X.—NOTE.

THE NOTION OF A GENERAL WILL.

In a recent review of an article by Prof. Bosanquet I made some disparaging observations about the General Will. It is one of the defects of reviews that considerations of space compel a reviewer either to confine himself to platitudes or to make assertions in a rather dogmatic tone without offering adequate reasons or marking delicate shades of difference. This fact, and certainly not any lack of respect for Prof. Bosanquet, was the cause of some sentences which are perhaps wanting in urbanity. I am quite sure that, when Prof. Bosanquet or Rousseau talk of the general will, they must be referring to something real and important; but I cannot detect anything that they might mean which seems to me appropriately called by this name. And assertions are made about this general will which seem incompatible with any meaning that I might otherwise be inclined to attach to the phrase. Hence I can only conclude that the *name* is a very unfortunate one, or else that there is something highly important in human societies which may appropriately be termed a *will* but which has wholly escaped my notice. It may just be worth while for me to state shortly the difficulties that I feel about the whole notion. They are so obvious and platitudinous that they cannot possibly have escaped Prof. Bosanquet's attention, and therefore I am sure that he must have some definition of the general will in his mind which is not exposed to these objections. But I do not know what this may be, and many other people of fair intelligence appear to be in the same difficulty, so that some further explanation from him seems highly desirable.

Let us begin by considering the will of a definite Englishman, Smith, a stockbroker living in Brighton. I take it that we mean by Smith's will the complex or system of Smith's particular volitions. He wants various things at various times, and these wants and his efforts to satisfy them are events with a certain place in his mental history. When we survey them we find that a great number of them, at any rate, are connected with each other in a rational way; and this system of connected volitions, or the organising principles of the system, are what I understand by Smith's will. Now, when I talk of Smith's will, I am under no obligation to regard him in abstraction from England, Brighton, and the stock-exchange. I know quite well that each of his volitions depends upon many conditions, that they would have been differently organised if he had been born and brought up and had lived in a different society or had occupied a different position in his society. This I take to be common ground. Hence, if you were to call Smith's actual will the general will and confine the name *Smith's will* to the supposed system of volitions that would have remained the same in whatever condition Smith had been placed, it would be a truism to say that Smith's will is abstract and fragmentary compared with the general will. But this would be a very odd way of speaking. It would be equally odd to call a hypothetical will that Smith might have had under imaginary conditions

Smith's will, and to call the will which Smith actually has under the actual conditions *the general will*. Nor would the general will, in this sense, throw much light on the nature of a society of people of whom Smith is only one member. Hence I conclude that this interpretation cannot be Prof. Bosanquet's though it would account for some of his statements.

Having said what I understand by a man's will I will next consider in what sense it seems to me that a will can be called general. In the first place you might say that Smith's will was general as compared with his particular volitions. Any one of his particular volitions is certainly fragmentary (and I think, in Prof. Bosanquet's sense, though not in the sense in which I should use the word, abstract) as compared with his will. But again this cannot be the fact that Prof. Bosanquet is referring to, for he does not say that each man's volitions are fragmentary and abstract as compared with that man's will, but that each man's will is fragmentary and abstract as compared with the general will.

The second possible meaning of a general will refers to the wills of several persons. Smith and Jones may be said to will the same thing under certain circumstances. This does not of course mean that they both want the same physical object, for their wills would then be in opposition. The fact is of course that the phrase 'to want a certain physical object' is elliptical; it means to want to *possess* this object. What we will in every case is that a certain proposition or set of propositions should be true. When we say that A and B have the same will we mean that A and B both want some proposition or set of propositions p to be true. If A and B do not have the same will one wants p to be true and the other wants q to be true. Two possibilities then arise: (i) p and q may be incompatible, either for logical or physical reasons. Their wills are then in opposition; (ii) p and q may be compatible. Their wills are then mutually indifferent.

Now I suppose that there is a general will in a group of persons in so far as they all will that a certain set of propositions shall be true. But, if this be the right interpretation, I cannot understand how anyone can assert either (a) that the wills of various members of a group are fragmentary and abstract as compared with the general will, or (b) that the general will is an adequate account of any state that is or has been.

(a) The general will is the will of each member that a certain set of propositions shall be true. But each member also desires other propositions to be true. The object of the general will is thus a fragment of the object of any individual's will, if the general will and the will of an individual be interpreted as we have interpreted them. Prof. Bosanquet holds that the exact opposite is the fact. There seems only one way in which this could be justified. We might define Smith's *private will* as his desire for the truth of propositions other than those whose truth all members of his community desire. With this definition Smith's will (as already defined) = Smith's private will + the general will of Smith's community. Now, whilst it is impossible that Smith's will should be abstract and fragmentary as compared with the general will, it is possible that Smith's private will might stand in this relation to the general will. This would mean that the propositions which Smith desires to be true and which some other members of his community do not desire to be true are few or trivial as compared with those which all members of the community desire to be true. It is to be noted that, if this should happen to be a fact, it is not deducible from the generality of the general will or the particularity of Smith's private will; it must be established by independent observations. It might be true of A and not of B in the community C; since it depends on the extent and importance of the agreement between the members of C, and the number and importance of

A's and B's private desires. I therefore cannot see that any general rule could be laid down on the subject.

(*b*) I can make no claim whatever to that practical acquaintance with public affairs which Prof. Bosanquet has acquired by a long course of disinterested social service. Nevertheless I must venture the opinion that the general will in any state with which I am acquainted by observations or through history is abstract, negative, unenlightened, and dimly conscious. If I were asked: 'What propositions do all or nearly all Englishmen desire to be true?' I should be puzzled to find many beside the following: That everyone who will work shall have a certain minimum of comfort, that the country should not be invaded nor its government set at naught by those of other countries, that justice (variously understood) shall be administered, and that there shall be *some* definite rules about the acquirement, distribution, tenure, and bequest of property. Any attempt to particularise further about property would neglect the important differences between what socialists and others desire to be true; any attempt to particularise about the form of government would neglect the difference between those who want parliamentary rule and those who prefer some form of syndicalism. That this amount of agreement in what is willed by all is enough to constitute a state I cannot for a moment believe. The real driving force of a state seems to me to be the will of a governing class; this will is sometimes good and sometimes bad, but in normal times it gets itself obeyed unless it flagrantly opposes the general will of all its subjects or of any large and powerful section of them. The general will thus appears to me to be merely a negative limiting condition within which infinite variations are possible; and any complete theory of the state needs to explain these variations by other principles.

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