectionists striving to master the abilities linked to particular sphere's of existence, and people defending the orthodoxy of moral systems. Each of them, despite the differences, will require social support to achieve his goal. This support may take on a form of enabling acquiring, consuming, and owning goods, or merely 'being left alone'. Bosanquet thought that at the end of all human efforts was the goal of realizing a coherent, highly developed personality. To Bradley individuals achieve such satisfaction only by participation in a whole free from their limitations, i.e. in a community.[15]

What determines the legitimacy of particular claims? It is a community's recognition that it could contribute to the common good. 'Rights then are claims recognized by the State, i.e. by Society acting as ultimate authority, to the

[13] T. H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation*, in: idem, *Works of Thomas Hill Green*, ed. R.L. Nettleship, vol. 2 (London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1890), § 139.

[14] B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State* (Aldershot, Gregg Revivals, 1993), p. 188.

[15] F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 174.

maintenance of conditions favorable to the best life'.[16] This vision of the common good is an emanation of the general will of a particular society, thus according to Green and Bosanquet,[17] individuals are usually unaware of it. Since they cannot have full knowledge as to the 'congeries of the hopes and fears'[18] or the 'system of ideas'[19] (this is how Green and Bosanquet defined the general will), they cannot be aware of the nature of goals designated by these enigmatic structures. Hence, if community is to follow the path desired by all its members, it is unnecessary to designate it explicitly, and its democratic selection is even less important. On the other hand, getting to know such goals is practically almost impossible. A very imperfect, but still the most accurate way is to search for their reflection in communal morality and the legal system, in generally accepted hierarchies of goods and values. 'This unity–on the one side of the being for another, or the making oneself into an outward thing, and on the other side of the being for oneself–this universal substance speaks its universal language in the usages and laws of his people'.[20] Rights express the nature of social union. They are a mirror reflecting its goals and, as such, are always of a local character, ascribable to particular societies, and not to some abstract 'humanity': 'no rights are absolute, or detached from the whole, but all have their warrant in the aim of the whole'.[21] This view was shared also by Bradley: 'we have thus seen the community to be the real moral idea, to be stronger than the theories and the practice of its members against it, and to give us self-realization.

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[16] B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, p. 188.
[17] T. H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles*, § 121; B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, pp. 117, 155, 164, 191, 198-9, 202, 285. Cf. idem, *Kingdom of God on Earth*, in: idem, *Essays and Addresses* (London Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1891), p. 116.
[18] T. H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles*, § 86.
[19] B. Bosanquet, 'The Reality of General Will', in: *Aspects of the Social Problem,* ed. B. Bosanquet (London, MacMillan and Co., 1895), p. 325.
[20] F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 86.
[21] B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, p. 216.

And this is indeed limitation; it bids us say farewell to visions of superhuman morality, to ideal societies, and to practical ideals generally'.[22] Similarly categorical statements may be found in Green's *Lectures on the Principles*: 'rights have no being except in a society of men recognizing each other as *ἴσοι καί ὅμοιοι* [equals]'.[23]

The character of the claims recognized by society and reflected in its legal system is absolutely dependent on its vision of the common good. Rights, according to Green, may be ascribed only to (1) a 'member of a society, and (2) of a society in which some common good is recognized by the members of the society as their own ideal good, as that which should be for each of them. The capacity for being determined by a good so recognized is what constitutes personality in the ethical sense'.[24] The character of common good depends on two major factors: objective (historical and geopolitical determinants) and absolute (*telos* of human existence), and its two main attributes are: (1) its unavoidably moral character and (2) its coincidence with individuals' personal good. It is moral, because (a) it consists of citizens' beliefs regarding the desired ways of self-realization, and because (b) its achievement ends with their moral development. For the same reasons it coincides with their interests.

Social recognition may be linked to the common good in at least two ways. Firstly, the citizens' mutual recognition constitutes a system of values and positive rights, in which some scholars seek an expression of the common good. In this context it may be identified with a particular form of political system, where the tradition and citizens' customs have the strongest impact on legislation (i.e. democracy), and which guarantees free acquisition of goods

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[22] F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 201.
[23] T. H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles*, § 139. Cf. *ibid.*, § 142-4.
[24] *Ibid.*, § 25. Cf. *ibid.*, § 132, § 134, § 136.

at the same time eliminating financial inequalities, if only they hinder citizens' moral development (i.e. social liberalism). This 'procedural' vision of the common good Maria Dimova-Cookson called 'a society of equals'.[25] However, there era weighty arguments against such an interpretation. The most significant objection is that it implies proceduralism and anti-teleology. Being oriented to the 'rules of justice', and not to communal *telos*, it contradicts fundamental premises of the idealists' thought, ignoring its anti-Kantian and Aristotelian/Hegelian inspirations.

The second interpretation of the common good points precisely to a *telos* of human existence – moral perfection. In this variant, the desired form of society is the one enabling individuals' moral progress. Nothing is told here about its fundamental ethical ideals, nor its political form. These factors depend solely on the community's general will, and thus also on its tradition and historical experiences. The 'substantial' interpretation significantly differs from the previous one. Here it is not the abstract procedures or political ideals which determine communities' institutional structure. This role is played rather by the concepts of good shared by their members, 'the institutions by which man is moralized, by which he comes to do what he sees that he must, as distinct from what he would like, express a conception of a common good; that through them that conception takes form and reality'.[26] 'Personal morality and political and social institutions can not exist apart, and (in general) the better the one the better the other. The community is moral, because it realizes personal morality;

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[25] M. Dimova-Cookson, *T. H. Green's Moral and Political Philosophy. A Phenomenological Perspective* (Basingstoke, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2001), p. 102. Cf. A. Simhony, 'T. H. Green: the Common Good Society', *History of Political Thought*, XIV (1993), pp. 122-45. In the same spirit Simhony suggests the existence of parallels between Green's and Rawls's theories (A. Simhony, 'Rights that Bind', pp. 258-60).

[26] T.H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles*, § 116. Cf. *ibid.*, § 120.

personal morality is moral, because and in so far as it realizes the moral whole'.[27] Individuals' moral beliefs and the community's institutional structure are interconnected. They both constitute a harmony of peculiar ethical symbiosis. Thus Bosanquet compared society to a tree, for as the limbs and branches are codependent, so all the parts of society contribute to its unity and welfare, in this way realizing also the well-being of their own.[28]

Negative Freedom – Positive Freedom. Negative Rights – Positive Rights

The problem of recognition in the writings of the idealists' is directly related to that of freedom. Green, Bradley and Bosanquet unanimously distinguish between its two types, most commonly referred to in philosophical debates. One of them is 'juristic' (Green) or 'negative' (Bosanquet, Bradley)[29] freedom, which they identify with self-determination, full autonomy, independence from others, absolute sovereignty. It has its enemies in rights, state, and other citizens (for they often stand in our way to satisfaction). Being in favor of this concept results in a vision of an 'idiotic' (gr. ίδιώτης) individual, undetermined in its volitional acts.

 The second kind of freedom is the 'real' (Green, Bradley), 'political' or 'positive' (Bosanquet, Bradley) one. According to idealists, enabling individuals to do whatever they think is right, does not mean that they will do what is worth doing. The assumption that everybody knows best what is right for him, is incorrect, for if the *telos* of human existence consists in moral perfection, the free person is the one

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[27] F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 188.
[28] B. Bosanquet, *Introduction to Second Edition*, in: idem, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, p. xxxiii.
[29] T. H. Green, 'On Different Senses of 'Freedom' as Applied to Will and the Moral Progress of Man', in: idem, *Works of Thomas Hill Green*, vol. 2, § 8, § 17; B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, p. 124; F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 57.

heading towards it. Those who spend their lives seeking for pleasures not only lose, sometimes even permanently, their potential for self-realization. They often also deprive others of the same chance. Thus Green defines true freedom in three ways: (1) as a 'maximum of power for all the members of human society alike to make the best of themselves'; (2) 'the liberation of the powers of all men equally for contribution to a common good'; (3) 'the true end of all our effort as citizens ... a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying, and that, too, something that we do or enjoy in common with others'.[30] Bosanquet wrote that 'our liberty, or to use a good old expression, our liberties, may be identified with such a system considered as the condition and guarantee of our becoming the best that we have it in us to be, that is, of becoming ourselves'.[31] Each of these statements implies positive self-determination, and not lawlessness, as a foundation of freedom: 'In one sense no man is so well able to do as he likes as the wandering savage. He has no master. There is no one to naysay him. Yet we do not count him really free, because the freedom of savagery is not strength, but weakness. The actual powers of the noblest savage do not admit of comparison with those of the humblest citizen of a law-abiding state. He is not the slave of man, but he is the slave of nature'.[32] Positive freedom consists in bending our will to that of something exceeding the finite, human ego. This may be a communal general will speaking through 'my station and its duties', or Bradley's ideals of social and non-social perfection. The important thing is that being truly free means intentional striving for moral perfection, and not, as radical individualists have thought, maintaining the illusion of perfect autonomy.

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[30] T.H. Green, 'Lecture on 'Liberal Legislation'', p. 370-2.
[31] B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, p. 119.
[32] T.H. Green, 'Lecture on 'Liberal Legislation'', p. 371. Cf. F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 57.

The Determinants of Idealistic Liberal-Communitarianism

Let us present then the features typical of the idealist vision of social and political life, resulting in its hybrid, liberal-conservative or liberal-communitarian character. As I have mentioned above, we must consider the following features: (1) Hegelian/Aristotelian teleology, (2) metaphysical foundation of politics, (3) ethical and legal contextualism, (4) constant idealist hesitation between unconditional acceptance of 'my station and its duties' and the ideals of social and non-social perfection, (5) the criticism of the liberal concept of negative freedom and the apology of freedom as positive self-determination and (6) individualism.

1) Teleology

Idealists took some terms to be functional[33] and one of them is the notion of humanness. According to them it is impossible to determine the essence of humanity referring to the imperfect stages of peoples' development. It can be done only by focusing on the moral ideal which is meant for them to be achieved. Bosanquet expressed it as follows:

> The most ordinary conception of growth involves maturity, and the term »nature« in Greek and Latin, as in English, can indicate not only what we are born *as*, but what we are born *for*, our true, or real, or complete nature. Thus the great thinkers of every age have been led to something like Aristotle's conception … And so we find that the peculiar naturalness of the primitive and the simple is only an illusion, caused by the grater difficulty of recognizing the larger individuality which comes both of and to itself in the later and more complex phases of life.[34]

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[33] A term popularized by MacIntyre in his *After Virtue,* but referring back to Aristotle ('for the city-state is an end of the other partnerships, and nature is an end, since that which each thing is when its growth is completed we speak of as being the nature of each thing' (Aristotle, *Politics*, I.I.8, transl. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 9)).

[34] B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, pp. 122-3.

Green referred to this matter in the same spirit. In his *Lectures on the Principles* he foresaw the failure of the liberal attempts to establish the essence of humanity on the basis of its hypothetical beginning (i.e. the state of nature).[35] He emphasized that the aim of human existence is hidden not at its start, but rather at its end. Existence of such *telos* is assumed in each moral demand, for at the foundations of every ethical theory reposes a distinction between 'what is' and 'what ought to be'.[36] Bradley repeated this thesis: 'Morality implies an end in itself; we take that for granted. Something is to be done, a good is to be realized'.[37] The British idealists were very generous in their praise for Aristotle's and Hegel's conceptions, for they most thoroughly expounded the goal of human existence and the role played by community in its achievement. Both Green and Bosanquet ascribed to Plato and Aristotle the credit of 'laying the foundation for all true theory of »rights«',[38] implying the teleological development of the state, similar to that of the living organisms. Green translated Aristotle's 'τό τί ήυ είναι' as 'what a thing has in it to become'[39] and took it as a fundamental *dictum* of Aristotle's thought. Not 'γένεσις' but 'ούσία' defines human nature. The British idealists took from Plato's and Aristotle's ethical theories also the aim of human development: the perfection of characters. In all these matters Hegel was just the modern continuator of the ancient Greeks.

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[35] T.H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles*, § 32-50.
[36] Idem, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, § 85.
[37] F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 65.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
[39] F.H. Harris, *The Neo-Idealist Political Theory. In Continuity with the British Tradition* (New York, King's Crown Press, 1944), p. 23. Harris, however, seems to be mistaken to ascribe this quotation to Aristotle's *Politics*. Green's formula *what a thing has in it to become* (T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, § 172, § 248, § 352), often appearing in a different form – *what it has it in itself to become / which it has it in itself to become* (*ibid.*, § 187; idem, 'On the Different Senses', § 18, § 20; idem, *Lectures on the Principles*, § 151), is never mentioned in his works in relation to any of Aristotle's writings.

2) The Metaphysical Foundation of Politics

Although recent decades have seen the rehabilitation of Hegelian metaphysics, still the prevailing belief is that every theory founded on metaphysical grounds has to be excluded from the group of liberal concepts. At the beginning of the twentieth century the last attempt at establishing the metaphysical theory of the state and politics on the borderline between liberalism and conservatism was undertaken by Bosanquet.[40] After it had found its later continuation e.g. in the theories of universal consent by the 'early' Rawls and Habermas, it suffered a heavy defeat from communitarians and ontologically agnostic postmodern liberals (such as J. Gray). Green and, following him, also Bradley and Bosanquet, claimed their political thesis were the outcome of epistemological, ontological and ethical considerations. From their perspective the role of the state and the duties of citizenship depended on the character and functions of the Absolute. It is obvious that this kind of quasi-theological (since such idealists as Green, Josiah Royce, and E. Caird identified the Absolute with the Christian God) view on politics is alien to modern and contemporary liberal thinkers, as well as to communitarians. Only one representative of this last tradition – the 'later' MacIntyre – who has argued for Aristotelian Thomism, praised the universal validity of Christian values against the relativist interpretations of Aristotle's thought. The idealist philosophy resembles rather some conservative traditionalists (e.g. J. de Maistre, L. de Bonald, F. R. de Lamennais) and some

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[40] Peter Laslett (P. Laslett, 'Introduction', in: *Philosophy, Politics and Society. First Series*, ed. P. Laslett, W. G. Runciman (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1956), p. vii) once referred to the history of political philosophy as to a period 'between Hobbes and Bosanquet', pointing to later explosion of philosophical minimalism, rejecting the general theories of society and politics. This thesis was later undermined by Quentin Skinner, who pointed out that Laslett overlooked such strictly philosophical (in Laslett's own terms) treatises as Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History* and Eric Voegelin's *New Science of Politics*, both published in 1952.

modern and contemporary conservatives (like C. L. von Haller, F. J. Stahl, E. Voegelin). The fact of the metaphysical consolidation of politics may also suggest the affinities with the liberal and metaphysical 'early' Rawls. There is a lot in favor of accepting such parallels. Most of all, as the neo-Hegelians did, Rawls connected essentialism with liberalism, for he located the foundations of the latter in human nature revealed in the psychological rights governing individuals in the hypothetical state of nature. Hence the only 'natural' legislation to Rawls (just as it was to Green) is the one realizing imperatives implied by the essence of humanity.

3) Ethical and Legal Contextualism

Perhaps this feature brings idealism closest to communitarism as well as to those types of conservatism, whose representatives relativized ethical and political norms to the traditions of particular communities (A. Müller). Here not so much Green as Bradley and Bosanquet with their concept of 'my station and it's duties' resemble the Aristotelian, and later neo-Aristotelian, vision of virtue as fulfillment of duties imposed by community. A case in point here is MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. Idealist opposition to the a priori reasoning and formality of Kantian ethics on one hand, and to abstractionism and methodological individualism of contractarians on the other, points to analogies also with other communitarian thinkers. Idealists anticipate Sandel's critique of the 'unencumbered self', Taylor's 'social thesis' and his diagnosis of the dialogical character of human existence and Walzer's vision of the 'spheres of justice'. Individuals living outside the social arrangements or, even only theoretically, distancing themselves from the community's cultural heritage as well as their own past experiences and played social roles, are mere philosophical fictions, practically useless as well as dangerous. Consequently, also the political

and legal systems, allegedly realizing the imperatives of universal ethical theories, are marked with the same defects. They are to be rejected in favor of contextualism, that is, a belief that ethical standards characteristic of particular communal morality should constitute the principal source of the patterns of behavior. Living properly means contributing to the welfare of community. Being a good man means being a good citizen, neighbor, husband, parent. There is no humanness besides the social roles we fulfill and there are no ethical standards apart from the communal systems of values.

4) Tension Between Cultural and Legal Relativism and Ethical Universalism

Although the idealists were decidedly opposed to Kantian formal universalism, they did not fall into relativism. They rejected both the liberal language of universal human rights and Protagorean *homo mensura* doctrine. Although they have exposed themselves to the accusation of reducing the essence of morality to the contingent communal standards of behavior, they have successfully avoided it thanks to the already mentioned metaphysical foundation of politics. A perfect example of this is Bradley's rejection of the relativist implications of 'my station and its duties' which has resulted in his recognition of the supra-social standards of behavior. In effect the author of *Ethical Studies* advances the postulates of the existence of ideals of social and non-social perfection.[41] This is the only way in which it is possible to explain the fact of social changes occurring and the possibility of criticism of the established patterns of behavior. The works of Green and Bosanquet disclose universalistic inclinations with similar recognition of the possibility and legitimacy

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[41] F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 220; cf. P. P. Nicholson, 'Bradley as a Political Philosopher', in: *The Philosophy of F. H. Bradley,* ed. A. Manser, G. Stock (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 123-4.

of undermining the *status quo.*[42] After all, each act of social criticism implies the existence of some ideals unfamiliar to the current social and political practices. These ideals change with cultural and historical context, but this does not contradict the thesis that there is only one goal of each human life. And this is the source of the constant idealist hesitation between recognizing the ethical primacy of the community's authority and trusting your own conscience, allegedly articulating the norms of universal morality.

This feature, being neither strictly liberal nor communitarian, is present in both these traditions. In the first one it reveals itself e.g. in a tension between opposition to metaphysical theories of politics and simultaneous defense of universal human rights (e.g. an issue present in John Gray's and Richard Rorty's writings).[43] Similar friction is present in the theories of MacIntyre (the clash between ethical contextualism and Christian universalism), Taylor and Walzer (the clash between acceptance of cultural sources of morality and the idea of universal moral code).[44]

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[42] T.H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles*, § 143-4; B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, p. 140; idem, 'The Duties of Citizenship', in: *Aspects of the Social Problem*, p. 15.
[43] J. Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, (New York, The New Press, 2000), pp. 106-15; R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 92-4.
[44] Ch. Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 4-5; M. Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 28.

5) The Criticism of the Concept of Negative Freedom

This point reveals the bonds linking idealist to conservative and communitarian thought. For although also the liberal tradition has shown the appreciation to the idea of positive freedom (J. S. Mill, A. de Tocqueville), for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries its main understanding of liberty pointed to independence from others.[45]

Green, Bradley and Bosanquet decidedly opted for 'positive', 'true' and 'political' freedom, looking for its ideal not in lawlessness (Hegelian *Willkür*) but in a concrete way of self-determination (German *Wille*). A free person is not the one capable of acting in accordance with his or her momentary wants. This blessed state may be ascribed to those only, who do what is worth doing, who do not squander their chances for further self-realization with an arbitrary behavior. As a matter of fact, freedom *from* every dependency is a mere illusion. After all, does it not imply the concept of a Cartesian subject, able to doubt everything whilst at the same time preserving its own identity? 'Only nothing [as Bradley wrote] is quite free, and freedom is abstract nothingness. If in death we cease to be anything, then there first we are free, because there first we are–not'.[46]

Idealists anticipate many of the later views on the problem of dualism of the concepts of freedom. A striking similarity may be found for instance with Gerard MacCallum and Charles Taylor, whose thesis were stated almost a century earlier by Bosanquet.[47] MacCallum in his paper on 'Positive and Negative Freedom' diagnosed the artificiality of Isaiah Berlin's strict division between the

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[45] T.A. Spragens, Jr., 'Communitarian Liberalism', pp. 40-4.
[46] F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 56.
[47] Cf. T. Baldwin, 'MacCallum and the Two Concepts of Freedom', *Ratio*, XXVI (1984), pp. 126-7.

two concepts of freedom.[48] Every view on freedom presupposes three predicates: freedom of some *x* from some *y* to do some *z*. Also Bosanquet in his *Philosophical Theory*... holds that every concept of freedom implies a dual formula: being always 'freedom *from* some things as well as freedom *to* others'.[49] Hence the criterion of choosing between particular freedoms (whether we call it negative or positive) is always the vision of some good estimated as valuable. Similarly Taylor, in his essay on 'What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?', after distinguishing two concepts of freedom pointed to the fact that their strict division is impossible.[50] Thus in this distinction it is not the nature of freedom itself that is understood differently. After all in both cases it means obedience only to oneself. Freedom is a 'condition relevant to our continued struggle to assert the control of something in us, which we recognize as imperative upon us or as our real self, but which we only obey in a very imperfect degree'.[51] 'The man is free who realizes his *true* self'.[52] Consequently, in the case of positive freedom-negative freedom distinction, it is not the category of *self-determination* that is crucial (since in both concepts freedom is defined with reference to self-determination), but rather the understanding of the *true self*. Is it to be identified with the undetermined self or the social self? Are we free only if we act in accordance with our momentary wants, or may these wants sometimes contradict our social, and thus *true* self? What is 'independence' and 'autonomy'? By what kind of

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[48] G. C. MacCallum, jr., 'Negative and Positive Freedom', in: *Liberty,* ed. D. Miller (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 102-22. Cf. E. Nelson, 'Liberty: One or Two Concepts of Liberty: One Concept Too Many?', *Political Theory*, XXXIII (2005), pp. 59-60; J. Christman, 'Saving Positive Freedom', *Political Theory*, XXXIII (2005), pp. 5-6.
[49] B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, p. 128.
[50] Ch. Taylor, 'What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?', in: *Contemporary Political Philosophy. An Anthology,* ed. R. E. Goodin, Ph. Pettit (Cambridge, Blackwell Publisher, 1997), pp. 418-28.
[51] B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, p. 118.
[52] F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 57.

deeds or moral dispositions are they realized? It is these questions that one has to answer before further considering the nature of freedom, and obviously it is impossible here to ignore metaphysical statements. A belief in the existence of strictly negative rights, i.e. ones that (1) give room for unhindered self-determination, (2) not imposing any concept of good, allowing individuals to freely choose from available ways of self-realization, is just an illusion.

Not only in this way do idealists challenge the strict distinction between the two concepts of freedom. Green states that the positive conception of freedom presupposes the negative one, since self-realization requires unhindered choice, and negative freedom similarly presupposes the positive conception to have any sense at all. For the lawlessness is in itself as unjustified as coercing individuals in the name of some alleged good, which they yet do not comprehend. This is why the person defining freedom as absolute independence must make an assumption as to the goal, which is to be realized in this way. Bosanquet gave this argument an excellent form by saying that 'the apparently negative has its roots and its meaning in the positive'.[53] Every concept of freedom is based on some view of human nature. Hence the dispute on the issue of freedom should not concern the limits of actions, but rather the definition of the truly autonomous personality.

6) Individualism

In spite of many accusations of idealists' alleged readiness to sacrifice freedom at the altar of abstract or, even worse, the only ontologically intrinsic being, i.e. community, recent years have resulted in a series of publications opting for the acknowledgment of idealist individualism. This kind of individualism, however, has nothing in common

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[53] B. Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, p. 127.

with the one usually associated with the liberal perspective. According to its liberal version, to which the distinction between the public and the private spheres is essential, the opportunity for self-expression and personal independence may be traced only in the privacy of one's home and face-to-face relations.

According to the idealists, the relation between public and private is not so uncompromising. One cannot simply distinguish oneself as a private person oneself as a citizen. This is why 'We shall need a new individualism, vitalized through the groups. The member of a state will not be the unit of a crowd whether of persons or of groups, but the full individual, the many-sided activity, revealed and realized in the system of groups'.[54]

Do we use other vocabulary in our private life than in public, are we motivated there by different ideals, hopes, values, do we act with support of different 'systems of ideas' or 'impalpable congeries of the hopes and fears'? Can I, as a citizen, completely forget about my personal needs, and as a private person about the community I live in? The answer is no. Neither freedom nor individualism should be considered apart from the social whole. The most brilliant of all thieves, although his capabilities may fill his heart with pride, will never be a truly free man and his activities recognized as a manifestation of individualism. For the term does not point to the expression of useless or harmful originality. If the roles ascribed to us by society determine our character, then individualism, as an expression of that character, cannot be asocial. Not only its source, but also its aims are social by nature. The concept of negative freedom as well as the appreciation of originality gain twofold justification in the idealists' writings. First, if the 'true freedom' of all the members of a community is to be realized, they should have the opportunity to

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[54] B. Bosanquet, 'Introduction to the Second Edition', p. lviii-lix. Cf. idem, *The Philosophical Theory of the State*, pp. 74-5.

choose freely between possible ways of gaining satisfaction. Perfection requires responsibility, which one cannot learn without knowing the full consequences of ones deeds. Secondly, the goals of community coincide with the goals of the individuals. After all in both cases it is moving the citizens closer to realizing their *τέλος* – moral perfection. Consequently, nonconformism is a condition *sine qua non*, on one hand, of individualism, and on the other – of realizing the common good. Institutions should promote criticism, for only in this way may they diagnose and eliminate the obstacles to the development of the social whole.

Conclusion

As can be seen, some of those traits were usually ascribed to liberal, others to Aristotelian, conservative or communitarian traditions. The thought of the idealists displays doctrinal similarity with each of them. It is connected to the first one by its individualism, its insistence on the necessity of social criticism of the existing institutions and the acknowledgment of the importance of unrestricted seeking after self-realization. It is also connected to the twentieth century, neo-Kantian version of liberalism by the metaphysical foundation of politics (embodied, for example, in Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, often criticized because of the priori assumptions underlying the concept of the 'original position'). On the other hand, among the conservative/communitarian elements of idealists' world-view should be counted: teleology, contextualism and the criticism of the concept of negative freedom and rights. Both liberalism and communitarianism resemble idealism with their tension between universalism and relativism.

Seen in the light of David Miller's list of three elements constitutive of the liberal-communitarian standpoint – (a) acceptance of liberal democracy as an appropriate

plane for solving ethical dilemmas, (b) rejection of abstract universalism, and (c) acceptance of the fact of cultural and political diversity – British idealism seems to be perfectly compatible with all of them. Element (a) is implicit in both idealist individualism, and contextualism. The first one presupposes negative freedom and rights as the basis of the positive ones cherished by Green, Bradley and Bosanquet, and it leaves place for, and even recommends, the criticism of the institutions of social and political life. The second one, although it may legitimize both democratic and undemocratic governments (so long as they function in accordance with the imperatives of the general will), demands the acceptance of changes of social consciousness, which can be counted for a strictly democratic premise. Element (b) opposition to abstract universalism, manifests itself in the criticism of Kantian and contractarian visions of human nature, whereby both disregard true, environmental and historical determinants of individuals' and communities' development. This criticism results in the appreciation of methodological holism and Aristotelian/Hegelian contextualism suggesting the necessity of considering ethical and political imperatives of particular communities exclusively in the light of their customs. Similar reasons speak in favor of acknowledging the concurrence of idealist thought with (c) the acceptance of cultural and political diversity.

Other features of idealist thought: teleology, an insistence in the metaphysical foundation of politics, and the support of positive freedom situate idealists among liberal communitarians favorably inclined towards (d) ethical perfectionism, as well as thinkers listed as liberal conservatists. We can count among them such thinkers as Locke, Condorcet, Bastiat, Constant, Tocqueville, J. S. Mill, J. H. Newman, Lord Acton, and of contemporary thinkers also e.g. Galston, Macedo, and Shklar.

Thus the six mentioned features, seemingly contradictory, harmoniously co-exist in idealist thought, determining its uniqueness as individualist, communitarian, liberal, conservative and progressive at the same time. Most famous contemporary Polish philosopher, Leszek Kolakowski, entitled one of his essays *How to be a conservative-liberal socialist?* Lecture of the British idealists' writings makes an impression that they were mostly concerned with the same issue.